

Leviathan Is Headless and Searching After Its Head

Editor's Note:

The author of this piece is Emma Gustavsson, an independent researcher and philosophy student in Stockholm, Sweden. She serves on the editorial board of *Tidskriften Ordning*, and works at the intersection of value-form theory, critical theory, and the history of political thought. This piece was originally released in Swedish at Clarté -

<https://www.clarte.se/leviatan-ar-huvudlos-och-soker-efter-sitt-huvud/>

Slavoj Žižek, following in Sohn-Rethel's footsteps, treats the exchange-abstraction as a real abstraction, an unconscious that operates in the very act rather than in the head.¹

The specifically Marxian twist he adds is something he calls the logic of the exception: every universal principle carries within itself a particular case that undermines it without violating it, a negation that is internal rather than external.

Take the law of equivalent exchange, namely that every commodity is paid its full value — the universal — and the exception is labor-power. Labor-power, after all, is sold, like everything else, at its full value, but it is only in and through this fully equivalent exchange that labor-power produces surplus value. The exchange does not cease to be equivalent because exploitation takes place; exploitation *is* the completion of the law of equivalent exchange. In that respect the apparatus describes the very paradox of fetishism: the negation does not sit outside

¹ The ideas I engage with are not located at any particular place in Žižek. They are in every Žižek book, usually more than once per book and gladly with the same example.

the form — a point value-form theory would John Hancock. Under the real abstraction a seeming unity prevails: the abstraction is completed in the act.

The difference is that for value-form theory this is a historically determined practice of exchange, whereas Žižek's logic of exception claims to apply to every ideological universal and not only capitalism's. We cannot be without ontology, which is perhaps one of Žižek's most important insights for Marxism — to reawaken the questions of metaphysics after nearly a hundred years of the DiaMat school's ideas about a distance between metaphysics and materialism.² Moreover, capital's self-valorization becomes in Žižek something more than a self-contained economic mechanism: the speculative movement which, indifferent to human beings and nature, constitutes the hard core of our epoch that all thinking runs up against and can never dissolve.

So where does the dividing line run between value-form theory and Žižek? It runs at what the ontologization costs. And this becomes expensive for Žižek; it costs history. The objection is that one must stand outside history in order to be able to say what is historical. That is true, and I simply have to divest myself of what it demands of me: determinations that hold independently of the form of society do exist, and they are not few. What I dispute is that the value-form is one of them. Marx, too, has transhistorical determinations and needs them: the metabolism between human being and nature is an eternal natural condition of human life, independent of every social form.

A qualification is needed here, however, since the Marxist current of theory known as the communisation current rightly objects to calling the metabolism labor. That human beings make

² Yes, this is a common view among Leninists: that Marx had no metaphysics but was objective.

what they need is eternal. That the making constitutes a separate, self-contained sphere in society, governed by its own measure, it is not. Communism abolishes the separation. What is not eternal is the determinate form in which this labor becomes social. What lacks duration is the value-form. To show this requires no position outside history. It suffices to show that the form posits its own presuppositions. To ontologize what lies between substance and subject is therefore not wrong because everything would be historical, but because such an ontologization elevates a determinate social mediation into a property of existence as such.

With this, the status of antagonism also shifts. For Žižek the subject is the crack in substance, and reconciliation consists not in healing the crack but in recognising it as constitutive. This is no summons to stoic endurance for Žižek — that attitude is the object of his and Hegel's sharpest polemic. This is instead the condition of his concept of the *act*: an act that manages to change the coordinates of the situation precisely because it promises no healing of the crack. The difference, then, does not run between patience and action but at what action can reach. The act rewrites the inscription of antagonism; sublation aims at the form of mediation that gives antagonism its determinate shape.

Most important is the subject as emptiness. When Žižek determines the actual subject as a hollow and the proletariat as pure, substanceless subjectivity, this is no flight from the body. The hollow sits in the body: for Žižek the human body is precisely the body that never quite manages to be a body, that cannot choose self-preservation over its own ruin.

Moreover, the figure is Marx's own — the class with radical potential precisely because of its chains, the complete loss of the human being. My objection, then, cannot be that the worker has a body and that Žižek has forgotten it; to invoke the body as the fixed ground beneath

the form would, besides, be to make it into a new fetish, a nature behind the social. The non-identical does not lie as a substance beneath the value-form. It is what the value-form must presuppose and yet can never take up into itself — hunger, fatigue, sold hours — and it is registered in the form itself: in the limits of the working day, in exhaustion, in the factory inspectors' protocols. The question, therefore, is not body versus hole, but the *status* of the hollow. Is the impoverishment of the subject to pure labor-power something capital historically brings about and which can thereby be undone, or is it the truth of subjectivity, which capitalism merely lets us see?

Žižek answers: both. The rereading must answer the first. Where negative dialectics holds fast to the non-identical as a historical wound, Žižek makes the crack the signature of being. The two do not exclude each other. The question is which of them does the work when one is to explain why precisely this social form has precisely this shape, and there the crack does not suffice. The difference does not run between ontology and no ontology. It runs at how far back the determinations reach. Do they apply to existence as such, or do they apply to a social form with a beginning and an end? The determinations of critique are negative and bound to their time; they apply to an object they wish to see disappear, and they decay with it. A wanted notice is a good measure of what such a determination is. The description is true for as long as the person remains at large, and it is true of precisely that person and no one else. The notice makes no claim to describe the human being in general and it does not want to hold forever: *it wants to become outdated*. The day the person is arrested the description is neither true nor false; *it is spent*, and that it is spent is precisely what it was for. That the notice works precisely by identifying is no detail. Critique borrows the move it combats; the difference from the police is that it knows it.

What Must Be Recognized

Before my objection to Žižek can hit its target, the truth in the figure of the subject must be acknowledged. Capital actually behaves like a Hegelian subject in a determinate, controllable sense — it posits its own presuppositions.

In *Grundrisse*, Marx describes the conditions for capital's coming into being: money and commodities on one side, propertyless workers on the other. Those conditions belong to capital's prehistory and disappear as external conditions to the same degree that capital becomes real. They then no longer appear as conditions of capital's origin but as results of its presence.³ As function, capital itself produces that which it presupposes. Chapter twenty-one of *Capital* shows the mechanism in detail. The capitalist production process, considered in its context as a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities and not only surplus value. It also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself: on one side the capitalist, on the other the wage-worker.⁴

The worker leaves the process as she entered it: separated from the means, compelled to sell anew. The historical presupposition that seems to lie behind us, the so-called primitive accumulation, thereby does not cease to hold but is reproduced as the relation's logical premise. The separation is no one-off event at the threshold, but the constant presupposition and constant result of the capital-relation.⁵

The circle thus truly closes and the individuals are bound to it. Adorno describes the same binding from the side of the subject. The experience of abstract labor is in itself unconscious and

³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm>>.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Paul Reitter, ed. Paul North (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 532.

⁵ Werner Bonefeld, "Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Notes on Social Constitution and Expropriation", *Science & Society* 75, no. 3 (2011): 379–399.

therefore takes on magical form: labor appears as the pure deed of spirit. What disappears in this elevation is the palpable; that someone actually performs the labor, under compulsion and within a determinate working day.

But the vanished returns inside spirit itself, now in the form of a necessity from which no one can talk their way out. The individual can no more escape it than she can escape social compulsion in general.⁶ The capitalist acts as character-mask — Marx's word for the role the economy assigns a person regardless of who the person is — because competition lets the immanent laws of production assert themselves against him.⁷ Here the acknowledgement must go further than it usually does. A movement that afterwards creates that from which it sets out. This figure of thought, which is not Marx's invention but Hegel's, comes out of the doctrine of essence, the section of the *Logic* about what a thing really is.

It is precisely this figure that Žižek makes his central concept. To turn the figure *against* Žižek therefore requires a distinction. In Hegel and Žižek the retroactive positing is the form of everything that comes to be; in Marx it is an operation that a determinate social form performs on its own history. Primitive accumulation becomes a logical premise because capital makes it so, daily and through law, not because every order necessarily turns its before into its within. The difference lies not in the figure itself but in how far it extends. Does it apply to every order there is, or does it apply to this one? The question is not decided philosophically but in the wage cycle.

Therefore it does not suffice, with Michael Heinrich's help, soberly to remind us that no conscious giant-subject exists. The same truth is found in Jacques Lacan, in the proposition that there is no big Other. But Lacan does not stop there; as I understand his life's work, it consists of

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 20.

⁷ Chris O'Kane, *Social Constitution and Fetishistic Social Domination* (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 78–79.

the follow-up question that the reminder provokes: How can an instance that does not exist still be effective? How can an appearance bind?

This is the same question as ours: Why does the form *function* nonetheless as a subject? The structure is precisely the one we are looking for, the one that can exist only in and through the doing it dominates. What the critique of political economy adds is not the figure but its derivation — which determinate social practice brings forth precisely this Other. The answer is private labors that become social only in exchange. (This is why Robert Kurz misses the mark when he takes the form for the essence.)

Who Was It Through?

On loan from whom? Test the figure against the etymology. A subject is that which is thrown under and that which throws. Does capital fulfil both determinations? Only by half, and by half through proxy. Capital is, as Marx writes in the final chapter of the first volume, a social relation between human beings that is mediated through things.⁸ A relation throws nothing and is not thrown either; both moments of the movement must be performed. Only one instance in the relation performs them both.

The worker is subjected in the strictest sense of the word. She is separated from the means and 200 per cent free. Marx's freedom is counted here in two items, both of which must be fulfilled. She is free to sell her labor-power; no one owns her and no one can force her to a given master. She is also free of everything she might live off without selling her labor-power. It is this second freedom that makes the first effective.⁹ What drives her to the market is no

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 1:694.

⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 1:142.

command but the impersonal lash of economic compulsion. What she sells is no thing she owns alongside herself. She sells disposal over her own living time, hour by hour.

But she is at the same time the one who throws under: it is her living labor that produces the surplus value, that is, capital; it is her labor of yesterday, piled up as machines and money, that today confronts her as an alien power and buys her. The worker herself unceasingly produces the objective wealth as capital — as an alien, dominating and exploiting power. The proletarian is a subject in the word's full and unhappy sense: thrown under what she herself throws.

In Adorno's reading of Hegel the secret behind the thinking unity is none other than social labor. He refers for this to the young Marx, who identified the chief accomplishment of the *Phenomenology* as double — the dialectic of negativity as its moving principle and the real human being grasped as the result of her own labor.¹⁰

That is why, and only why, the proletariat is the revolutionary subject. Not because labor would be society's true essence to be liberated and to finally rule — here Kurz is right, labor is to be abolished, not affirmed — and not because history has equipped the class with a mission and a guarantee.

Moishe Postone draws the opposite conclusion from the figure of the subject: if capital is the subject, the proletariat cannot be it, and the working class thereby becomes for him integrated into capitalism rather than the embodiment of its negation.¹¹ The conclusion is half right. As *positive* subject, as bearer of an essence to be realized, the proletariat is nothing, and every

¹⁰ Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", 18; Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the section on Hegel's dialectic.

¹¹ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17; cf. 389.

attempt to make it the hero of history merely reproduces the metaphysics of the subject under new auspices. Nevertheless, Postone confuses the subject of the form with the bearer of the relation. The class in the sociological sense is wholly uninteresting, something I have noted in *Flamman*.¹² The class is constituted by the same form, in the same movement as that which oppresses it, and has nothing to reclaim from that structure. The working class's self-fulfilment is its self-negation, the abolition of its own class together with the bourgeois class. That capital has appropriated all the determinations of the subject does not mean that subjectivity is spent. Nor can we retrieve subjectivity at some other place, in some sort of immanent mental palace. Subjectivity is thus only in and through the form, and it follows from this that the possibility of refusal exists only in and through the form.

That the appropriation has a perpetrator and not merely a form, Adorno states outright. In Hegel, spirit appears as both the one who acts and that which is acted upon, and therewith the question of who actually performs the labor and who disposes over it disappears. According to Adorno this presentation is no error of thought; it is rather a tracing of a social relation: to make labor the innermost essence of the world and to seize the labor of others are two sides of the same dialectic.¹³ The seizure is visible in the very cast list of the social play: when Marx lets value be the subject he reserves for the living the role of personifications, character-masks, roles in a play whose script no one has written. The critique of the roles is not moral; it is not in fact a critique of the actors at all; it concerns chiefly the stage. The revolutionary question does not read: Who shall complete the movement? It reads: Who can refuse to once again posit its presuppositions? Only those who daily produce the relation can refrain from reproducing it. It is

¹² Emma Gustavsson, "The working class is not lost — only unorganised", *Flamman*, <<https://www.flamman.se/arbetarklassen-ar-inte-forlorad-bara-oorganiserad/>>.

¹³ Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", 24.

here, too, that the communist party appears, likewise in the negative. Not as the organization that shall bring forth the movement — parties and revolutions do not let themselves be created in that way — but as the name for what the class does when it ceases to posit the presuppositions of the relation anew. The form follows the content, not the other way around.¹⁴

Why does capital appear at all as a subject? The answer is fetishism and can now be given exactly. It is the worker who produces the surplus value; it is the capitalist who buys the labor-power; and it is the purchase itself, the transformation of living capacity into a commodity among commodities, that lets the social character of labor confront the laboring as a property of things: as capital's own power of production, as money's own fertility. Dead labor rules over living labor because the living has been sold to the dead. The quotation about how capital is a vampiric bloodsucker hereby receives its resolution. The vampire is real as function but borrowed as essence. It is not the dead that drinks of its own thirst; it is the form-determination of the living — labor as wage-labor, sociality as value — that forces the living to serve. The dead have no suck; it is more of a garbage chute than a vacuum cleaner. The automatic subject is fetishism's completed figure: millions of wills and hands appearing as a single self-movement. Leviathan is headless and searching for its head.¹⁵ Capital is a monster, but not a vampire; it is *The Headless Horseman* — we are Capital.

The appearance is objective. So long as private labors are mediated through exchange, value really is the form in which their sociality exists, and its movement really is the law that individuals obey. But the appearance is created, and what is created can be destroyed — but it is not necessarily so that the creator can undo it; evidently the bourgeoisie cannot undo its own

¹⁴ Emma "Munk" Gustavsson, "Organicity or Centralism", *Manifest* 3 (2026).

¹⁵ P.M. Gustavsson, "The Distributed Leviathan: AI, Networked Violence, and the Fragmentation of Responsibility", *AI & Society* (2026), <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-026-03244-x>> .

movement into a possible doom. Here a question arises: Can appearances be avoided at all? No, and that need not be claimed. The essence must appear; no social form is transparent to itself and the promise of such transparency is snake oil. What can fall is not appearing as such but this determinate appearance: that human beings' relation to each other meets them as a property of things. To abolish mediation is impossible; to abolish mediation through value is not. The fetish does not fall to insight; it falls with the relations that bring it forth. Adorno, moreover, states what classical philosophy did with the compulsion it could not dissolve: it let pure compulsion pass as freedom.¹⁶

To call capital a subject is therefore true as description and false as ontology. True, because the form has really appropriated all the determinations of the movement: it consists through the exchange and posits its own presuppositions; it relates to itself. False, in the same moment as the appropriation is forgotten — when the overarching subject is taken for an originary one and the loan is entered as property.

¹⁶ Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", 26.

Citations

1. The ideas I engage with are not located at any particular place in Žižek. They are in every Žižek book, usually more than once per book and gladly with the same example.
2. Yes, this is a common view among Leninists: that Marx had no metaphysics but was objective.
3. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*,
<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm>>.
4. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Paul Reitter, ed. Paul North (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 532.
5. Werner Bonefeld, "Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Notes on Social Constitution and Expropriation", *Science & Society* 75, no. 3 (2011): 379–399.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 20.
7. Chris O'Kane, *Social Constitution and Fetishistic Social Domination* (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 78–79.
8. Marx, *Capital*, 1:694.
9. Marx, *Capital*, 1:142.
10. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", 18; Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the section on Hegel's dialectic.

11. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17; cf. 389.
12. Emma Gustavsson, "The working class is not lost — only unorganised", *Flamman*,
<<https://www.flamman.se/arbetarklassen-ar-inte-forlorad-bara-oorganiserad/>>.
13. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", 24.
14. Emma "Munk" Gustavsson, "Organicity or Centralism", *Manifest 3* (2026).
15. P.M. Gustavsson, "The Distributed Leviathan: AI, Networked Violence, and the Fragmentation of Responsibility", *AI & Society* (2026),
<<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-026-03244-x>> .
16. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy", 26.