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The Body Ontology of Capitalism

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Chapter 9:

The Body Ontology of Capitalism

Daniel Krier and Kevin S. Amidon

Introduction:

This chapter locates the body in a critical social ontology operative on the triple planes *socio - psyche- soma*. While critical social theory powerfully negates symbolic structures of political economy (and imaginary projections of ideological culture, it never quite knows what to do with corporeal bodies. We begin with Marx's account of the body ontology of capitalism in his post-1859 writings (especially *Capital, Vol. I*), in which value (on the ontic plane of abstract labor) is extracted from the concrete bodies of laborers caught in capital's grasp. Psychoanalytic social theory takes up the body where Marx left off, and we analyze the congruent body ontologies of Marx and Jacques Lacan. Lacanian social theory analyzes imaginary (sublime) ideologies as ontically-shifted projections of structurally-wounded bodies (Zizek 1989; Zizek 1992). For Zizek, sublime ideological objects complete and unify reality for subjects whose wounded bodies are violently installed within capital's symbolic order (Zizek, 1999). The prevalence of wounded body-fantasies in the cultural productions of late capitalism, including those that feature reanimated corpses (undead) and incorporation of the body into technological structures (cyborgs). These fantasy projections sustain the subjectivity of workers whose bodies are installed within the structural-symbolic order of capitalism, generate fantasies of wounding, energy-streaming and perforation of bodily boundaries. We conclude, like Marx, that body ontology is necessary to comprehend and critique capital in its symbolic and imaginary forms.

Marx's Body Ontology of Capital

Like murderers in classic detective fiction, critical theorists of capitalism never quite know what to do with the body. Political theorists have investigated the “two bodies,” imaginary and symbolic, of kings and democratic peoples, while largely ignoring the corporeal, organic bodies of political power (Kantorowicz, 1997; Santner, 2012). With important exceptions (Agamben 1997; Agamben, 2016; McNally, 2011; Reich, 1949; Santner, 1996; Santner, 2015; Theweleit, 1988; Theweleit, 1989) bodies are invisible in critical and social theory. Corporeal bodies of laborers in capitalist industry were everywhere implicated in Marx’s post-1859 writings, especially *Capital, Volume 1*, in which narration of workers’ bodies was sometimes so dense and detailed that the pages seemed saturated with the reality of sweat and blood. In a close reading of Marx’s *Capital*, the first body encountered is the “physical body of the commodity itself” (1867/1977, p. 126). Bodies, especially laboring bodies, sporadically walk in and out of Marx’s text as he guides the reader through the various metamorphoses of the commodity in capital, the circulation of capital, the transformation of money into capital, and the general formula of capital and its contradictions. Bodies begin to pile up and accumulate beginning with the chapter, “The Sale and Purchase of Labor-Power,” where laboring-bodies are analyzed as organic bearers of the entire symbolic system of capital.

Marx’s explanatory strategy generates significant ontological stakes by shifting between the three planes of *socio-psyche-soma* as he relates the dynamics of capital, commodity and labor. Labor in capital is “objectified” in commodities, and thus shifts from the ontic plane of embodied, organic existence into the ontologically imaginary world of products and the ontologically symbolic-social world of value. Labor-power, or the capacity for labor, is unique among commodities as the only “commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labor,

hence a creation of value” (1867/1977, p. 270). Laboring lies at the ontic intersection of psychesoma: “labour-power...the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind” (1867/1977, p. 270).

Within the capitalist mode of production, the concrete labor of the worker is transformed into the ontologically symbolic category of “abstract labor.” Labor time, quantitatively equivalent across various categories of concrete labor, lies at the ontic intersection of *soma-socio*: “the proprietor of labor power (the worker who possesses his labor-power as “his own property”) must always sell it for a limited period only...a definite period of time, temporarily” (1867/1977, p. 271). The intersection between the ontic planes of *soma-socio* is fundamentally implicated in the value of the “peculiar commodity” labor-power whose value is determined “by the labor-time necessary for the production and consequently the reproduction of ... labour, a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, etc. is expended, and these things have to be replaced” (1867/1977, p. 274-5). The value of labor-power included “natural needs, such as food, clothing, fuel, and housing” as well as historically-contingent social needs that varied based upon the “historical and moral” development of society (1867/1977, p. 275).

In Marx’s writings, the body ontology of capitalism was bound up with the historical structure of the social. The double ontology of *soma-socio* determined sex itself: because workers in capital aged and died, procreation was subsumed within the value of labor-power: “The labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear, and by death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour power” (1867/1977, p. 275). The content of cultural education and disciplinary training were also subsumed within the

value of labor power (1867/1977, p. 275-6). The body of the worker, then, bore the burden of social-historical development since:

The value of labour power can be resolved into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence. It therefore varies with the value of the means of subsistence, i.e. with the quantity of labour time required to produce them (1867/1977, 276).

The body of workers set the “ultimate or minimum limit of the value of labour-power” equivalent to the “value of the commodities which have to be supplied every day to the bearer of labour power,” embodied workers in order to “renew” their “life-process” (1867/1977, p. 276-7).

The density of body analysis in *Capital* accelerates through Part III: “Production of Absolute Surplus Value,” whose five chapters chart the course whereby laboring bodies are installed in the system of capitalist production that absorbs their expended labor that is congealed in commodities, whose exchange realizes surplus value, such that their embodied vital forces register effects on all three ontological planes (*soma, psyche, socio*). Chapter 10: “The Working Day” is among the bloodiest passages in Marx’s work that sweats with muscular expenditure that depletes organic vitality. “The Working Day.” In Part IV on the “Production of Relative Surplus Value,” Marx again works through the body ontology at the base of of capitalism, with chapters on relative surplus value as a concept, cooperation, division of labor, and machinery. In this part of *Capital*, the laboring body appears as a negative, as a thing that capital seeks to obsessively avoid, to reduce to a minimum the socially necessary labor time (value) of production.

Capitalism as a social system (ontologically-symbolic) is rooted in the natural powers of working bodies (ontologically-somatic). “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature [that]...sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs,

head and hands, in order to appropriate (seize) the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs” (1867/1977, p. 283). The teleological nature of human work (*poiesis* in the Aristotelian sense), activity piloted toward a specific end-in-view lifts work out of pure body ontology into the psychic and social plane. While “a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells,” the teleological nature of work/*poiesis* is what “distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees” because the architect “builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it with wax” (1867/1977, p. 284). Work, the production of commodities (utilities with value) is, to Marx, an ontologically tripled activity implicating *socio-psyche-soma*.

Workers and their organic bodies are the “instruments of labor...those of a mechanical kind...the bones and muscles of production” (1867/1977, p. 286). The creative potential, the life activity of the worker is deployed during labor but is burnt up in the process. Marx writes that labor, the ontologically-somatic being, “is extinguished,” dying into the thing produced, simultaneously producing an ontic shift such that “labour has become bound up in its object: labour has been objectified ... the worker has spun, and the product is a spinning” (1867/1977, p. 287). Already dead labor (constant capital, as well as *dying* labor, the variable component!) buries itself in the commodities and capital it produces: it terminates in the body that emerges from the process as a product. This sacrificial death of the body is constitutive of capitalism, because no capital, fixed or constant, or natural material can produce value, only embodied workers. The powers of the laboring body magically transcend the ontologically-somatic to generate effects in the symbolic-structural order of value:

“living labour must seize on these things, awaken them from the dead, change them from merely possible into real and effective use values. Bathed in the fire of labour,

appropriated as part of its organism, and infused with vital energy for the performance of the functions appropriate to their concept and to their vocation in the process, they are indeed consumed, but to some purpose” (1867/1977, p. 289).

The body ontology of capital -- the activity of the living laborer -- animates the corpse of dead labor that was previously “extinguished” as capital, which “incorporates labour, as a living agent of fermentation, into the lifeless constituents of the product”(1867/1977, p. 292). Marx theorizes ontological splitting into *socio-psyche-soma* and its reunification in commodities and capital as the essential secret of capital: “During the labour process, the worker’s labour constantly undergoes a transformation, from the form of unrest into that of being, from the form of motion into that of objectivity” (1867/1977, p. 296). Capital is that perverse social-substance that has the unique capacity to absorb the vitality and bio-powers of living labor into itself, growing in the process. Capital reduces concrete energies of laboring bodies to the symbolic unit “average labor” and the “quantitative universal of labor-time:” “by being soaked in labour, the raw material is in fact changed into yarn, because labour-power is expended in the form of spinning and added to it; but the product, the yarn, is now nothing more than a measure of the labour absorbed into the cotton” (1867/1977, p. 296-7). The “swollen” value of commodities is the symbolic index of “quantities of crystallized labor time.” Attention to Marx’s verbs reveals this: production “absorbs” labour, products have labour *absorbed*, *crystallized*, *congealed* or *objectified* within them, all alchemical/philosophical terms that reference fundamental changes of state or ontological shifts.

Capital absorbs living labor (ontologically-somatic) and congeals/ crystallizes/ objectifies it into commodities (ontologically-psychic as an object of desire), then through the process of realization, the absorbed labor undergoes another ontological transformation into money-value

(ontologically-symbolic). Valorization (the symbolic increase of value from M to M') requires that the labor power absorbed by capital in commodity production exceeds the value of laboring power. The worker is forced to work longer than necessary to recover the value of his laboring power. This of course is the great secret of the apparently "self-generating" monstrous quality of capital that Marx illustrates with the famous quotation from Goethe's *Faust*:

... by incorporating living labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to "work," "as if its body were by love possessed" (1867/1977, p. 302).

The fundamental ontological break in the production process occurs through the doubling of concrete, qualitatively-distinctive, embodied labor into "abstract social labor" measured quantitatively as "labor-time" to measure the quantum of labor absorbed by capital in production (Marx, 1867/1977, p. 30; see also Postone, 1993). Marx's description of this ontological shift uses spiritual (alchemical) metaphors:

"While productive labour is changing the means of production into constituent elements of a new product, their value undergoes a metempsychosis. It deserts the consumed body to occupy the newly created one. But this transmigration takes place, as it were, behind the back of the actual labour in progress (1867/1977, p. 314)

The term "metempsychosis" is important here: the transmigration of souls from one body to another, especially one of an entirely different species/form. "Behind the back" of workers, their laboring bodies, ontologically-somatic bearers of value, are burnt up as a "consumed bodies;" releases value as a soul/spirit (ontologically symbolic) that haunts the thing produced. In capitalism, production is the perpetual burning up or sacrifice of the somatic whose soul (value)

refreshes and reanimates the the dead labor of capital (1867/1977, p. 322). Surplus value, whose acquisition constitutes the telos of capital, is “merely a congealed quantity of surplus labour-time” (1867/1977, p. 325).

The body ontology of capital sets limits to the rate and extent of capital accumulation. The laboring body has physical limits and temporal limits: “the vital force must rest, sleep...to feed, wash and clothe himself...[as well as certain] moral obstacles... intellectual and social requirements... conditioned by the general level of civilization” (1867/1977, p. 341). The ontological phase-shifting continues as capital’s “voracious appetite for surplus labour,” reduces labor to “nothing more than personified labor time” (ontological move from somatic to imaginary bearer of the symbolic) (1867/1977, p. 352). The body of the capitalist is also reconfigured as “capital personified” (an ontological move from the somatic to imaginary bearer of the symbolic), a body post-metempsychosis, possessed by capital itself (compare the spirit of capitalism that possesses businessmen in Weber, 1920/1958):

“His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amounts of surplus labor. Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (1867/1977, p. 342)

This is one of the most powerful phrasings of the body ontology of capital in all of Marx’s writings. Capital requires violent, sacrificial destruction of the somatic enroute to its own symbolic-expansion (on moral ordering of sacrifice and expiation in societies, see Durkheim, 1958 and Freud, 1915). Marx describes the body-ripping qualities of capital using folkloric terms: “werewolf-like hunger for surplus labor” (1867/1977, p. 353) and the “vampire thirst for

the living blood of labour” (1867/1977, p. 367). Workers were overworked into a “stone like torpor” (1867/1977, p. 35), suffering “degenerescence” due to complete absorption of the time of life as labor time (1867/1977, p. 355). Marx describes the bodies of bakers’ journeymen depleted by shifts that begin at 11pm and last overnight, requiring workers to make a bed by sleeping atop their own rising dough (1867/1977, p. 359-60). Marx further describes a “motley crowd of workers of all callings, ages and sexes, who throng around us more urgently than did the souls of the slain around Ulysses, on whom we see at a glance the signs of over-work,” milliners and blacksmiths who suffer “death from simple overwork” and whose lifespan is reduced by an average of thirteen years (1867/1977, 364). He describes “stunted, short-lived and rapidly replaced” working bodies that were “plucked, so to speak, before they were ripe.” (1867/1977, 380). The sacrifice of the ontologically-somatic enroute to surplus value is explicit when he writes that “children were quite simply slaughtered for the sake of their delicate fingers just as horned cattle are slaughtered in southern Russia for their hides and fat” (1867/1977, 406).

Marx triples his optics across the ontological shifts in capital: from the material, concrete world of productive processes (ontology of soma-psyche) into depth consideration of the immaterial, symbolic, abstract, and weightless world of valorization (symbolic ontology). Marx maintains contact with all three ontic levels as he drills down to the process of valorization:

“as soon as we view the production process as a process of valorization... the means of production are at once changed into means for the absorption of the labour of others. It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker...inversion, distortion, ... the relation between dead labour and living labour, between value and the force that creates value, is mirrored in the consciousness of the capitalist” (1867/1977, p. 425).

Marx's Body Ontology, Division of Labor and Machine Production

Under modern industrial organization, with detailed division of labor and specialization, the body ontology of capital changes: “a worker who performs the same simple operation for the whole of his life converts his body into the automatic, one-sided implement of that operation” (1867/1977, 458). The combination of large numbers of specialized workers generates a “collective worker,” an assemblage technically-limited laborers unable to perform production on their own but require large combines. The degradation of the worker is inverted and doubled as the enhanced power of capital: “the one-sidedness and even the deficiencies of the specialized individual worker become perfections when he is part of the collective worker” (1867/1977, 468-9).

The detailed division of labor in industry “seizes labor-power by the roots” and rips apart the bodily capabilities of workers:

It converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing-house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations, just as in the states of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow. Not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation....Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of that workshop. As the chosen people bore in their features the sign that they were the property of Jehovah, so the division of labour brands the manufacturing worker as the property of capital (1867/1977, P. 481-2)

The division of labor in modern industry, on the surface an efficient machine for the production of commodities (ontologically psychic/imaginary), it appears “simply [as] a pretext for profit-making... [factories] are there to absorb surplus labor” (1867/1977, p. 373), to perform the magical ontological sacrifice of the somatic, “crippling of body and mind” (1867/1977, 484), to generate symbolic-spiritual value. Industrial production in machino-factories intensifies and “filling up of the pores” of labor-time (1867/1977, 534). The worker in modern machine production becomes an organ or part of a larger body, an industrial-machinic organism on a vast scale, a massive engine “the parts of which are men” (1867/1977, p. 483). The worker becomes a virtual cyborg: “the machine makes use of him...it is the movements of the machine that he must follow... a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers who are incorporated into it as its living appendages”(1867/1977, p. 548). The body ontology of capitalism now includes tortuous excess, damage that is not sacrificed into value but dissipates as an unvalorized destructive somatic excess:

“Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom both in bodily and in intellectual activity...Owing to its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the worker during the labour process in the shape of capital, dead labour, which dominates and soaks up living labour power.” (1867/1977, p. 548)

The manifold body sufferings of workers often fail to be sacralized into value: “Every sense organ is injured by the artificially high temperatures, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention the danger to life and limb” (1867/1977, p. 552). The excess somatic damage to workers bodies was catalogued by Marx with great detail: boys in

matchmaking factories dipped their hands in “melted phosphorous, whose poisonous vapour rose into their faces” (1867/1977, p. 606), and workers were disciplined with extraordinarily corporeal forms of punishment: beatings, ear-clippings, brandings, and other carceral punishments were deployed against working bodies to direct flows of human energy into colonies, enclosures and systems of wage-labor (see also Federici, 2004).

Marx’s body ontology of capital also included the consuming body of the worker, whose poor diet, bad housing, overcrowded and unhealthy “negation of all delicacy, such unclean confusion of bodies and bodily functions, such exposure of animal and sexual nakedness, as is rather bestial than human... a baptism into infamy” (1867/1977, p. 813). Marx relates accounts of working families forced to relieve themselves into chest-of-drawers emptied once a week, and other accounts of bathroom, bedroom, and other embodied living arrangements (1867/1977, p. 844).

Marx *avec* Lacan: Marx’s Body Ontology and Psychoanalytic Theory

Our close reading of *Capital* reinforces the view that Marx’s social ontology of capitalism is triadic: labor, commodity and capital are triple-determined by all three ontic planes:

- *socio*, or the symbolic structure of value, language, and law;
- *psyche*, or imaginary objects of commodified desire and ideological productions;
- and
- *soma*, or embodied energies and organic drives of workers (and to a lesser degree, capitalists).

In Marx’s body ontology, the *soma* remains forever conjoined to and interpenetrated with *psyche* and *socio*. In Marx, bodies and organic drives of real workers are material bearers of value. Bodies of workers and their organic drives are structurally-wounded upon installation in the

capitalist mode of production. Enroute to commodity production the valorization of capital, bodies are depleted, damaged and their organic drives thwarted. Some, but not all, “body consumption” is productively absorbed, embedded or crystallized in commodities and capital. Capitalism does not only produce material products, but imaginary cultural productions for ideological ends. Ideology in capital, especially sublime objects (see below), is crafted to facilitate the bodily installation of workers within the production system and to *keep them there once installed*. In Althusser’s famous formulation, the embodied subjects of ideology are interpolated within the structural-symbolic order of capital. Hence, the social ontology of capital is always already a body ontology: even ideological productions of capital are constructed to keep working and consuming bodies “in position” within capitalism’s structural order. The body ontology of ideology is analyzed below with a special focus upon widespread fantasies wounded bodies, in the historical figures of Zinzendorf and Schreber, and in contemporary vampires, zombies and cyborgs.

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Readers of psychoanalytic critical theory will recognize in Marx’s triple ontology the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triadic structure developed by Jacques Lacan (2006, p. 318-33; see also Dolar, 1996; Žižek, 1989). Table 9.1 maps the correspondence between the body ontologies of Marx and Lacan. The table overlays Lacan’s realm of the real with Marx’s somatic plane, Lacan’s imaginary realm with Marx’s psychic plane, and Lacan’s symbolic realm with Marx’s plane of *socio*. Labor is located in the real-soma column, commodities in the imaginary-psyche column, and money, or more precisely, the money-form of value, in the symbolic-socio column.

In the column real-soma-labor, we position singular workers whose material bodies and organic drives are deployed in concrete labor and whose survival depends upon the consumption

of concrete use-values. These concrete workers are installed within concrete capital, productive workplaces that produce use-values as a side-activity to the absorption of labor. The progressive development of more powerful productive forces capable of absorbing ever larger quantities of labor time constitutes the technical composition of production (Labor + Labor') (Marx, 1894, n.p.).

In the column imaginary-psyche-commodity, we situate commodities and workers (reduced to purveyors of labor-time) facing each other as specular "doubles" or particular equivalents. In this realm, commodities are spectres (sublime objects) of fantasy that are fetishized, even totemized, as semblances radiating power, fascination and triggering desire. Commodities face each other in the marketplace as particular equivalents (commodity form of value), mirroring the double-reflection of fetish (display) value and congealed labor (value small a, or imaginary value). At this level, the telology of capital appears as the acquisition of surplus commodities (congealed labor) and the accumulation of productive technologies (dead labor) in the organic composition of capital (commodities + commodities').

In the column symbolic-socio-capital, we locate money as the universal equivalent, quantitatively abstracted from particular commodities. Capital in this form is both immaterial-weightless but also oppressive, as the often-unconscious, structuring power of capitalist modernity. The money-form of value is a symbolic marker of quantum of value, a structural force that "comes and goes," retroactively determining quantum of value realized in exchange (value big A). Money, as a purely symbolic form of value, weighs and registers the abstract labor resulting from the entire circuit of capital. It is the monster of self-valorizing value, of money begetting money (money + money').

Marx's critique of political economy and psychoanalytic critical theory map the body ontology of capital in congruent ways. In capitalism, bodies expend labor that is absorbed by capital, congealed in commodities and realized in exchange as value: all of the major categories of capital, even those situated in imaginary and symbolic orders, are ontologically born by the "real" corporeality of bodies. Wounded body-fantasies have become prevalent within the cultural productions of late capitalism, including those that feature reanimated corpses (undead) (McNally, 2011) and incorporation of the body into technological structures (cyborgs; armoured subjects) (Haraway, 1991; Worrell and Krier, 2012). These cultural products, like all fantasies, "flesh out" the symbolic order to subjects whose bodies bear the burdens of capital. With Marx and Lacan, we conclude that body ontology is necessary to comprehend and critique capital in its symbolic and imaginary forms.

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