

Thesis Summary

This thesis explores the claims of autonomist Marxist theory that contemporary struggles against capitalism are about rejecting capitalism through producing commons. The autonomist approach to commons is significant for social movement theory because, unlike existing Marxist approaches such as neo-Gramscian social movement theory, it places political action in a relation with capital. As a result, autonomist theory establishes a framework for understanding social movements as ‘commons movements’, rooted in claims about the nature of commons; the structure of capitalism; and the significance of political action.

The thesis explores this framework by applying it to two contemporary social movements: the *Bene Comune* movement in Rome, Italy, and the Occupy movement in Oakland, U.S.A. These movements are significant because commons, and practices of ‘commoning’ are both explicit and implicit within the movement practice. It establishes the successes of the autonomist method in offering a thick description of the social movements, their participants, and the local issues that animate them, but less successful at theorising the relationship between social movement practice and capitalism.

The final chapters explore the reasons for this, and explore alternative ways of understanding these movements in the context of capital. In the first instance, it looks to other resources that can be found within the intellectual milieu of post-2008 social movements, particularly so-called ‘communisation’ theory, which proposes a structural explanation of commons, rooted in a theory of secular crisis. Finally, the thesis concludes by suggesting that the primary problem facing autonomist theory as a basis for understanding social movements is its conflation of the logic of the political with the logic of the structural conditions of capital, a conflation which is sclerotic of its attempt to explain the dynamics that underlie the turn towards commons, and limiting of its capacity to explore political strategies at the level of totality

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Dedicated to the memory of Jessica Helen Raw

(1987-2015)

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Introduction

In his talk at the *Idea of Communism* conference held at London's Birkbeck College in 2008, American academic Michael Hardt suggested that 'the common' is the beating heart of radical politics in the 21st Century.¹ Historically, commons are the property form proper to communism, reflecting neither the private property of capitalism, nor the state property of actually existing socialism, but Hardt was keen to suggest that these ideas hold a particular contemporary valence.² Indeed, he suggested that commons are key to reclaiming an idea of communism as a systematic alternative to liberal capitalism.³ The notion of the commons, Hardt suggests, allows the articulation of an emancipatory politics "defined not only by the abolition of property but also by the affirmation of the common- the affirmation of open and autonomous biopolitical production, the self-governed continuous creation of humanity."⁴ Indeed, organisers of the conference Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas suggested that the idea of the commons is one of the central pillars of the contemporary resurgence of thought about communism.⁵

Even if we do not share Hardt's faith that 'the common' heralds a return to *Communist* politics, it is apparent that commons have not only become a prominent part of radical political imaginaries, but they also have relevance for the ways in which anti-systemic social movements operate in the 21st Century. If academic publishing is an indication of an idea's pertinence, then the recent weight of publications on precisely this subject suggests that 'the commons' have become an idea that is of profound importance within the contemporary world. In the introduction to a recent edited volume on commons, Manuel Yang and Jeffrey D. Howison suggested that "[t]he last twenty-three years since the state-socialist/capitalist regimes of Eastern Europe have shown repeatedly the intractable

¹ Hardt, M., (2010), 'The Common in Communism', in Douzinas, C. & Žižek, S., (Eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, (London, Verso), pp. 131-144.

² Hardt, 'The Common in Communism', p. 131.

³ See for example Elliott, G., (2008), *Ends in Sight: Marx/Fukuyama/Hobsbawm/Anderson*, (London, Pluto Press).

⁴ Hardt, 'The Common in Communism', p. 144.

⁵ Douzinas, C. & Žižek, S., (2010), 'Introduction', in Douzinas, C. & Žižek, S. (Eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, (London, Verso), pp. vii-x.

universality of commons and class struggle in defining our history.”⁶ There is a case to be made that the social forces in world politics that have most clearly resisted the juggernaut of neoliberal accumulation, are “anti-capitalist commoning activities which find spontaneous expressions in post-disaster mutual aid, urban community avant-gardening, workers’ occupation and direct control of abandoned factories.”⁷ If commons are indeed central to the ways in which anti-systemic movements operate, then there is both a political and an analytical imperative to make sense of commons both as a sociological phenomenon and as an idea that inspires political action. This thesis is an attempt to make sense of the commons in relation to attempts to transcend capital, and the utility of claims made on this basis.

Before any of this can be discussed, however, it is first necessary to get some sense of what commons are. A brief survey of contemporary thinking on the subject suggests that when people talk about commons, they are referring to forms of non-commodified social reproduction,⁸ but there is by no means a single, uncomplicated use of the term. Despite this, beginning with the notion of ‘non-commodified social reproduction’, I shall briefly outline some common features of the different ways that people talk about commons. In his contribution to a recent special issue of the journal *Borderlands*, Massimo De Angelis suggests that “[c]ommons movements’ first goal is addressing directly different needs of reproduction by mobilising the natural and creative resources at their disposal.”⁹ This appears to be the central pole around which accounts of commons coalesce. Commons, however, are about more than just social reproduction, and in order to understand the logic of how commons emerge and are sustained, Peter Linebaugh suggests that commons involve three further dimensions: a common pool of resources that can be used to meet needs; communities that create and sustain commons; and ‘commoning’, a social process that creates and reproduces

⁶ Yang, M. & Howison, J.D., (2012), ‘Introduction: Commons, Class Struggle and the World’, *Borderlands* 11(2), p. 1.

⁷ Yang & Howison, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

⁸ E-flux, (2010), ‘On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides’, (available online at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/>), (accessed on: 12.02.2015).

⁹ De Angelis, M., (2012), ‘Crisis, Movements and Commons’, *Borderlands* 11(2), p. 1.

commons.¹⁰ In this way, more than just being about the way in which communities reproduce themselves, commons are about agencies that establish common property relations.

Indeed, this is one of the origins of conceptual dissonance over commons. As they are more than simply about about what commons *are*, theoretical discourses around commons disagree about the various agencies, social relations, and communities that are implied within a commons movement. In this regard, theories of commons are not just discourses about a social form. They are also discourses about social movements, and the obstacles they face. In this context, De Angelis, Linebaugh and their peers have argued- either explicitly or implicitly through the procedure of their writings- that we need a set of *sui generis* conceptual and theoretical tools for understanding commons. In the sense that commons are about agencies, social relations, and the attempt to transcend capital, it is not entirely distinct from the challenges facing contemporary attempts to steer Social Movement Theory in a Marxist direction.

Marxist Social Movement Theory and literatures on commons share many of the same challenges, each attempting to articulate a radical perspective on social transformation through theorizing the subjective and organizational aspects of movements that seek to overcome capital. This perspective challenges orthodoxies within both Social Movement Theory and Marxism. Marxist scholars Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen have suggested that there is a dual problem at the heart of mainstream academic Social Movement Theory: first, a failure to take activists' own concerns seriously,¹¹ and secondly, a reluctance to contextualize their activities in the context of large-scale processes of social change.¹² This failure to contextualize is by no means a problem unique to Social Movement Theory, and the 'parcelling out' of different issues to different disciplines- everyday resistance to 'cultural studies', labour movements to 'industrial relations' and revolutions to a particular branch of Political Science- has been described by Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky,

¹⁰ E-flux, 'On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides'.

¹¹ Cox, L. & Gunvald Nilsen, A., (2014), *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, (London, Pluto Press).

¹² Barker, C., Cox, L., Krinsky, J. & Gunvald Nilsen, A., (2014), 'Marxism and Social Movements: An Introduction', in Barker, C., Cox, L., Krinsky, J. & Gunvald Nilsen, A., (Eds.), *Marxism and Social Movements*, (Leiden, Brill), p. 5.

and Alf Gunvald Nilsen as “a great impoverishment of sociological and political imaginations.”¹³ They suggest that in its current positivist and behaviouralist guise, ‘Social Movement Theory’ displays a fundamental disregard for the way in which social movements interact with social forms, preferring to understand them in terms of ‘opportunity structures’ and their decision-making dynamics. As a result of the relative paucity of sociological thinking within contemporary Social Movement Theory, but also the fact that movements are encountering a sociologically unique question: that of the transcendence of capital, has led most commentators on commons to develop *sui generis* methods for understanding commons not just as socially embedded practices of resistance, but also as an attempt to establish an alternative social-metabolic system to that of capital. In this context, it is unsurprising that scholars have drawn on Marxist social theory rather than Social Movement Theory in order to make sense of the relationship between commons movements and capitalist social forms.

It is not, however, consistent with the Marxism that is prominent within International Relations, or other branches of contemporary academic Marxism. For theorists of commons who are interested in relating commons to the structural context of late capitalism, while taking the self-conceptions of activists seriously, the most obvious place to turn is theories generated by activists themselves. Indeed, many writings on the commons do exactly this, developing theories of commons not with the abstract detachment of the social scientist, but from the position of ‘the commoner’ herself. The writings of scholars such as Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, or Massimo De Angelis, written from an ‘autonomist Marxist’ perspective¹⁴ are examples of this

¹³ Barker, Cox, Krinsky & Gunvald Nilsen, ‘Marxists and Social Movements: An Introduction’, p. 6.

¹⁴ Although I expect that most readers will be familiar with the term ‘autonomist Marxism’, I shall take the precaution of defining it here for the sake of clarity. Autonomist Marxism, or autonomism is a form of anti-authoritarian Marxism that emerged from the political current known as workerism in 1960s Italy. Autonomism was known for its rejection of Soviet-influenced Marxism-Leninism, Chinese Maoism, *and* Eurocommunist social democracy, which has led some commentators to classify it alongside anarchism as a political doctrine. Gregory Katsiafikis suggests that “[i]n contrast to the centralized decisions and hierarchical authority structures of modern institutions, autonomous social movements involve people directly in decisions affecting their everyday lives. They seek to expand democracy and to help individuals break free of political structures and behavior patterns imposed from the outside.” Although emerging

approach, giving analytical priority to the struggles and self-conceptualisations of activists themselves, as they make and sustain commons, while taking into consideration the wider structural dynamics of late capitalism.¹⁵ Indeed, in the last 10 years, autonomist ideas about commons emerged as the *de facto* theoretical framework for understanding the social movement dynamics that seemed to synthesise a diverse range of struggles around the world, both academically and in the imagination of the social movements themselves.¹⁶

Whilst autonomism has become hegemonic within the secondary literature on commons, there is by no means a hegemonic conception of the meaning of commons *within* autonomism itself. Commons have become central to the work of Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri: it was an explicit focus of their recent pamphlet *Declaration*,¹⁷ and a subterranean current running through their influential *Empire* trilogy of books, occasionally rising to the surface (particularly in *Commonwealth*), and serving to unite various discrete forms of resistance to capitalism in a single, univocal language of resistance.¹⁸ Hardt & Negri's account is by no means unchallenged within the literature, however. For example, Massimo De Angelis' *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* is but one of a number of academic publications that have contested their ideas about commons *within* autonomist literatures. Whereas Hardt & Negri suggest that commons emerge at the heart of the capitalist system, within the most advanced sectors of the economy such as the immaterial labour that is being done within the service sector, De Angelis suggests that commons are about the construction of a system of values 'outside' capitalism.¹⁹ Whilst De Angelis' intervention was sympathetic to the broader

from social movement practice in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of autonomists have become known as Political Theorists, such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, and Mario Tronti.

¹⁵ I will return to the question of how exactly autonomist theory does this in chapter one of the thesis.

¹⁶ Cunninghame, P., (2010), 'Autonomism as a Global Social Movement', *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 13, pp. 451-464.

¹⁷ Hardt, M. & Negri, A., (2012), *Declaration!*, (New York, Argo Navis).

¹⁸ Hardt, M. & Negri, A., (2000), *Empire*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press),
Hardt, M. & Negri, A., (2005), *Multitude*, (New York, Penguin),

Hardt, M. & Negri, A., (2011), *Commonwealth*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).

¹⁹ De Angelis, M., (2007), *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*, (London, Pluto Press).

autonomist tradition to which both he and Hardt & Negri belong, he challenged their understanding of what commons are, and why they are significant for emancipatory politics in several key ways. This debate about commons within the autonomist tradition is important for two main reasons: first, because it gives us a model of what commons are within capitalism and how to approach them; and second, because they reveal that when we talk about the commons, we are not just talking about the commons, but about the interrelationship of commons, capitalism, and political action. An autonomist perspective on the commons encourages us to see commons as social forms that emerge through action against the logic of capitalism, which places human needs at the centre of a political logic. Although representing the most theoretically advanced poles of the argument, this ‘dispute’ between Hardt & Negri and De Angelis is far from the only philosophical and sociological debate going on about the commons within autonomist theory.²⁰

Developed from activists’ own understandings of political action, with the aim of articulating political struggles in relation to the wider structural dynamics of late capitalism, discourses of commons contain within them claims about two things other than commons themselves: the nature of capitalism; and the nature of political action directed at overcoming it. As a consequence, therefore, at the very heart of discussions about commons is a political theory question about what it means to overcome capitalism, and how this overcoming should be affected. Indeed, it is possible to understand debates within autonomist Marxism such as those between Hardt & Negri and De Angelis in precisely these terms: whereas for Hardt & Negri, commons are something that emerges within the totality of capitalism’s social relations, an internal challenge to the Leviathan logic of ‘Empire’, for De Angelis, the production of commons are not the outgrowth of capital’s internal contradictions, but arise from the voluntaristic act of stepping outside the ‘totality’ of capitalist social relations.²¹ In each of these accounts, the nature of commons is tied to particular assumptions about what capitalism is, and the possibility of political action to transcend it. In the former account, commons are a product of labour’s gradual capacity to supersede capital within the global production process, whereas the latter

²⁰ See for example the recent special issue of the journal *Borderlands* 11(2), the writings of the Midnight Notes Collective, and issues of the journal *The Commoner*.

²¹ I return to this theme in chapter one of the thesis.

understands commons as a conflict between capital and the commoner, with the commons becoming the social forms through which this conflict takes place.

Whilst this debate is an important one, it is not one that I seek to resolve directly in this thesis, and nor do I wish to suggest that De Angelis and Hardt & Negri's contending account of the commons exhaustively cover all that is significant about the commons today. Rather, this debate is significant, because it hints at the ways in which theories of the commons are used to make sense of commons as political action. In some senses, my thesis begins where this observation finishes. As such, this thesis seeks to investigate whether or not it is useful to think about commons in the political-theoretical terms laid out by autonomism. In order to do so, I conduct an immanent critique of the conditions and procedures of the autonomist approach to commons, employing an autonomist methodology and autonomist assumptions about commons in order to assess its validity as a political-theoretical approach to the emergence of commons in social movements in Europe and North America since the 2008 financial crisis. By conducting an immanent critique, I aim to explore autonomist claims that commons are capital-transcending action, or whether it encounters limits that force us, if the transcendence of capital is our referent object, to go beyond the perspective put forward by autonomism.

In some regards, the nature of this thesis might be regarded as theory development, 'taking up the baton' from theories of commons developed in the mid-2000s, and assessing their validity for exploring the commons within what autonomists term 'the current cycle of struggle'. At the same time, its aim is wider: it is also concerned with the validity of the autonomist approach *tout court*. In beginning with autonomist assumptions and testing their capacity to make sense of contemporary dynamics, I aim to assess the limits of the autonomist approach, not only to commons, but also to theorising the relationship between the structure of capitalism and struggle against it more generally. To this end, the Central Research Question driving this project is the following:

"Is autonomist Marxism an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between commoning and capitalism (in the current cycle of struggles)?"

In order to answer this question, I take existing autonomist approaches to commons, and analyse how they account for commoning practices that have emerged within social movements since the 2008 financial crisis. The two case studies chosen for this purpose are the *Bene Comune* movement in Rome, Italy, and the commoning practices of Occupy Oakland. These case studies are not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive, but rather have been chosen as heuristic devices through which to assess the autonomist problematisation of commons.

The central problematique that runs through this thesis can be broken down into a series of sub-questions, answers to which are necessary, if not sufficient, to answering the central research question. Each of these corresponds to particular chapters of the thesis and deepens and expands the critique upon which this thesis is founded.

- 1) What are the main characteristics of existing autonomist approaches to the commons? What is at stake in an autonomist account of commoning? (**Chapter one**)
- 2) What is the politics of commoning in the current cycle of struggles? What kind of practices can be observed? How do these practices relate to the autonomist theoretical frameworks established in chapter one? (**Chapter two & three**)
- 3) How do the autonomist theories of the mid-2000s- the key Marxist theories of commoning- account for and shape the meaning and significance of commons and commoning for anti-capitalist political practice in the post-2008 period (and what do they contribute to existing accounts of social movements)? What dynamics do autonomist theories of the commons fail to account for? In what ways have the movements themselves sought to account for any deficiencies within the autonomist formulation? (**Chapter four**)
- 4) How can/should Marxist theory improve on existing accounts of commoning, specifically the conceptualisations of the relationship between structure and struggle? What does this say about the wider nature of Marxist thought about the commons? (**Chapter five**)

The next section of this introduction will now outline the structure of the thesis in more detail, summarising the argument of each chapter, and laying out the ways in which each one fits into the wider conceptual logic of the thesis.

Chapter one explores existing ‘autonomist’ theories of the commons. It does so by exploring two key autonomist theories of the commons, those of Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, and that of Massimo De Angelis. In counterposing these two approaches, both of which were developed during the 2000s, but do so by drawing upon an older tradition of autonomist political thought, I want to demonstrate the internal tensions within autonomist theories of the commons, as well as draw out the key features of what autonomist theories of commons *do*. I do not wish to suggest that the two perspectives remain the limit of what a theory of the commons in the current crisis can be, or the limit of what a theory of the commons should be, rather that the tension between the two reveals the key features of theories of the commons more generally. I argue that there are three things that these accounts disagree about:

- The nature of commons
- The nature of capitalism
- The nature of the political

This suggests that autonomist theories of commons are simultaneously accounts of the nature of commons, the nature of capitalism, and the nature of the political. In order to make this argument, I demonstrate that there is a particular logic to *why* commons become central to their theoretical endeavours, a logic that emerges from the political and philosophical foundations of workerist thought. The final section of this chapter briefly outlines the methodology employed in this thesis. As the point of the thesis is to conduct an immanent critique of autonomist theory, the methodology is drawn from autonomism. It also outlines more practically the way in which the research was conducted, and the epistemological and methodological basis upon which the knowledge claims of this thesis are made.

Following this, the purpose of chapters two and three is to explore commoning practices witnessed within social movements that have emerged in the global North since the 2008-financial crisis, and to explore how adequately the autonomist approach to the commons deals with these cases. Chapter two explores the *bene comune* movement in Rome, Italy, outlining its origins in a referendum against water privatization, and assessing its aftermath- *Bene Comune*’s call for a return to civic,

associational life- as an example of constituent power. At the same time, there are a number of dynamics that the autonomist framing of the movement belies; particularly the commons as a response to the rapidly restructuring post-neoliberal state, and the way in which commons have emerged as a ‘coping strategy’ following the state’s withdrawal from the education sector and its refusal of ‘traditional roles’ such as the provision of housing and welfare. The conclusion of the chapter suggests that the reluctance to theorise the state places limits upon autonomist theories of commons.

In a similar fashion, chapter three addresses the ways in which commons have emerged as part of the Occupy movement in Oakland, California. These protests have typically been understood in terms used to describe the wider Occupy movement, which encourages us to approach the movement in terms of its democratic and organizational culture. There is a case to be made for understanding these movements, and particularly the Occupy movement in Oakland, as commoning practices. The chapter demonstrates that all of the features of commons outlined in chapter one can be found within the movement in Oakland, and an approach that views the movement in these terms can shed light on its relationship with material dynamics of the East Bay. In particular, autonomism offers particularly strong explanations of the relation between the subjective dimensions of the protests and the class composition of Oakland. However, again there are aspects that autonomist theory cannot so easily explain, particularly relating to the weakness of labour movements and other existing forms of left politics, the role of the state, and the ‘failures’ of these movements, which leads to lacunae within this account of the commons.

Chapter four attempts to resolve these lacunae within autonomist theories of commons. It does this in two ways, drawing on previously untapped resources that can be found within the autonomist tradition itself, particularly the notion of ‘secular crisis’ articulated by Harry Cleaver, and mobilizing theoretical additions that have been discussed within the movements themselves. Within movement practice- particularly in Oakland, California- activists have started to talk about ‘communisation theory’, a branch of Marxist theory derived from a reading of Marx developed through the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* or *Wertkritik* in 1970s Germany. This move offers an explanation of commoning that locates it in the breakdown of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. However, these revisions also have

their own limitations. Drawing on autonomism and the theoretical additions made possible through taking some concepts from communisation theory, it establishes that autonomism does a good job of narrating the empirical reality of commoning practices. What it does less successfully, however is establishing commons as capital-transcending practices. Following on from this recognition, the chapter asks whether what is at stake here is not simply something that requires revision to specific theories of commons, but the validity of the autonomist method *tout court*. It argues that autonomism understands capital in a nominalist fashion, an understanding that leads to an overly optimistic perspective on the potential of commons to transcend capital. As a result of the way that autonomist theory understands the relationship between commons, capitalism and political practice, autonomism has a tendency to locate the political within the commons themselves. The tendency of theorists of the commons to locate the political within the voluntaristic rejection of capitalism **OR** the faith in capitalism's working out of its contradictions leads to an insufficient account of the political **AND** a misrepresentation of how commons appear within capitalist social relations. In view of the observational claims made in chapters two and three, and the theoretical working through of the *problematique* in chapter four, the political-theoretical statement of the thesis is that *contra* autonomism, the political cannot be located within commons, and we must consider political reason as something external to the commons themselves. The particular autonomist construction of the *problematique* of the commons conflates the political with the structural, something that precludes, or at least makes difficult disaggregating political strategy from logics that are internal to commoning itself. At the same time that this thesis critiques autonomism for its conflation of the political with the strategic, it recognizes that this deficiency cannot be rectified as simply as by disaggregating the two, which would amount to a 'positivisation' of the Marxist project.

To this end, an alternative conception of capital and the political must be developed. In chapter five, I argue that this can be achieved through developing a conception of the totality of capital's social-metabolic system through the philosophy of István Mészáros, and a conception of political intervention into this totality through the writings of Louis Althusser on 'the conjuncture' and 'contradiction' within the capitalist totality. This approach to commons through an account of the capital system as totality suggests that if commons are to be capital transcending, they must be part

of a broader political movement that *both* creates commons as alternative forms of social-metabolic reproduction *and* negates the social forces of capital. This alternative strategic-relational approach to commons has a number of implications for wider academic debates about the significance of resistance, and the nature of critique in the 21st Century.

So, to summarise, the argument that I make in this thesis is as follows: commons are an important part of contemporary anti-capitalist struggles. If we want to understand the social forces arrayed against capitalism today, we cannot ignore the role that commons and acts of commoning play among them. As such, a theory of commons, which allows us to see the relationship between commoning practices and capitalism, is important for a number of reasons. First, it offers a more theoretically informed discussion of the relationship between anti-systemic practices and capital than regular Social Movement Theory, or neo-Gramscian Marxist Social Movement Theory currently offers.²² Second, commons are significant because they raise the question of capital-transcending political action. Autonomism has been the most theoretically sophisticated way of understanding commoning practices as something that takes place within and against capitalism, but even it encounters limits to its comprehension.

The autonomist orientation towards the commons can be used to explain many of the dynamics of the commons struggles in the post-2008 period, particularly the ways in which commons are formed through the cultivation of ‘subjectivities of resistance’ and practices of autonomy. However, there are problems with the autonomist arguments about commons. Although autonomism is a diverse and vigorously contested theoretical tradition, these problems stem from the implications of the so-called ‘Trontian turn’. The tendency to focus on the local, and the way in which capitalism is *driven by* class struggles, means that autonomism does not pay particular attention to the wider context of commoning. One of the most important of these contexts is the context of crisis. At times we see commons emerging as responses to a particular crisis dynamic within the global economy, and the way that this crisis manifest in Europe and North America. In this regard commoning, rather than

²² See for example Barker, Cox, Krinsky & Gunvald Nilsen, (Eds.), *Marxism and Social Movements*.

stemming from the strength of struggles, appears to be a product of the weakness of anti-systemic projects. While there are resources within autonomist theory and the movements themselves (particularly Harry Cleaver's writings on secular crisis and so-called communisation theory) that can help us to understand this weakness, at the same time, this creates other problems. A powerful but sympathetic Marxist critique suggests that we must understand the emergence of commons in relation to capitalist totality. This has political implications too: if commons are to prove a challenge to capitalist totality, they must be used strategically as a way of challenging the hegemony of capital's social metabolic control. This suggests broadening and deepening the strategic perspective developed by autonomist theories of commons to establish political reason as a more significant feature of thought about commons. Anti-systemic political thought that solely discusses political action in terms of political power is unable to sufficiently give voice to human self-determination, whereas political accounts based only in self-determination eventually encounter the social force of capital as their insurmountable limit. If the limits to human self-determination are found in capital, it is capital, and not the movements themselves that must become the referent object of critique and political action.

Although the claims made by this thesis are limited, I hope that its readership shall not be limited only to those interested in autonomism and commoning. Whilst first and foremost it should be of interest to those who engage with autonomist theory, as it attempts to analyse the changing dynamics of commoning and their relationship to autonomist theory since autonomist theory was brought to bear on the issue of the commons of the mid-2000s, as well as offering a more general appraisal of the autonomist project, I hope that it will also have a wider valence, speaking to current attempts to conceptualise capital-transcending action using Marxist tools, and demonstrate the significance of conceptualizing capitalism in our accounts of social movements. Although it is not the focus of my thesis proper, in depth conceptual thinking about how commons are employed as political concepts is both important and timely, particularly because there the apparent urgency of finding a new beginning for oppositional, critical, and emancipatory politics in the 21st Century, and responding to the specific conjuncture of crisis within the social movement dynamics

of resistance.²³ Unlike many of the recent critiques of autonomism,²⁴ this thesis does not make claims to validity on the basis of a ‘return to Marx’, or a *prima facie* rejection of autonomist politics, but on the basis of the specific empirical conjuncture of the present. Teasing out the contradictions, possibilities, and truths of the social movements themselves, and more specifically, the role that commons play in the discourse and practice of social movements, might actually be crucial to thinking through a new political grammar for the 21st Century, and a political response to the global economy’s crisis tendencies in the twilight of neoliberalism. However, before it is possible to look at the importance of commons on a wider scale, it is necessary to begin by assessing the conceptual foundations of commons within the existing literature. It is to this task that I turn in the first chapter of this thesis.

²³ The question of what it means to begin emancipatory politics today is prominent within contemporary continental philosophy. See for example: Douzinas, C., (2013), *Philosophies and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe*, (Cambridge, Polity Press), Badiou, A., (2012), *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, (London, Verso), Žižek, S., (2012), *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, (London, Verso).

²⁴ See for example Barker, C., Cox, L., Krinsky, J. & Gunvald Nilsen, A., ‘Marxism and Social Movements’, in Barker, C., Cox, L., Krinsky, J. & Gunvald Nilsen, A. (Eds.), (2013), *Marxism and Social Movements*, (Leiden, Brill), particularly pp. 19-21.

Chapter One: The Commons, Political Action, and the Autonomist Tradition

The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct existing autonomist perspectives on commons. It does so by bringing into focus two views on commons articulated through autonomist theory in the mid-2000s, that of Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri in the *Empire* trilogy, and the pamphlet *Declaration!*, and that of Massimo De Angelis in *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. In choosing these works as representative of the way in which autonomist theory has made sense of ‘the commons’, it aims to shed light on two very different interpretations of the commons that exist within the autonomist perspective, interpretations which disagree about the nature of the commons, the nature of capitalism, and the nature of political interventions into capital. In reconstructing this ‘debate’, the chapter seeks not to construct two opposing paradigms so much as it hopes to demonstrate that autonomist theories have proceeded by way of arguments about what theories of the commons do. Disagreement proceeds like this because autonomist theories of commons make claims about a number of things: what commons are and how they relate to capitalism; the nature of capitalism; and the possibility of capital-transcending political action through commons.

In addition to its reconstruction of the debates within the autonomist tradition about the nature of commons, this chapter identifies the autonomist method that underpins both positions within this debate. It establishes that at the heart of autonomist theory is Mario Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’, which places the struggles of social movements themselves at the heart of an ontology of social transformation, from which a method is developed that stresses the significance of analyzing their development as the motive force of social transformation. Common to autonomist writings on commons are a belief that commons are social phenomena that we must approach from within the practices of movements themselves, and the way that they create new systems of social reproduction and ideological cultures of resistance. The history of ‘post-Trontian’ social theory is a history of social theory that approaches the potential of transcending capital through analysis of the movements themselves, their practices and the cultures of action they cultivate.

The Commons and the Tradition of Political Resistance

To get to the core of the disagreements between Hardt & Negri and De Angelis, and to establish the most general contours of the autonomist method, it is first necessary to reconstruct the intellectual history of the wider autonomist tradition. Given the constraints of space afforded by this thesis, and the wealth of excellent secondary literature on autonomist movements, from Steve Wright's impressive historical account in *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*,²⁵ to Dave Eden's theoretical appraisal of the tradition in *Autonomy*,²⁶ I shall not attempt to outline the intellectual history of autonomism thoroughly, but rather to offer a more skeletal reconstruction of its ideas, with particular reference to how different 'branches' of autonomism construct and employ theories of the commons as something through which political action can be framed.

As a preliminary note, it is worth recognizing that autonomism does not have a monopoly on either discussions of the commons in contemporary literature, or on the commons as political theories of the transcendence of capital. The commons offers a rich countercultural tradition through which communities of resistance to capitalist social relations have been imagined. Whilst much of the existing non-autonomist literature on the commons pays little attention to its political dimension,²⁷ there is also a large literature that has conceived of commons in terms of political resistance. Social historian Peter Linebaugh has described the commons as a tradition of political resistance, suggesting that this tradition has been fundamental to thinking about resistance in Britain, Europe, and across 'the revolutionary Atlantic'.²⁸ Linebaugh's

²⁵ Wright, S., (2002), *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, (London, Pluto Press).

²⁶ Eden, D., (2012), *Autonomy: Capitalism, Class and Politics*, (Farnham, Ashgate).

²⁷ See for example:

Hardin, G., (1968), 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science* 162, pp. 1243-1248,

Ostrom, E., Burger, J., Field, C.B., Norgaard, R.B. & Policansky, D., (1999), 'Revisiting the Commons: Local Lessons, Global Challenges', *Science* 284, pp. 278-282,

Bollier, D., (2014), *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, (Gabriola Island, New Society Publishers),

Bollier, D. & Helfrich, S., (Eds.), (2013), *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, (Amherst, Levellers Press).

²⁸ Linebaugh, P., (2009), *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, (Berkeley, University of California Press),

original contribution, in keeping with the efforts of his PhD supervisor E.P. Thompson, and the formidable cohort of 20th Century British Marxist historians,²⁹ was to attempt to rescue the social history of class resistance to capital's extractive demands through the commons from "the enormous condescension of posterity".³⁰ That this task should be necessary is in part due to the project of modernity, and its disregard for ways of being, seeing, and doing politics that are not themselves modern. Progressive thought, not least amongst it Marxism, has been particularly guilty of disregarding non-modern forms of agency and politically transformative action. Although Marx's *Capital* saw great significance in commons, a perspective outlined particularly in chapter 28 of *Capital, Vol. I*, which details their expropriation 'bloody legislation' of the 15th to 19th Centuries,³¹ this has rarely been translated into the ways in which Marx's writings have been interpreted or put into political practice. Indeed, it has taken the arrival of autonomism, and the so-called 'Open Marxist' tendency,³² to convince Marxology to take commons seriously.³³

While the theoretical core of this project is the way that Autonomist Marxist theories

Linebaugh, P., (2014), *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*, (Oakland, PM Press),

Linebaugh, P. & Rediker, M., (2012), *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, (London, Verso).

²⁹ See for example:

Hill, C., (1991), *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, (London, Penguin),

Rude, G. (1964), *The Crowd in History: A Study in Popular Disturbances in France and England 1730-1848*, (London, John Wiley & Sons),

Saville, J., (1974), *Marxism and History*, Inaugural Lecture, University of Hull, 6th November 1973,

Thompson, D., (2013), *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution*, (London, Breviary Stuff Publications),

Thompson, E.P., (2009), *Customs in Common*, (London, The Merlin Press).

³⁰ Thompson, E.P., (1968), *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London, Penguin), p.12.

³¹ Marx, K., (1990), *Capital, Vol. I*, (London, Penguin), pp. 893-894.

³² Bonefeld, W., (2008), 'Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Economic Categories and Social Constitution', (available online at: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/politics/research/hmrg/activities/documents/Bonefeld.pdf>), (accessed on: 11.03.2014), p. 3.

³³ This is not to say that Marx did not take commons seriously himself. His letters to Vera Zasulich already complicate the 'modernist' temporality through which his work has often been read, and suggest that he himself saw various forms of common property as potential paths to the establishment of forms of communism.

See for example Tomba, M., (2014), *Marx's Temporalities*, (Leiden, Brill).

talk about commons, it is important to be mindful that they are by no means the only way that commons have been spoken about throughout history, and that commons- as sociological phenomena, and as a philosophical abstraction that allows us to think about agency against capital- long predate Marxism. Indeed, there are rich resources within the contemporary publishing on commons, which treat commons as living resources that are important to contemporary political and social action, which bypass Marx's thought, or engage with it only tangentially.³⁴ Unfortunately, due to the constraints of this thesis it is not possible to adumbrate the main features of this literature here, but it is worth noting that there is a rich tradition of alternative thinking about commons, which treats commons as a form of local, customary knowledge, a collective action problem, or a question of how mankind should marshal ever dwindling natural resources. In awareness of these alternative non-Marxist ways of thinking about commons, I now want to look at the history of autonomist Marxism, as the specific Marxist tendency from which both De Angelis' and Hardt & Negri's writings emerged. In doing so, it is my intention to do two things: first, to outline the reasons *why* autonomist thinkers have been so enamoured by the idea of the commons, and second, to analyse *how* they do so.

The Autonomist Tradition in Theory and Practice

Today, autonomism is a widely accepted framework for thinking about political action in academia. Its origins, however, are largely extra-academic. As Patrick

³⁴ See for example:

Boal, I., Stone, J., Walker, R. & Winslow, C., (Eds.), (2011), *West of Eden: Communes and Utopia in Northern California*, (Oakland, PM Press),

Bollier, D., (2002), *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of our Common Wealth*, (Abingdon, Routledge),

Hyde, L., (2010), *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, Ownership*, (New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux),

Ostrom, E., (1990), *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, (New York, Cambridge University Press),

Patel, R., (2009), *The Value of Nothing: How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy*, (New York, Picador),

p.m., (2011), *bolo bolo*, (New York, Autonomedia),

Reid, H. & Taylor, B., (2010), *Recovering the Commons: Democracy, Place, and Global Justice*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press),

Walljasper, J., (Ed.), (2010), *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons*, (New York, The New Press).

Cunninghame has suggested, “autonomism can be seen as a global network of alliances between occupied social centres and media activists in Europe, Zapatistas and Piqueteros in Latin America, Black Blockers in North America, cyber hacktivists in Japan, and autonomous workers, unemployed youth, students, dispossessed peasants, and urban squatter movements in South Korea, South Africa, and India.”³⁵ It is, he suggests, a movement that is characterized and driven by its practitioners. It is also a political tradition that does not have a geographical centre, with its intellectuals often working outside the academic institutions and conventions of Marxist theory. In recent years, autonomism has come to be associated with the grassroots organizations for ‘another’ globalization, that have become famous for their mass decentralized campaigns of direct action and civil disobedience, which- often under the banner of the *Peoples’ Global Action Network*- attempts to tie many disparate causes together into one global struggle. That autonomist politics should have become synonymous with the anti-globalization movement of the turn of the century is partly the product of the (unexpected) popularity of the writings of Hardt & Negri, within these movements themselves, and in the wider popular imagination.

However, if there is sometimes a tendency to think of autonomism as a brand of neo-Marxist theory that was born with the publication of Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri’s *Empire* in 2000, this is fundamentally misleading. Autonomism is a much longer tradition of thinking about political action informed by the philosophy of Marx, a tradition that it is important for us to understand if we are to make sense of the writings of Hardt & Negri, or the autonomist tradition’s capacity to make sense of the contemporary world. Although in some ways Hardt & Negri’s *Empire* trilogy marks a departure from the classical themes of autonomist Marxism, in other senses it is remarkably consistent with it. In particular, its attempt to think about how to create a bottom-up political movement in response to massive transformations within the political and economic administration of world politics is consistent with autonomism in any era. Emerging first in Italy, Germany, and Holland,³⁶ and then in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, autonomism sought to respond to changing forms of political organization of the anti-systemic left, as well as the philosophical

³⁵ Cunninghame, ‘Autonomism as a Global Social Movement’, *Working USA: The Journal of Labour and Society*.

³⁶ Tormey, S., (2013), *Anti-Capitalism: A Beginner’s Guide*, (London, Oneworld).

‘rediscovery’ of a ‘humanist Marx’ in Western Europe.³⁷

In the first instance, the autonomist perspective was developed by activist scholars associated with the political left in Italy during the late 1960s and the 1970s, as the Italian labour movement tore itself apart in the context of a dual struggle against the Italian Communist Party and the post-Fordist reorganization of the production process.³⁸ Although the earliest articulators of the autonomist position were primarily political figures such as Mario Tronti, Franco Piperno, Raniero Panzieri, Oreste Scalzone, and Valerio Morucci,³⁹ the reception of this period within the Anglophone academic world has been heavily shaped by its more academic interpreters,⁴⁰ including Antonio ‘Toni’ Negri,⁴¹ Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi,⁴² Paolo Virno,⁴³ and Maurizio Lazzarato.⁴⁴ The movement developed through two different, but interrelated stages. The first, rooted in workers movements and often called *Operaismo*, comprised of groups such as *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*, and organized among workers and students, promoting workplace autonomy and the self-management of student spaces. The second stage of the movement, generally known as *Autonomia*, emerged as the groups started to mutate, and anti-capitalist struggle came to be waged on a more general level. The autonomist movement itself coalesced around the free radio movement, and projects such as *Onda Rossa* in Rome and *Radio Alice* in Bologna. Even within this periodization of the movement, there remains considerable variation between different groups within the broader historical phenomenon of Italian autonomism: Marxist-Leninist orientations such as *Autonomia Operaia Organizzata* and more anarchist and libertarian tendencies referred to as

³⁷ See for example Keucheyan, R., (2013), *The Left Hemisphere*, (London, Verso).

³⁸ The best available English language history of *Operaismo* and *Autonomist* politics in Italy is Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. Also, for an edited collection of original, primary texts see Lotringer, S. & Marazzi, C., (Eds.) (2008), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, (Semiotexte, Los Angeles).

³⁹ See for example Lotringer & Marazzi (Eds.), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*.

⁴⁰ For an excellent overview of the more philosophical interpretation of autonomist thought, see Virno, P & Hardt, M., (Eds.), (1996), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press).

⁴¹ Negri, A., (1992), *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, (London, Pluto Press).

⁴² Berardi, F., (2011), *After the Future*, Genosko, G. & Thoburn, N. (Eds.), (Oakland, AK Press).

⁴³ Virno, P., (2004), *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (Los Angeles, Semiotexte).

⁴⁴ Lazzarato, M., (2012), *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, (Los Angeles, Semiotexte).

Autonomia Difusa.

Although Italian autonomism is the most historically prominent example of an autonomist movement, and remains central to the way that we think about autonomist politics, Italian autonomism is by no means the only historical experience that has shaped modern academic discourses of autonomism. Other interpretations of autonomy were taken up in the United States, the Netherlands and Germany. Prominent writings on the subject continue to shape debate, from the writings of the *Johnson-Forest Tendency* in the United States,⁴⁵ to the *Autonome* in Germany.⁴⁶ The constellation of autonomist politics is ideologically as well as geographically varied,⁴⁷ but nonetheless there remain an identifiable core of shared beliefs, summed up by Luciano Castellano as follows: “the refusal of labour (itself open to a variety of interpretations); the defence and extension of working class needs against the logic of the market; the reading of capital as a social relation of power; and finally, as a consequence of the latter, a notion of capital's state-form at odds with the mindset of orthodox Marxism.”⁴⁸ Indeed, these ideas put it at odds not only to orthodox Marxism-Leninism, as practiced in the Soviet Union and the major Marxist-Leninist

⁴⁵ See for example James, C.L.R., Lee, G.C. & Chaulieu, P., (1958), *Facing Reality*, (Detroit, Corresponding Publishing Company).

⁴⁶ See for example Geronimo, (2012), *Fire and Flames: A History of the German Autonomist Movement*, (Oakland, PM Press).

⁴⁷ The term was first coined by Harry Cleaver, who suggests:

“What gives meaning to the concept of ‘autonomist Marxism’ as a particular tradition is the fact that we can identify, within the larger Marxist tradition, a variety of movements, politics and thinkers who have emphasized the autonomous power of workers – autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (e.g. the trade unions, the political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g. women from men). By ‘autonomy’ I mean the ability of workers to define their own interests and to struggle for them – to go beyond mere reaction to exploitation, or to self- defined ‘leadership’ and to take the offensive in ways that shape the class struggle and define the future.”

De Angelis, M., (1993), ‘An Interview with Harry Cleaver’, (available online at: <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/InterviewwithHarryCleaver.html>), (accessed on: 11.02.2014).

⁴⁸ Castellano, L., (1980), 'Introduzione', in Castellano, L., (ed.) (1980) *Aut. Op. La storia e i documenti: da Potere operaio all'Autonomia organizzata*. (Rome, Savelli), quoted in Wright, S., (2005), ‘A Party of Autonomy?’, (available online at: <http://libcom.org/library/party-autonomy-steve-wright>), (accessed on: 10.02.2015).

parties such as the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI), but also with Trotskyist interpretations of Marx's writings as well as much of the nascent 'new left',⁴⁹ and Anarchist thought. This perspective is perhaps epitomized by *Autonomia* in Italy, which not only challenged the Communist Party's plans to share power with the Christian Democrats in the infamous 'historic compromise', but was also critically opposed to the nascent new left in the country.⁵⁰

In this way, autonomism was born of particular struggles to challenge the growing hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Unlike many of the other strands of 'critical theory' that are prominent within the academy today, which can often seem borne of despair at the defeat of Marxism-Leninism,⁵¹ and are divorced from the question of practical political engagement, autonomism was from its very beginning, concerned with social movement practice. Beginning with Adorno or Horkheimer, the critique carried out by these 'critical theories' often remains intellectually pure, but largely divorced from the practical act of changing the world. The difference between Autonomism and Frankfurt School Critical Theory, for example, is political, but it is also about the nature and starting point of intellectual inquiry. Indeed, if the tacit starting point of much critical theory written in the Frankfurt School idiom is the complete subsumption of life under the physical and ideological carapace of capital and the impossibility of critique under these conditions,⁵² then this is something that autonomism seeks to invert, affirming the relative weakness of capital, and the radical potential possessed by the proletariat.⁵³ Indeed, this emphasis on the strength of the proletariat in relation to capital is the synoptic statement of what many consider to be

⁴⁹ Hall, S., (2010), 'Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review* 61, (available online at: <http://newleftreview.org/II/61/stuart-hall-life-and-times-of-the-first-new-left>), (accessed on: 10.02.2015).

⁵⁰ Wright, *Storming Heaven*.

⁵¹ See for example, Martin Jay's writings about Critical Theory as a *response to* the failure of modernist political movements.

Jay, M., (1996), *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*, (Berkeley, University of California Press), or

Jacoby, R., (1981), *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

⁵² See for example Martin, S., (2011), 'Capitalist Life in Lukacs', in Bewes, T. & Hall, T., (Eds.), *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, (London, Continuum).

⁵³ This thread is also taken up in Brown, W., (2005), *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press), p. 68.

autonomist Marxism's canonical text, Mario Tronti's *Operai e Capitale*.⁵⁴ In the most famous section of the book, a section called 'Lenin in England', Tronti makes the argument that the history of capitalism is the history of two subjects in perpetual opposition to one another: capital, and the collective subject of the working class.⁵⁵ Their histories are not consubstantial, in the dialectical fashion of classical Marxist theory, but are distinct, and in constant antagonism. As a consequence, the history of capitalist modernity can be told twice: in the terms of capital, or in the terms of labour.

Marxist 'science' must begin with this proposition, Tronti suggests, as: "[w]e too [the workers] have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital's own reproduction must be tuned."⁵⁶ This is a most breathtaking overturning of Marxist orthodoxies: not just those of Marx himself, or of his Soviet interpreters, but also the orthodoxies that shaped the critical-theoretical orthodoxies of Western Marxism, in the writings of Lukács, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School. Tronti's interpretation of Marxism was deeply political, and he was keen to reject the economic determinism that influenced both Soviet Marxist theory and the orthodoxy that governed the Italian Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s. On this, he suggests that the 'economic' questions that revolutionary theory had taken 'economistically' are problematic because they obscure what are at the heart political problems. This is not just an abstract philosophical prognosis about 'the primacy of the political', but stems directly from the political problematique to which autonomism was a response. Where the economic determinism of the PCI suggested that anti-capitalist forces should pursue 'modernisation' in Italy, autonomism emerged as a response to this doctrine, suggesting that the historical destiny of the working class cannot be pursued

⁵⁴ Tronti, M., (1996), *Operai e Capitale*, (Einaudi, Turin), esp. pp. 89-95.

⁵⁵ Tronti, M., (1964), 'Lenin in England', (available online at: <https://marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm>), (accessed on: 10.02.2015).

⁵⁶ Tronti, 'Lenin in England'.

simply by undertaking ‘modernisation’ or the ‘development of capital’. In this regard, Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’ was aimed as much towards the hierarchies and orthodoxies of old working class organisations, as much as they were against the state and other representatives of capital. Whereas the traditional institutional representatives of the working class appeared to have been engaging in a strategy of accommodation with capital,⁵⁷ perhaps derived from a belief in the teleology of anti-capitalist struggle, or a Gramscian approach to the war of position and the war of movement,⁵⁸ Tronti believed that he (or rather the movements themselves) had uncovered the fundamental strategic strength of the working class: “the political ability to force capital into reformism, and then to blatantly make use of that reformism for the working class revolution.”⁵⁹ Whereas Lenin had identified revolution as the task of locating and directing force at the weakest point of capital’s *integument*, Tronti identified revolution as something to be found at the point where the working class was strongest.⁶⁰

With the proletariat in ‘the driving seat’ of Italian history, Tronti believed that it was absolutely necessary for the epistemological standpoint of critique to assume a similar position: “[t]heoretical research and practical political work have to be dragged — violently if need be — into focusing on this question: not the development of capitalism, but the development of the revolution.”⁶¹ According to this view, critical inquiry was no longer to be developed from the commanding heights of economic totality, but to reflect Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’, and place the struggle against capital front and centre. This was a theme developed further in the publications of journals such as *Quaderni Rossi*, finding its most eloquent and complete articulation in the writings of one of the journal’s editors, Raniero Panzieri.⁶² Panzieri followed the

⁵⁷ For more on this, see Wright, *Storming Heaven*.

⁵⁸ Perhaps the most significant Gramscian influence on Italian politics in the 20th Century was Palmiro Togliatti.

Agosti, A., (2008), *Palmiro Togliatti: A Biography*, (London, I.B. Tauris).

⁵⁹ Tronti, ‘Lenin in England’.

⁶⁰ Tronti, M., (2012), ‘Our Operaismo’, *New Left Review* 73, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://newleftreview.org/II/73/mario-tronti-our-operaismo>), (accessed on: 14.08.2015).

⁶¹ Tronti, ‘Lenin in England’.

⁶² Panzieri, R., (2005), ‘The capitalist use of machinery: Marx versus the objectivists’, (available online at: <http://libcom.org/library/capalist-use-machinery-raniero-panzieri>), (accessed on: 10.02.2015).

broad sweep of Tronti's analysis by suggesting that the function of theory was to intervene in the relationship between class and capital by theorising from the perspective of labour, in the interests of its political struggle against capital.⁶³ Inquiry is simultaneously cognitive and practical,⁶⁴ but most importantly it expresses the "non-complete real subjugation of the class to capital,"⁶⁵ in "an attempt to seize...the unexpressed possibility of the class."⁶⁶ Indeed, within the autonomist perspective, this type of inquiry- both when it is formalized as such, and when it exists as an unconsciously practiced form of workplace insubordination- is central to the 'coming to consciousness' of the proletariat as a class for itself.⁶⁷ In the autonomist estimation, social inquiry, rather than producing positive knowledge that can be applied to the class conflict, is a process of class formation, through which workers come to theorise their position within the factory and the wider social field. Militant inquiry conducted in this fashion demonstrates to the workers how their current position is constituted and maintained, as well as how best to fight against it, be it through strikes, sabotage, or the withdrawal of labour. This form of militant inquiry, again derived from the type of politics practiced by autonomists, reveals a lot about how autonomists conceptualise capitalism.

For the purposes of this chapter, militant inquiry is not significant so much for its epistemological claims about the nature of knowledge, as it is for its ontological assumptions about the nature of capitalism, and the possibility of resistance to it. Ontologically, it begins with the proposition that the laboratory within which capitalist social relations are formed and maintained is the factory. The life experience of the workers comes to be dominated by capitalism's imposition of discipline and routine, something that is primarily conducted in the factory. In this regard, it is as much the subjective experience of capital's hegemony that autonomism opposes, as it is its objective conditions. The primacy of resistance, established in the writings of

⁶³ For more English-language commentary on Panzieri's writings on Workers' Inquiry, see Fasulo, F., (2014), 'Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry', *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 14(3), pp. 307-314.

⁶⁴ Fasulo, 'Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry', p. 327.

⁶⁵ Ferrero, P. (Ed.) et al., (2006), *Raniero Panzieri. Un uomo di frontiera* (2nd Ed.), (Milano, Edizioni Punto Rosso), p. 42 in Fasulo, 'Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry', p. 327.

⁶⁶ Ferrero, *Raniero Panzieri*, p. 43, in Fasulo, 'Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry', p. 327.

⁶⁷ Panzieri, 'The capitalist use of machinery'.

Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti,⁶⁸ yokes together an implicit ontology of capital with a political theory of its supersession. These ontology has implications for our understanding of what capital is, what it affects, and how it can be resisted, as well as having major implications for *Potere Operaio*'s and *Autonomia*'s theoretical and political sweep. These ideas are dependent, however, upon a particular reading of Marx's theoretical *corpus*, and the distinction between formal and real subsumption within it.

The concepts of formal and real subsumption are vitally important for understanding the autonomist conception of capitalism, and the relationship that political action must necessarily have with it. It is also absolutely central to the way that autonomism has tended to (at least in its most common invocation) navigate Marx and Engels' writings. The distinction between formal and real subsumption originates in Marx's writings about the emergence of absolute and relative surplus value.⁶⁹ Absolute surplus value is the most common form of surplus value, realized in the discrepancy between the labour time worked, and the wage received, but relative surplus value emerges through the rationalization and mechanization of the production process. For the autonomists, the concept of real subsumption describes the process by which capitalism expands, and in so doing organizes and configures encounters between people through technology and new organizational techniques. Subsumption is important to understand, because the process by which an element (in this case labour) becomes integrated into a wider system, tells us a lot about what this system is, how it holds together, and how it impacts upon the elements that comprise its totality. The distinction between the formal subsumption of labour and real subsumption is the distinction between labour being integrated into capitalism in such a way that the character (if not where the final product goes) remains unchanged (formal subsumption) and in such a way that the labour-process is totally determined

⁶⁸ Toscano, A., (2009), 'Chronicles of Insurrection: Tronti, Negri and the Subject of Antagonism', in Chiesa, L. & Toscano, A., (Eds.), *The Italian Difference*, (Melbourne, re:press), pp. 109-128.

⁶⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 'chapter twelve',

For an autonomist interpretation of this distinction, please see:

Cleaver, H., 'Study Guide to *Capital*, Vol. I, 'Chapter 12: The Concept of Relative Surplus Value' (available online at: <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/357k/357ksg12.html>) (accessed on: 08.02.2016).

by capital (real subsumption).⁷⁰ This is at once an historical issue, and of great theoretical and political significance for autonomists. Its importance for the contemporary political is twofold. In the first instance, it is significant because it is primarily the effects of real subsumption (capital's attempt to control and shape the work process) that form the crucible within which autonomist struggles have been forged. Secondly, it is significant because the possibility of resistance as a social activity is intimately tied to the question of real subsumption. Panzieri suggests that the significance of real subsumption for autonomists is that it is only under real subsumption that workers' organization as collective emancipation becomes a possibility: "[a]s Marx suggests in *Capital, vol. I*, the worker, as owner and seller of his labour-power, enters into relation with capital only as an individual; cooperation, the mutual relationship between workers, only begins with the labour process, but by then they have ceased to belong to themselves."⁷¹ Political action can be traced in terms of the particular conjuncture between the capitalist production process and workers socialized by it.

This idea that capital is a social force that seeks to control and regulate labour for the pursuit of its own valorization of value is the interpretive key to understanding how autonomists were interpreting social changes in their own social context. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Italy had experienced many years of labour militancy, and in the large factories of the industrial north, organisations such as *Potere Operaio* had been very successful in forcing concessions from capital in the form of higher wages and better working conditions. As a response to this, capital was quick to transform the work process in ways that inhibited labour's capacity to organize and place capital 'on the back foot'. While some of these transformations were organizational, further justifying workers' inquiry as a strategy for pursuing class war, many more of these were technological, with class relationships being obscured and diffused throughout

⁷⁰ For more on the history of subsumption, see Camatte, J., (1988), *Capital and Community: The Results of the Immediate Process of Production and the Economic Work of Marx*, (London, Unpopular Books), (online version available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camate/capcom/index.htm>), (accessed on: 10.02.2015).

⁷¹ Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery'.

an ever-more technical production process.⁷² Perhaps the most radical analysis offered about the re-shaping of the work process was the ‘social factory thesis’.⁷³ According to this thesis, as capitalist development proceeds, and the production of relative surplus value penetrates more of society, the interlocking system through which value is produced and realized (the circuit of production-distribution-exchange) comes to dominate more and more of society.⁷⁴ This directly undercut the dominant organizing logic in Italian politics at the time, because it challenged the dominant Gramscian idea that- predicated on the idea that it is at least relatively autonomous- civil society should be the foundation of a counter-hegemonic political project.⁷⁵ This became central to the political strategy of *Autonomia*, as its moved from the mass worker of *Operaismo* to the more general struggle over a social field in which capital was able- or at least was attempting- to penetrate every corner.

In turn, this focus on real subsumption as the permissive cause of social struggle shapes the way that autonomists read Marx. In the first instance, autonomism focuses on texts such as *The Grundrisse*, and particularly a section called the ‘Fragment on Machines’ rather than the more conventionally popular *Capital*. When autonomists do make use of *Capital*, it tends to be read in a somewhat unconventional fashion, such as Harry Cleaver’s interpretation of *Capital, Vol. I*.⁷⁶ For example, Cleaver’s analysis identifies Chapter One of Marx’s *Capital* as the core of his theory, a move that is not in and of itself unconventional, a core from which a political project can be derived.⁷⁷ This is evidenced by the secondary literature on Marx written by autonomists, which interpret Marx’s analysis of value as directly political.⁷⁸ Rather than the more conventional reading of the discussion of value as a technical or abstract treatment of

⁷² Panzieri, R., (1976), ‘Surplus Value and Planning: Notes on the Reading of *Capital*’, in Conference of Socialist Economists, (Ed.), *The Labour Process and Class Strategies*, (London, Stage 1), p. 9.

⁷³ See for example Cleaver, H., (1992), ‘The inversion of class perspective in Marxian Theory: from valorization to self-valorisation’, in Bonefeld, W., Gunn, R. & Psychopedis, K. (Eds.), *Open Marxism, vol. II: Theory and Practice*, (London, Pluto Press).

⁷⁴ Cleaver, ‘The inversion of class perspective in Marxian Theory’.

⁷⁵ Negri, A., (1979), ‘Capitalist domination and working class sabotage’, in Red Notes (ed.), *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis: Italian Marxist Texts of the Theory and Practice of a Class Movement: 1964-79*, (London, Red Notes and CSE Books).

⁷⁶ Cleaver, H., (1979), *Reading Capital Politically*, (Brighton, Harvester Press).

⁷⁷ Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, p. 159.

⁷⁸ Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, p. 23.

the most simple element within Marx's theoretical system, that emerges primarily from the necessity to *present* Marx's ideas through a series of models,⁷⁹ in books such as Harry Cleaver's *Reading Marx Politically*, or Antonio Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*,⁸⁰ autonomists tend to see the value relationship as something that is directly conflictual, the site at which class struggle takes place.⁸¹ This has implications for the type of struggle that autonomists become interested in. In contradistinction to Marxist-Leninist readings of the political significance of *Capital*, which suggest that revolutionary political interventions are required to capture the state and insert the 'truth' of universalism to political action and 'expropriate the expropriators',⁸² the autonomist reading suggests that political struggle can be found throughout the capitalist social system, in the manifold labour struggles that take place over working conditions, autonomy within the workplace, and the length of the working day. This suggests that autonomism adopts a particular interpretive position *vis-à-vis* Marx's writings, which directly links their understanding of the nature of capitalism to their understanding of the political logics that might overcome it. What is of significance here, and will become of further significance as this thesis develops, is that the autonomist reading of Marx's texts imply that there is already a political logic within these texts, and thus it is not necessary to supplement them with a political reading, in the fashion of Lenin, or the other 'Communist' readings of Marx, but to find politics immanently within these forms of struggles.

⁷⁹ Christopher Arthur lays out this understanding of the logic of *Capital* in his critical article:

Arthur, C.J., (2001), 'Value, Labour and Negativity', *Capital & Class* 73, pp. 15-39.

⁸⁰ Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*.

⁸¹ See for example Cleaver, H. & Bell, P., (1982), 'Marx's Theory of Crisis as a Theory of Class Struggle', *Research in Political Economy* 5,

Cleaver, H., (1986), 'Karl Marx: Economist or Revolutionary?', in Helburn, S.W. & Bramhall, D.F., (Eds.), *Marx, Schumpeter & Keynes*, (New York, ME Sharpe Inc),

Cleaver, H., (1996), 'Theses on Secular Crisis in Capitalism: The Insurpassability of Class Antagonisms', in Polychroniou, C. & Targ, H.R., (Eds.), *Marxism Today: Essays on Capitalism, Socialism and Strategies for Social Change*, (Westport, Praeger), pp. 87-97, (available online at:

https://www.academia.edu/794600/Theses_on_Secular_Crisis_in_Capitalism_The_Insurpassability_of_Class_Antagonisms), (accessed on: 09.02.2013).

⁸² Lenin, V.I., (1918), *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State & the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*, (available online at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>), (accessed on: 10.02.2015).

In this section, I have outlined the political and analytical implications that emanate from Tronti's 'Copernican turn', and the methodology of workers' inquiry. In telling this story, my aim has not been to reconstruct the political or philosophical history of autonomism so much it has been to establish the theoretical and political pillars upon which the autonomist invocation of commons rests. In particular, three notions will be of particular further significance: the first of which is the Trontian insistence on the primacy of the working class as the motive force in the development of world history; the second of which is the significance of a reading of Marx's theory of real subsumption, the significance of which is capital's tendency to respond to the struggles of labour; and the third of which is a conception of capitalism that places particular emphasis on value as a site of struggle, be it in the workplace, or in the wider social sphere. Many of the notions outlined in the first section of this chapter are central building blocks for autonomist theories of the commons, and thus must be understood as such. In their own ways, Hardt & Negri's and De Angelis' thought are derived from the early discourses of autonomist politics. The purpose of the chapter's next section is to trace the impact of these ideas on Hardt & Negri's, and then De Angelis' thought, as well as assessing how and why each of these projects encounters commons as capital-transcending political action.

Hardt & Negri's *Commonwealth* and the Autonomist turn to the Commons

Whilst in some ways, Hardt & Negri's project in the *Empire* trilogy appears to be a radical departure from earlier autonomist ideas; in many other respects it is a direct descendant of them. References to Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari, and Spinoza would doubtless be alien to many readers of classical *Operaist* texts, but the reasons why Hardt & Negri turn to them (in order to shed light on subjectivity, antagonism, and the refusal to accept the laws of capital as objective constraints for class struggle) would not be. Correspondingly, in this section, I am not trying to reconstruct Hardt & Negri's *oeuvre* as a whole, or to ask how well their thought tallies with older currents of Italian autonomism, so much as to explore how the discussion of the commons in the *Empire* trilogy is predicated upon autonomist assumptions, and to establish what function the turn to commons serves in their thought.

By the 1980s, the previously close bonds between the labour process, social movements and theoretical inquiry that marked autonomism out from other critical theories had been broken, and the political project of *Operaismo* appeared to have been smashed into pieces.⁸³ Nonetheless, if, as Velerio Evangelisti has recalled, “all the best militants were in jail or on the run [and] we found ourselves with hardly any theorists”,⁸⁴ autonomist theory found itself remarkably resilient to both the changing material conditions of the Italian political situation, and the aggressive political campaign waged against *Operaismo* and *Autonomia*.⁸⁵ Whilst what Steve Wright identifies as the ‘revival’ of Italian autonomism as part of a wider social renaissance of activism in the country,⁸⁶ is of significance for the continued relevance of autonomist theory, there was also an encounter between Anglophone academia and a number of the theorists of *Operaismo*, particularly Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi. The theorization of power, capital understood as a social relation, and subjectivity proved very appealing to an academy seeking a *via media* between the rigorously critical but politically pessimistic tradition of Western Marxism, and the tradition of French post-structuralism that many academics found academically productive, but troublingly silent about issues of class, ideology, and worryingly disabling of collective political agencies. *Empire* can be located as the strange hybrid-offspring of these two dynamics: the encounter between *Operaismo* and Anglophone academia, and the decline and partial rebirth of autonomist thought.

Although *Empire*’s genesis can be located in the collapse of the workerist project, the seeds of *Empire* can be found within Negri’s early thought about autonomism and political struggle in Italy in the 1980s. Regardless of political differences, Negri’s thought has been heavily influenced by Tronti’s writings, and in particular Tronti’s identification of a political reading of capitalist social relations.⁸⁷ Indeed, in much the same way as Tronti, Negri’s political reading of the situation in Italy led him to depart from many of the Marxist orthodoxies that surrounded the left in Italy and elsewhere,

⁸³ Wright, S., (2008), ‘Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism: A Preliminary Survey’, *Historical Materialism* 16, p. 111.

⁸⁴ Evangelisti, V., (2002), ‘Intervista 18 Marzo 2000’, cited in Wright, ‘Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism’, pp. 111-112.

⁸⁵ Wright, ‘Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism’, p. 112.

⁸⁶ Wright, ‘Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism’, p. 112.

⁸⁷ Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*.

particularly those that surrounded the way in which value is extracted.⁸⁸ Although the discussion of value is central to Marx's project in *Capital*, and the way that Marx is taught and understood today,⁸⁹ Negri argued that the discussion of value in *Capital* is not universally valid, and can be applied only to a very specific period of capitalism's history.⁹⁰ The extraction of surplus value described by Marx in *Capital, Vol. I* cannot be reconciled with the complex class forces at work in contemporary society, and in particular, what Marx identifies as 'the law of value' no longer functions as an autonomous, emergent property of capitalist social relations, but must be maintained through force: "[e]xploitation...is the political sign of domination above and against the human valorization of the historical/natural world; it is command above and against productive social cooperation."⁹¹ Rather than suggesting that Marx is simply wrong however, Negri suggests that recognition of the withering away of the law of value can be found in the *Grundrisse* (a recognition absent, or occluded in *Capital*): "[in the Grundrisse] Marx chases and defines a contradiction that concerns the law of value itself. He shows how the law of value, which ought to represent the rationality of exploitation (and be the scientific key to its interpretation), must lose its rationalizing and legitimating plausibility within the very development of the capitalist mode of production."⁹² Making another common autonomist move, Negri develops a reading of Marx's thought that draws heavily on the so-called 'Fragment on Machines' in the *Grundrisse*, where- the workerist reading of these passages suggests- "Marx shows how the demise of the function of the law of value simultaneously corresponds (as cause and effect) to the enormous and formidable growth of the productive, free, and innovative potential of the proletariat, and this

⁸⁸ Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*.

⁸⁹ For the best secondary expositions of Marx's theory of capitalism as the extraction of value, see:

Harvey, D., (2010), *A Companion to Marx's Capital, Vol. I*, (London, Verso),

Heinrich, M., (2012), *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's Capital*, A. Locascio (trans.), (New York, Monthly Review Press).

⁹⁰ See for example:

Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*.

Negri, A., (1996), 'Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today', in Makdisi, S., Casarino, C. & Karl, R.E., (Eds.), *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, (London, Routledge), pp. 149-180

⁹¹ Negri, 'Twenty Theses on Marx', Thesis 5.

⁹² Negri, A., (2014), *Factory of Strategy: 33 Lessons on Lenin*, A. Bove (trans.), (New York, Columbia University Press), p. 250.

simultaneity must be underlined.”⁹³ The upshot of this is that the confrontation between labour and capital becomes increasingly one of force.⁹⁴ Capital does not extract surplus value from labour as a transcendental force, but is in a continuous battle to ensure its valorization.⁹⁵ In the context of ‘Empire’, it is utterly impossible to dissociate, even in a modest, analytical fashion, economic and political power. The supersession of the law of value by an economy predicated on force is central to what Hardt & Negri try to describe in *Empire*, and key to understanding how their project works.

Seemingly paradoxically, although he saw the law of value as having broken down, drawing on the writings of Tronti and Romano Alquati,⁹⁶ Negri saw the whole of Italian society becoming consumed by the social relations of the factory. As Alquati suggested, “[in Turin] there isn’t one aspect of the ‘social life’ of the city that is not a moment of the ‘factory’ understood in the Leninist sense of a ‘social relation of production’.”⁹⁷ Following Tronti, Negri saw the colonization of the social by capital as a particular ‘qualitative leap’ within the history of the capitalist mode of production.⁹⁸ On the one hand, capital subsumes the whole of society, but on the other, capital *is* the product of labour, and this while “capital constitutes society, capital is entirely social capital.”⁹⁹ Here, Negri goes beyond what Marx suggests about real subsumption in *Capital, Vol. I*, for it is not simply that the act of *labour* becomes subsumed under capital, but in the present moment, the whole of *society* becomes subsumed under capital.¹⁰⁰ This notion of the real subsumption of society, as employed by the early autonomists, is foundational to Negri’s project with Michael

⁹³ Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, p. 250.

⁹⁴ This is a logic that appears early in Negri’s *operaist* writings.

Negri, A., (1971), ‘Crisis of the planner state’, reprinted in Negri, A., (2005), *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970’s Italy*, (London, Verso).

⁹⁵ For a powerful critique of Hardt & Negri’s thoughts on the law of value, and the idea that it is more valid today than ever before, see the writings of Samir Amin, particularly Amin, S., (2014), ‘Multitude of Generalized Proletarianization?’, *Monthly Review* 66(6), (available online at: <http://monthlyreview.org/2014/11/01/contra-hardt-and-negri/>), (accessed on: 05.02.2015).

⁹⁶ Wright, *Storming Heaven*, p. 80.

⁹⁷ Wright, *Storming Heaven*, p. 80.

⁹⁸ Tronti, M., (1973), ‘Social Capital’, *Telos* 17.

Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, p. 144.

⁹⁹ Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁰ See particularly Negri, A., (2003), ‘The Constitution of Time’, in *Time for Revolution*, (London, Continuum), pp. 21-138.

Hardt, but the conception of real subsumption employed is not identical. As Ben Pohill has remarked, “[Hardt & Negri] keep the term, while dispensing with its determining dynamic: the labour-capital relation.”¹⁰¹ As established previously, for Hardt & Negri, the labour-capital relation is no longer key to the dynamics of capital, because the breakdown of the law of value has re-configured the dynamics of capitalist society as political relations, or relations of force. As such, in the context of *Empire*, real subsumption becomes a looser term, used to describe the way that capital dominates ‘its own capitalist terrain’.¹⁰² It appears that they mean to say that capital dominates society more generally than it did under Fordism, encroaching on the environment, the state’s provision of public goods, and in an immaterial economy, social relations become mobilized and valorized by capital.¹⁰³ In this formulation, the way they employ ‘real subsumption’ seems to carry little analytical weight, but is employed to great rhetorical effect, becoming the cornerstone of their account of capital’s universal structure, and indispensable to their understanding of political action.

That the absolute domination of capital should be central to an optimistic conception of resistance can be attributed to Hardt and Negri’s faithful observance of Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’. Indeed, in *Empire*, Hardt & Negri argue that the totality of capitalism, in fact its sheer ubiquity across the world, makes communism an immanent historical possibility.¹⁰⁴ At no point does capital’s expansion across the globe mean that capital becomes autonomous from labour. Although by the time that *Empire* was written, Negri had long abandoned the Marxist ‘law of value’, he continued to conceptualise capitalism as a system by which capital valorizes itself through extracting surplus value from labour. As a result, capital is faced by the paradoxical fact that the more it has colonized the life world of human activity, the more it has become dependent upon this selfsame lifeworld for its own valorization. If capital remains dependent upon labour, the reverse cannot be said about labour:

¹⁰¹ Pohill, B., (2009), ‘Antonio Negri’s Social Ontology of Real Subsumption’, in *The Devil’s Party Marx, Theory and Philosophy*, (London, Centre for Cultural Studies Goldsmith’s, University of London), p. 48.

¹⁰² Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 272.

¹⁰³ This is a prominent theme for other neo-autonomists. See for example Lazzarato, M., (2005), *General Intellect*, E. Emery (trans.), (available online at: <http://libcom.org/library/general-intellect-common-sense>), (accessed on: 11.02.2015).

¹⁰⁴ Negri, ‘Twenty Theses on Marx’.

although the real subsumption of labour under capital suggests that labour is dependent upon capital to direct production, the real subsumption of society under capital means that it is increasingly labour that, as a collaborative and co-operative subject drives innovation and the type of activities that are required for capital to grow. In this fashion, the expansion of capital into ever more of areas of life creates capital's own gravediggers: a global multitude with the capacity to direct social activity autonomously, free from the dead social form of capital. Unlike Marx, for whom labour was the gravedigger of capital only to the extent that it was excluded and exploited by capital, Hardt & Negri see Empire as something that gives more power to labour/the commons, and sees various forms of co-operative labour as prefiguring post-capitalist social forms.

At this point, we see the contours of Hardt & Negri's approach to 'the political' take shape. The liberal 'myth' that 'the political' is autonomous and can be used to diverse ends is laid bare.¹⁰⁵ The political sphere as defined by liberalism is mutually imbricated with the capitalist property order. In contemporary society, impregnated as it is with the extractive logic of capital, all forms of action become meaningful to the reproduction of that society, and thus the political question (which for Hardt & Negri is the 'non-reproduction' of capitalism) can be asked at any point within the social sphere.¹⁰⁶ It is at this point that we see the emergence of a new logic of politics: an approach, rooted in autonomist ideas about the primacy of labour over capital, refracted through Spinozan ideas about the expressivity of existence,¹⁰⁷ which

¹⁰⁵ This is a recurrent theme in Negri's earlier more 'academic' writings (that is to say, distinct from his militant writings), notably his monographs on Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and the state form in world politics.

Negri, A., (1999), *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press),

Negri, A., (2004), *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press),

Negri, A., (2013), *Spinoza for Our Time: Politics and Postmodernity*, (New York, Columbia University Press),

Negri, A., (2007), *Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology, and the Bourgeois Project*, (London, Verso),

Negri, A., (2009), *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, M. Boscaqli (trans.), (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).

¹⁰⁶ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ See for example Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations* and Negri, *Spinoza for Our Time: Politics and Postmodernity*.

opposes the self-determination of human activity to attempt to limit or constrain it in order to valorize Empire/capital. Indeed, because questions of property and the rule of law are now immanent to the social (here Hardt & Negri are invoking the idea of real subsumption), it is now impossible to ask political questions in the vein of classical political theory, where property is anterior to society, and instilled in the governing logic of a republic.¹⁰⁸ In the liberal democratic political imaginary, these political questions have been settled: as former U.S. President John Adams suggested, the very notion of a liberal democracy is predicated upon the protection of property.¹⁰⁹ In critiquing the way that political institutions have delimited the political in such a way that the commodity form remains the untouchable kernel of human existence,¹¹⁰ Hardt & Negri turn to the commons as the potential for humanity to resist this alienation, a potential which is immanent to the capitalist totality of Empire.

In this regard, the role that commons play in Hardt & Negri's biopolitical understanding of Empire is much the same as the role that labour plays in the writings of Karl Marx.¹¹¹ The common is the ontological substratum of human activity under capitalism. It is the social force upon which capital, the state, and the institutions of Empire are dependent, but also the social force that has the capacity to 'burst through the integument' and do away with the entire edifice. Again, in much the same way as Marx refers to labour in *Capital*, Hardt & Negri argue that the common has been called into existence by capitalist organization, but now drives and determines the forces of capital themselves, and so- if the potential of the commons and human

¹⁰⁸ Hardt & Negri, *Commonwealth*, pp. 67-129.

Hardt & Negri are by no means the only commentators to make this point. See for example Frederic Jameson's thoughts on the 'impossibility' of political theory today in the final chapter of:

Jameson, F., (2011), *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One*, (London, Verso).

¹⁰⁹ John Adams quoted in Hardt & Negri, *Commonwealth*, p. 10.

This argument has been made elsewhere, for example in MacPherson, C.B., (2011), *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

¹¹⁰ In Negri's earlier work, he identifies this not simply as an outgrowth of *fetishism*, but the ideological dimension of the bourgeois political project. See for example: Negri, *Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology, and the Bourgeois Project*.

¹¹¹ Indeed, Negri admitted as much in a round table discussion with Paolo Virno and Marco Bascetta,

Bascetta, M., Negri, A. & Virno, P., (2002), 'Public Sphere, Labour, Multitude: Strategies of Resistance in Empire', organised by *Officine Precarie* in Pisa (transcript available online at: <http://www.generation-online.org/t/common.htm>), (accessed on: 01.02.2015).

capacity is to be reached- the fetters of Empire must be thrown off.¹¹² Unlike the concept of labour, which in its abstract form is defined by its relationship with capital, the significance of the idea of the common is not simply its direct relationship with capital defined in terms of the workplace, or the figure of the worker, which means that it is possible to resist capital, because it is not only in the workplace that the worker is exploited. This kind of resistance is brought into being by the mutating social force of capital, as right across the social field, it is now simply parasitic upon the commons, as the command of labour witnessed under real subsumption becomes a relationship of rent.¹¹³ The potential of the common is at the heart of productive relations, in the particular conjuncture between labour struggles and the (post)modern mode of production, an unusual place to begin a discourse on the commons.

In contradistinction to the approach of authors such as Peter Linebaugh & E.P. Thompson, who have demonstrated that historically commons depend on custom and culture in questions of social reproduction,¹¹⁴ and particularly take place *outside* the site of the production of commodities, Hardt & Negri understand the common as something internal to the structure of capitalism itself. In the workerist fashion of Tronti, who suggested that the particular organization of capitalism forced the labourer to organize and become conscious of his position in the production process,¹¹⁵ the category of commons only obtains its relevance because of the particular contemporary relationship between labour and capital. As Negri has

¹¹² This has considerable overlap with the ‘accelerationist’ discussion of anti-capitalism as a Promethean project, by which productive forces are wrested from the limiting forces of capital. For more on accelerationism and its relationship to Hardt & Negri’s thought, see: Mackay, R. & Avanessian, A., (Eds.) (2014), *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, (Falmouth, Urbanomic), Noys, B., (2014), *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*, (Winchester, Zero Books), Shaviro, S., (2015), *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press).

¹¹³ Hardt & Negri, *Commonwealth*, p. 292.

This is a popular theme within post-autonomist literatures. See for example:

Vercellone, C., (2007), ‘From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism’, *Historical Materialism* 15, pp. 13-36,

Vercellone, C., (2010), ‘The Crisis of the Law of Value and the Becoming-Rent of Profit’, in Fumagalli, A. & Mezzadra, S., (Eds.), *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios*, (Cambridge, MIT Press), pp. 85-118.

¹¹⁴ Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*.

¹¹⁵ Tronti, ‘Lenin in England’.

suggested elsewhere, in his view, “[t]here is no common before capital. There is no common before history imposed it.”¹¹⁶ Again, drawing on Tronti’s ‘Copernican Turn’, Hardt & Negri identify capital’s system of control and regulation as a response to the social forces that have cultivated subjectivities of resistance. Unlike Tronti, however, rather than the factory becoming hegemonic over the whole of the social field, Hardt & Negri suggest that the entirety of global social relations are becoming subsumed under the political constitution of Empire. Again, in much the same way as in Negri’s early writings about the breakdown of the law of value in Italy suggest that the law of value has broken down, the imposition of value across Empire is a political imposition, made necessary because capital is no longer able to drive the production process in the way of real subsumption, and must simply engage in the accumulation of value created by the common co-operation of human activity.¹¹⁷

I think that there are two main implications of this for the way in which Hardt & Negri understand the commons. The first is that those who wish to politically mobilise the common must think about it in terms of constituent power, and the second is that the common is a universal category that operates against the totality of Empire’s grasp. For Hardt & Negri, political action around the commons is by its very nature the cultivation of one subjectivity (commons) against an opposing antagonistic subjectivity (capital). Through communication and co-operation, it is possible to constitute a world,¹¹⁸ although this capacity is alienated, distorted, and occluded within liberal society. The task for a politics that wishes to predicate life on the commons is to resuscitate the constituent power of the multitude that underlies liberal political order. Exercising the sovereign political principle of constituent power necessitates the establishment of a subject of political struggle through which it can be enacted.

This logic of constituent power pervades both the *Empire* trilogy and their most recent co-authored work on commons.¹¹⁹ Hardt & Negri’s dualistic conception of the

¹¹⁶ Bascetta, Negri & Virno, ‘Public Sphere, Labour, Multitude: Strategies of Resistance in Empire’.

¹¹⁷ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 355.

¹¹⁸ There are parallels here, of course, with the writings of Hannah Arendt. Arendt, H., (1998), *The Human Condition*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

¹¹⁹ Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*

struggle against capital, as the struggle between two competing social forces, is central to the fashion in which subjectivity becomes such a large part of Hardt & Negri's oeuvre: politics is about contestation between two competing forces or subjectivities within capitalism, each attempting to impose or cultivate their own values within life itself. In this fashion, in Hardt & Negri's later work, *Declaration!*, a book about resistance to the crisis, the figures that they choose to highlight are subjective figures of the crisis. In particular, they suggest that a number of subjective figures characterize the ideological and material interpellation of subjects in the neoliberal era. Under neoliberalism, subjects find themselves mediatized, represented, indebted and securitized by a conjuncture of political and economic power over life. In contradistinction to these neoliberal subjectivities, the figure of the commoner is the Rosetta stone of resistance to capital, insofar as it embodies resistance to capital's propensity for shaping, moulding, and controlling both the subjectivities of neoliberal capitalism and life itself. Although they do so in a different fashion, in bringing the question of commons together with the question of subjectivity, Hardt and Negri follow the classical autonomist theme of class composition: that is to say "how the masses act, whether they steal, what they sign up to, whether they are family-oriented, how they refuse or sabotage work, and all observations that point to the conditions of possibility of such micropower relations, as a starting point."¹²⁰ From cultivating certain subjective figures- particularly that of 'the commoner', opposed to the indebted, the mediated, the represented, and the securitised- it is possible to build a political movement.

Despite the interest in practice- how the masses act and how they compose themselves as a class- Hardt & Negri's vision of commons is both catholic and universal: "No limited community could succeed and provide an alternative to imperial rule; only a universal, catholic community bringing together all populations and all languages in a common journey could accomplish this."¹²¹ This is something of a departure from the early autonomist writings about class composition developed in the factory struggles of the Italian working class. The implication of this is that the practice of movements

¹²⁰ Bove, A. 'Translator's Note', in Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, p. xxv.

This also demonstrates Hardt & Negri's adherence to a certain Leninist form of strategy, over and above the Maoism expressed elsewhere in the writings of Alain Badiou, or Jacques Ranciere.

¹²¹ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 61.

is not important in its own right, but because of what it signifies about the wider, almost transcendental conditions of possibility for political action. Perhaps it is no coincidence that unlike most commentators on the subject, Hardt & Negri use the singular term common rather than the more frequently used commons. As the common is the product of the totality of capitalist social relations, rather than the product of this or that act of commoning, it must by its very nature also share the quality of totality. The only way in which we can overcome the totality of Empire is with a social force that is equally totalizing in its opposition to Empire. Hardt & Negri acknowledge that this places them at odds with the left orthodoxy of recent years,¹²² as they advocate a political project based in universalism that rejects the particularisms of national self-liberation struggles, and the politics of identity, but suggests that the contemporary fragmentation of struggles itself expresses a truth about the imminence of universalistic political transformation.

Commoning and the outside of capitalism in Massimo De Angelis' *The Beginning of History*

As suggested earlier, however, Hardt & Negri by no means have a monopoly over the way that autonomists talk about the commons. Indeed, as a political and philosophical tradition, autonomism has proceeded by way of disagreements about empirical and theoretical issues; debates about commons and the persistence of value in the contemporary world are fundamental to understanding autonomist contributions to conceptualization of commons and the legacy of Tronti's 'Copernican turn' within contemporary theoretical constellations. Indeed, if the common (understood as the productive substrate from which capital extracts surplus value through establishing relations of rent) is internally consistent with Hardt & Negri's understanding of the breakdown of the law of value, then there are equally logical reasons why other autonomists have offered different accounts of the genesis of the commons. In order to outline this challenge to Hardt & Negri's account, I want to explore the ideas outlined by Massimo De Angelis in his book *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*, and then in subsequent texts. The reasons for doing so

¹²² Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 44.

is because his writings on commons offer an important rejoinder to Hardt & Negri, yet retains a strong commitment to the autonomist way of thinking about political problems. In contradistinction to Hardt & Negri's writings on commons, I argue that in De Angelis' account tries to do two things: first, to restore *commoning*, that is to say the practice element, to the heart of an account, and second, he attempts to re-read Marx and his ideas about value back into the idea of the commons (see for example the long chapters on 'the law of value' in *The Beginning of History*).¹²³ In so doing, De Angelis tells the story of struggles to create and preserve 'an outside' to capital's social metabolism, within which an alternative set of values for the reproduction of human life can be maintained. Before I go on to lay out how De Angelis' work establishes its conception of commons more specifically, I want to lay down some general background of the work. It is my supposition that although *The Beginning of History* can be understood as a response to Hardt & Negri's neo-autonomist interventions, it is dependent upon an older research agenda within a branch of autonomism that moved away from its Italian roots in a number of key ways.

In particular, a separate reading of autonomism, and with it a separate reading of commons emerged from the way that autonomism was taken up in the United States. Although in its contemporary guise, autonomist ideas in America are dependent upon the theoretical and practical legacy of Italian militancy, American ideas about autonomous struggles predate the influence of Italian ideas. The *Johnson-Forest Tendency* emerged from the U.S. Trotskyite left in the late 1940s, when a number of activist-scholars, including C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya left the Socialist Workers Party over its failure to understand the Soviet Union as a state capitalist entity, and the party's reluctance to take part in anti-racist struggles.¹²⁴ Their analysis, such as that of the state capitalist reaction to workers' revolution in Hungary in 1956 pre-dated, and in many senses pre-empted the emphasis on workers' inquiry in the writings of Tronti, Alquati and Panzieri, focusing on the way that struggles between bureaucracy and democracy broke out within Hungarian labour struggles.¹²⁵ Although

¹²³ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, pp. 43-50.

¹²⁴ See for example James, C.L.R., with Dunayevskaya, R. & Boggs, G.L. (2013), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, (Oakland, PM Press).

¹²⁵ Lee, Chaulieu & Johnson, *Facing Reality*.

anti-Communist currents within American society, and the group's own struggles with the American left soon broke the project up, the desire to theorise class struggle from the ground up within the American Marxist left did not go away. The writings of other Marxist radicals such as Hal Draper, whose 1966 pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism* demonstrates the poverty of the Stalinist political imaginary and the necessity of an American communist movement that takes the subjectivity and actions of its members seriously,¹²⁶ and demonstrates the desire among the American left for this kind of perspective.¹²⁷ This culture of American socialism, a current that cut across its Trotskyist wing as much as its anarchist wing, as well as the anti-nuclear and anti-war struggles of the 1960s and the 1970s proved fertile ground for the arrival of Italian autonomist ideas on the American scene.

Whilst the prominence of the idea of socialism from below made it receptive to autonomist ideas, the nature of the American left had a significant impact on the way that these ideas were taken up within the United States. Without a strong institutional presence within the American workplace, autonomism in America became something that was practiced outside the workplace in the wider social sphere, taking on environmental, anti-war themes, or becoming involved with reproductive struggles. Nowhere was this political project, and the attraction of autonomist ideas to it, better represented than in the writings of the so-called *Midnight Notes Collective*. In briefly exploring the ideas of *Midnight Notes*, I hope to be able to shed some light on the way that American autonomist currents came upon commons, an association that has relevance for context of the writings of Massimo De Angelis.

The Midnight Notes Collective emerged as a collaborative scholarly effort in the autumn of 1979, on the initiative of Marxist scholar George Caffentzis. Influenced by the efforts of autonomist Marxists in Italy, and emerging from the intellectual

Also of significance are texts such as James, C.L.R., Forest, F. & Stone, R., (1947), *The Invading Socialist Society*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1947/invading/index.htm>), (accessed on: 11.03.2015).

¹²⁶ Draper, H., (2001), 'The Two Souls of Socialism' in *Socialism From Below*, (Alameda, Center for Socialist History), pp. 1-32.

¹²⁷ See also Draper, H., (2011), *Socialism from Below*, (Alameda, Center for Socialist History).

collaboration of the U.S. autonomist journal 'Zerowork',¹²⁸ the first issue of their new, eponymous journal was released soon after the 'Three Mile Island' nuclear disaster in Pennsylvania. Although clearly anti-nuclear,¹²⁹ the main theoretical contribution of the early writings of the collective was to explore the way that energy production is bound up with shifting relations of production, and the way that energy policy is a mechanism of control within the United States. This interest in the relationship between oil prices and class struggle 'returned' *Midnight Notes* to a conversation with Italian Autonomist theory, and particularly the way that Italian Autonomism had been influential on Zerowork. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Midnight Notes* had become interested in the way that international financial institutions were facilitating a new 'great transformation' in the developing world.¹³⁰ Within their analysis, the period following the neoliberal ascendancy of the 1970s was characterized by an aggressive recomposition of the workforce and a technological and organizational adjustment of the mode of production, through which new regimes of accumulation were established, both within the existing industrial core of the

¹²⁸ 'Zerowork' was a journal formed in 1974 to offer an autonomist analysis of the labour situation in the U.S. Its editorial board comprised of autonomist scholars Paolo Carpignano, Bill Cleaver, Peter Linebaugh, Mario Montano, Bruno Ramirez, Leoncio Schaedel, Peter Taylor, and George Caffentzis. The journal was animated by a tension between two tendencies within autonomist politics in the 1970s, specifically that between the 'Wages for Housework' movement that was organised by activist-scholars such as Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and the so-called 'refusal of work', or 'end of work' perspective that was prominent in Italian Autonomism. Pointing to *The Grundrisse*, and particularly 'The Fragment on Machines', 'end of work' tendencies suggested that global economic developments were pointing beyond work, with mechanisation reducing capitalist accumulation to little more than a political relation, or forms of control. By way of contrast, the 'wages for housework' tendency offered an analysis that suggested that the capitalist economy remained reliant on various forms of labour that are not recognised by the wage relation. Domestic labour, and other activities oriented towards social reproduction are wholly necessary for the reproduction of the capital relation, but wholly unrecognised by it.

For more on the history of the 'Zerowork' journal, see: 'TPTG's Conversation with George Caffentzis', (2000) (available at: <http://libcom.org/library/interview-george-caffentzis>), (accessed on: 01.03.2014).

¹²⁹ *Midnight Notes*, (1979), *Strange Victories: The Anti-Nuclear Movement in the U.S. and Europe*, (available online at: <http://www.midnightnotes.org/pdfstrangvic0.pdf>), (accessed on: 03.03.2014).

¹³⁰ The *Midnight Notes* Collective, (1990), 'The New Enclosures', *Midnight Notes* 10, (available online at: <http://www.midnightnotes.org/newenclos.html>), (accessed on: 03.03.2014).

global economy, and in its more ‘peripheral’ areas.¹³¹ The political project of neoliberalism was pursued at home and abroad, and if the Italian autonomist project was interested in the way that this project reconfigured labour’s relationship to the production process at home, *Midnight Notes* have been more prominent commentators on the international dimensions of this project. They explore the fashion in which the ‘debt crisis’ of the 1980s was used by international financial institutions to ‘discipline’ governments through the pursuit of a financial strategy that led to widespread wage repression and an ‘opening up’ of new territory to market relations. The famous projects of structural adjustment, they argue, are not just ideologically driven attempts to organize the world through market relations, but they have a more direct appropriative logic that opens up new rounds of capital accumulation. There are comparisons here with the logic of ‘primitive accumulation’ discussed by Marx in chapter twenty-six of *Capital*. In this vein, they argue that structural adjustment operates on a similar basis to the “Tudor court [selling] off huge tracts of monastery and communal land to their creditors, so too modern African and Asian governments agree to capitalize and ‘rationalize’ agricultural land in order to satisfy IMF auditors who will only ‘forgive’ foreign loans under those conditions.”¹³² Drawing on these narratives of primitive accumulation, both from Marx’s *Capital* and the writings of scholars such as E.P. Thompson, they describe this accumulation not only as the appropriation of state property and natural resources, but as processes of proletarianisation that pave the way for further rounds of capital accumulation.

Since its very beginning, capitalism has had a political dimension, as the worker needs to be separated from independent means of subsistence before they sell their labour on the free market. Although the encounter between capital and labour remains the *sine qua non* of capital’s extraction of value, this encounter can only be ensured through political force. In order to ensure this encounter is sustained, capital uses political mechanisms to destroy the means of subsistence that would allow the commoner to subsist outside the wage relation. This legally sanctioned (and in some cases extra-legal) destruction of alternatives is as much a feature of neoliberal

¹³¹ The Midnight Notes Collective, ‘Introduction to the New Enclosures’, *Midnight Notes* 10, p. 3.

¹³² The Midnight Notes Collective, ‘Introduction to the New Enclosures’, *Midnight Notes* 10, p. 4.

capitalism's project to break down trade barriers, as it is of the social struggle over enclosures in England and Wales between the 16th and 18th Centuries. Indeed, *Midnight Notes* mobilises these concepts in order to assess contemporary practices of proletarianisation and enclosure, and the production of a mobile, flexible labour force of the contemporary world.¹³³ They are, however, keen to retain a sense of proletarian agency within these processes.

Consistent with Tronti's 'Copernican Turn', *The Midnight Notes Collective* identifies organization around commons as a response to the new enclosures, and the flexible, decentralized accumulation of globalized capital. In addition, and again consistent with the wider autonomist tradition, although framed in terms of the wider conditions of global capital accumulation, *Midnight Notes* focus their inquiry on the subjective constitution of resistance to capital's parasitic, appropriative interventions. Their investigation of the subjective, class compositional dimensions of resistance to global capitalism lead them to the fringes of global capitalism, and actors who resist inclusion into its epistemological and productive totality by creating alternative systems of knowledge production, social organization, and value production.¹³⁴ Movements such as the *Zapatistas* in Chiapas, Mexico, the *Movimiento al Socialismo–Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos* (MAS) in Bolivia, and the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil, all became instrumental to thinking about how resistance to capitalism takes place.¹³⁵ If the focus on class composition within Italian autonomism leads to analysis of the ways in which the proletariat organizes within and against the workplace, then the focus on enclosures by *The Midnight Notes Collective* and associated thinkers such as John Holloway,¹³⁶ leads them to think about the question of class composition in relation to processes of enclosure and resistance to them. Unlike the ideas of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, *Midnight Notes* and those inspired by them have often discussed this

¹³³ The Midnight Notes Collective, 'Introduction to the New Enclosures', *Midnight Notes* 10, p. 4.

¹³⁴ See for example The Midnight Notes Collective, (2001), 'Auroras of the Zapatistas: Local and Global Struggles in the Fourth World War', *Midnight Notes* 13, (available online at: <http://www.midnightnotes.org/auroras.html>), (accessed on: 21.09.2013).

¹³⁵ The Midnight Notes Collective, 'Auroras of the Zapatistas: Local and Global Struggles in the Fourth World War', *Midnight Notes* 13.

¹³⁶ Holloway, J. & Pelaez, E., (Eds.), (1998), *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, (London, Pluto Press).

project of resistance in the terms of anti-power, understood as the rejection of a sovereign politics.¹³⁷ In this regard, they draw upon another of autonomism's central tropes: exodus.

Autonomists such as Mario Tronti and Paolo Virno have spoken about exodus as a key political strategy for opposing capital's hegemony.¹³⁸ Again, this builds on a notion developed in the writings of Mario Tronti, which is the idea of a 'strategy of refusal'.¹³⁹ A war against capital conducted in terms of hegemony cannot be won, and the only way to become free of this hegemonic logic is to refuse to engage in the type of hegemonic politics that capital and the state engage in.¹⁴⁰ The political logic of autonomism, rooted in the autonomist analysis of the equivalence of state power and capitalist extraction, lends itself to a refusal of the types of mediation and reform that would see a movement find accommodation with the kinds of sovereign power that have often been embraced by Marxist-Leninist politics.¹⁴¹ The refusal of sovereign power (and its replacement with another type of sovereignty) is prominent within autonomism, which has often tried to frame political action as an 'exodus' from the system of control exercised by capital.¹⁴² This theoretical concept of exodus has been articulated in many different ways, but each of its articulations suggest that a community of human ends cannot be constructed within capital's hegemonic logic, but must be produced outside its rationality. It is this tradition, and the attempt to construct a community of ends outside the control of capital, in which Massimo De

¹³⁷ See for example Holloway, J., (2010), *Change the World Without Taking Power*, (London, Pluto Press).

¹³⁸ Virno, P., (1996), 'Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus', in Virno, P. & Hardt, M., (Eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press).

¹³⁹ Tronti, M., (2007), 'The Strategy of Refusal', in Lotringer, S. & Marazzi, C., (Eds.), *Autonomia: Post-political Politics*, (Cambridge MA, Semiotexte).

¹⁴⁰ Berardi, F., (2009), *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*, (New York, Autonomedia), p. 25,

Casarino, C. & Negri, A., (2008), *In Praise of the Common*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press), p. 107.

¹⁴¹ De Blois, J., Jansen, M. & Korsten, F.W., (2014), 'Introduction: From Autonomism to Post-Autonomia, from Class Composition to a New Political Anthropology?', *Rethinking Marxism* 26(2), pp. 163-177.

¹⁴² Its most explicit formulation is in the writings of Paolo Virno. See for example: Virno, 'Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus', or Virno, *The Grammar of the Multitude*.

Angelis' *The Beginning of History* is situated.

At the same time that *The Beginning of History* can be located in the history of an 'American' *detournement* of autonomism and a response to Hardt & Negri's suggestion that "postmodernity [is] communism in waiting",¹⁴³ it shares with Hardt & Negri a desire to speak to the resurgence of political activism at the turn of the millennium. To this end, the book begins with a rejection of the millennial zeitgeist that ascendant neoliberal capitalism marked the end of man's historical journey.¹⁴⁴ Against the triumphalist logic of neoliberal capitalism, and the left's accommodation with it in the historic compromise of 'Third Way' socialism, De Angelis suggests that "[t]o pose the problematic of the beginning of history is to refuse the construction of the world in the image of the end of history, it is to posit other values and embrace other horizons than democracy corrupted by money, social co-production corrupted by liverligood-threatening competition, and structural adjustment enclosing non-market commons."¹⁴⁵ If one of the targets of De Angelis' analysis is Hardt & Negri's postmodern Marxism, another is 'traditional Marxism', which has tended to see "history beginning only after the smoke from the rubbles of the old capitalist system settles."¹⁴⁶ In contradistinction to this, De Angelis suggests that history begins "whenever there are social forces whose practices rearticulate...time autonomously from capital, whatever their scale of action."¹⁴⁷ The focus on practices of resistance and a refusal to think in terms of 'after the end of capitalism' suggests that the question of prefiguration- the way that means are important to ends within contemporary social movements- is important to De Angelis.¹⁴⁸ Political action, De

¹⁴³ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Fukuyama, F., (2012), *The End of History and the Last Man*, (London, Penguin).

¹⁴⁵ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 1.

¹⁴⁶ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ The term 'prefigurative politics' was first used in Brienes, W., (1989), *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press).

Other works that use the term prefiguration in the contemporary literature on social movements include:

Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*,

Day, R.J.F., (2005), *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, (London, Pluto Press).

It is of importance to recognize that the significance of prefiguration in De Angelis' thought is different to many of the existing orthodoxies on this subject. De Angelis

Angelis suggests, is not just the application of instrumental reason, particularly that associated with the force of the state, but it is also about cultivating ethical relationships: at the heart of contemporary struggles around neoliberalism, enclosure, and accumulation are competing systems of values.¹⁴⁹

Value, De Angelis suggests, is an ethical system. Following Canadian philosopher John McMurty, he suggests that value contains an ethical judgement, and operates as a system through which we are able to differentiate ‘good’ from ‘bad’.¹⁵⁰ De Angelis defines value as “the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves,”¹⁵¹ emphasizing the social nature of values, and that any action or process “only becomes meaningful (in Hegelian language, takes on “concrete, specific form”) by being integrated into some larger system of action.”¹⁵² As a result, value is a social phenomenon that has to be constructed ethically and politically. The problem with the capital system- the dominant way of deriving value in the contemporary world- is that it is predicated on the self-valorisation of value.¹⁵³ The problem with capital, in the most simple terms possible, is that it creates social systems that are driven by its own logic of expansion. In this context, capital mitigates against, sometimes violently, the establishment of other value systems that would place human needs first.

Contra Hardt & Negri, for whom there is no outside to capital, and new forms of sociality and value emerge within capital, De Angelis argues that value struggles take place at the boundary between the value system of capital and alternative value systems. Indeed, the creation of an outside is fundamental to De Angelis’ notion of the beginning of history. For De Angelis, “*an outside* is constituted anytime social

rejects the concept of prefiguration as it is used by anarchists, because social systems will emerge and evolve beyond their immediate horizons. However, he suggests that it is important to think about anti-capitalist politics in terms of the relationship between means and ends, something that much of the Marxist-Leninist literature eschews.

De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, pp. 5-6.

Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Day, R.J.F., (2005), *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, (London, Pluto Press).

¹⁴⁹ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁰ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁵¹ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 24.

¹⁵² Graeber, D., (2001), *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our Dreams*, (New York, Palgrave), p. 68.

¹⁵³ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 38.

subjects are engaged in a struggle vis-à-vis a social force whose own *telos* and *conatus* demands the dismantlement and colonization of anything outside itself.”¹⁵⁴ What is at stake is- in the classic autonomist fashion- the struggle between two subjects, each of which embodies different principles of social reproduction: capital and commons. Although the conception of the political- the struggle between two social subjects- invoked here is not wholly dissimilar to that of Hardt & Negri, and distinguished largely by whether this struggle takes place *within* a capitalist totality, or between a totalizing social force and a counter power that manufactures an outside, the conception of capitalism implicit within it *is* significantly different. Although suspicious about the word ‘capitalism’,¹⁵⁵ De Angelis believes that this relationship between capital and non-capitalist space tells us a lot about capital as a social force.¹⁵⁶ Much of academic Critical Theory has encouraged us to think about capitalism as a ‘totality’, from which it is impossible for social action to escape without the destruction of the entire systemic logic.¹⁵⁷ De Angelis challenges this understanding, suggesting “capitalism...is only a *subsystem* of something much larger and all-encompassing, that is the system of social reproduction within which different subsystems are articulated.”¹⁵⁸ Capitalism is not identified with *the* totality, but rather it is understood as *a* totality, that is to say a “system that emerges out of the coupling, interrelation, meshing, among different social forces and value practices.”¹⁵⁹ Capital should not be understood as *totality*, but as a process of totalisation carried out by a social system that seeks to become total. Its essence is twofold: a “*social force* that aspires to subordinate all value practices to its own type of value practice and, correspondingly, a mode of doing things, hence of relating with one another, a set of *social relations*.”¹⁶⁰ Political action, the struggle between the two social forces, that of capital and that of the commons, “becomes a problem of how we disentangle [from the dialectic of the reproduction of capital], of how within the social body conflict is not tied back in to capital’s *conatus*, but instead becomes a force for the social constitution of value practices that are *autonomous* and independent from those of

¹⁵⁴ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁵ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 255, n.1.

¹⁵⁶ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ See for example Adorno, T.W. & Horkheimer, M., (1997), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (London, Verso).

¹⁵⁸ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 37.

¹⁵⁹ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁰ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 37.

capital.”¹⁶¹ The central political dimension of De Angelis’ project appears to be the creation and maintenance of the outside.

Although the notion of a ‘system of value’ suggests a synchronic approach, there is an historical dimension to De Angelis’ understanding of capitalism, as the expansion of capital into ever more of life, drawing on Harry Cleaver to argue that life practices are turned into ‘work’.¹⁶² The emergence of capital’s ‘system of value’ is not consistent with the so-called ‘commercialisation model’,¹⁶³ according to which successful mercantile practices become hegemonic; capitalism emerges through often violent enclosures of the externality of capital.¹⁶⁴ The central category of Marx’s critique of political economy is thus the *separation* of the producer from the means of production: the forcible removal of workers from their means of self-subsistence.¹⁶⁵ Not only is “primitive accumulation the historical basis, instead of the historical result, of specifically capitalist production,”¹⁶⁶ the violent logic of separation is also key to the ways in which the capitalist social relation is reproduced.¹⁶⁷ The key difference between primitive accumulation (as the expropriation of an outside) and regular accumulation (as accumulation that takes place through production), is not temporal, but the circumstances in which the separation between labour and the means of production is enforced.¹⁶⁸ De Angelis suggests that “while accumulation relies *primarily* on ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations [which] sets the seal

¹⁶¹ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 42.

¹⁶² De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 49.

¹⁶³ For more on the ‘commercialisation model’ see:

Wood, E.M., (2002), *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*, (London, Verso),

Ashton, T.E. & Philbin, C.H.E. (Eds.), (1987), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

¹⁶⁴ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 133.

This is, of course, also Marx’s argument about the way in which the capitalist mode of production is brought into being. See particularly Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, chapter 26.

De Angelis has published elsewhere on the significance of primitive accumulation to understanding the Marxist *oeuvre*. See for example:

De Angelis, M., (2001), ‘Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital’s ‘Enclosures’’, *The Commoner* 2, (available online at: <http://www.commoner.org.uk/02deangelis.pdf>), (accessed on: 02.02.2015).

¹⁶⁵ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 137.

¹⁶⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p. 775.

¹⁶⁷ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 246.

¹⁶⁸ De Angelis, ‘Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital’s ‘Enclosures’’, pp. 8-9.

on the domination of the capitalist over the worker,' in the case of primitive accumulation the separation is imposed *primarily* through '[d]irect extra-economic force'.¹⁶⁹ The logic of capitalist accumulation goes hand-in-hand with a logic of violence: capitalist accumulation can only be sustained through the destruction of attempts to create other systems of value.

Through separating man from his means of subsistence, capital can be understood as a social system that compels man to enter into wage relations in order to meet the needs of his own biological and social reproduction. De Angelis argues that the significance of commons lies in their capacity to overcome this separation, and as such "have as a first goal that of addressing directly the various needs of reproduction of different communities by mobilising the natural and creative resources at their disposal or that they are able to identify and reclaim from other social forces."¹⁷⁰ Commons are, at their very heart, a challenge to the separation that takes place through capital, a return to associational forms of living in the face of capital's continual attempt to separate people from other forms of subsistence and render them dependent upon the market.

In order for an alternative system of values to emerge, however, we must find alternative ways of measuring how useful different forms of human activity are. The desire to say something about different systems of value leads De Angelis to refute what might be Negri's signature theoretical manoeuvre: the breakdown of the law of value.¹⁷¹ Hardt & Negri argue that the measure of capitalist production has broken down, and thus as a consequence life itself is irreducible for measure.¹⁷² For De Angelis this is problematic for three main reasons: his first objection is empirical, demonstrating that value does still determine social relationships of domination and drives forward the accumulative logic of capital;¹⁷³ second, approaches that do away with value equate the forms of co-operation and immaterial labour central to cognitive capitalism with emancipation;¹⁷⁴ and third because such an approach fails to

¹⁶⁹ De Angelis, 'Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital's 'Enclosures'', p. 9., quoting from Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, pp. 899-900.

¹⁷⁰ De Angelis, 'Crises, Movements and Commons', *Borderlands* 11(2), p. 4.

¹⁷¹ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 4.

¹⁷² Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, pp. 354-361.

¹⁷³ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, pp. 150-193.

¹⁷⁴ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 171.

recognize that capital is only *one* form of measure, “a particular mode of *measuring* life activity, and therefore of articulating social powers.”¹⁷⁵ De Angelis suggests that, contra Hardt & Negri, for whom the moment of constituent power escapes all measure, “the constituent moment can only be the positing of *other* measures the communal problematisation of which is at the bottom of processes of political constitution beyond capital.”¹⁷⁶ Political action should not then be thought about as ‘pushing through Empire’, taking up certain tendencies within it and exploiting its internal contradictions, but pursued as a refusal of the status quo that contains within it the logic of an alternative mode of social reproduction.¹⁷⁷ These points of disagreement are, I think, key to understanding how De Angelis’ mobilization of commons differs from the ways in which Hardt & Negri deal with them.

For the purposes of this study, we can identify three main points where De Angelis disagrees with Hardt & Negri. Identifying these points of divergence can help us to understand not only where autonomists disagree about commons, but also what is at stake within an autonomist theory of commons. Both Hardt & Negri’s and De Angelis’ accounts make diverging claims about three things. These three things are:

- The nature of commons
- The way in which commons relate to political action
- The way in which commons relate to capitalism

In the next section of this chapter, I will adumbrate these disagreements further.

The authors disagree quite significantly about the nature of the commons. Whilst both Hardt & Negri and De Angelis accept the loose definition of commons as non-commodified forms of social reproduction, they disagree about what it would look like and where it appears in the contemporary world. For Hardt & Negri, commons emerge as the outgrowth of certain tendencies within late capitalism (the emergence of co-operative labour within immaterial/cognitive production), in which production as commons becomes necessary for the continued valorization of capital, effectively

¹⁷⁵ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 167.

¹⁷⁶ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 167.

¹⁷⁷ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 170.

establishing a relationship of rent between capital and labour. As a result, capital indirectly produces forms of co-operation and collaboration, which necessitate a revolution in the mode of production through the eradication of the parasitic form of capital, which has become a brake on their productive capacities. These subjectivities cannot be ‘decoupled from’ the capitalist totality in isolation. However, they can revolutionise the mode of production from within, calling into being a new mode of production in which ‘the common’ is central. As a result, for Hardt & Negri, the common is the transcendental condition of possibility for political action in the contemporary world. Against this conflict playing out at the level of totality, De Angelis suggests that commons exist in a more fragmented way, instituted through the act of resistance to capitalism, being produced where alternative values are developed that contest capital’s imperative to place profit maximization over and above human needs. As a result, commons are not something that emerge internally within capitalism, but at its margins, and are constituted in struggle through acts of opposition to neoliberal capitalism. Commons are not the transcendental conditions of political action so much as they are the result, or *form* taken by political action as the expression of resistance to capitalism.

The second category is the way that commons relate to political action. Although the disagreement appears less well defined than their divergent perspectives on commons, it is implicit within the way that they talk about commons, and affects the kind of analysis that they provide. For Hardt & Negri, the emergence of commons within social movements (as well as within the capitalist mode of production) says something about the conditions of possibility of political action and class composition in the contemporary world. In this regard, the types of common that we see in the world should be regarded as symptomatic of the transcendental conditions of a class-based political project, rather than the substantive, actual production of social forms. Despite this, the movements built around the common do have the capacity to act as the cell form of a new social and political settlement. In their essay on the wave of political uprisings around the world in 2011, *Declaration!*, they suggest that the meaning of the common in the contemporary conjuncture is that it institutes a constituent process: “To consolidate and heighten the powers of such subjectivities...another step is needed. The movements, in effect, already provide a series of constitutional principles that can be the basis for a constituent process. One

of the most radical and far-reaching elements of this cycle of movements, for example, has been the rejection of representation and the construction instead of schemas of democratic participation. These movements also give new meanings to freedom, our relation to the common, and a series of central political arrangements, which far exceed the bounds of the current republican constitutions.”¹⁷⁸ As a result, politics is a constituent process in which the boundless, unrestrained constituent power of the commons (or what Hardt & Negri call ‘the multitude’)¹⁷⁹ ‘unworks’ the political order of liberal modernity and the neoliberal world alike, and constitutes a new order around the commons. By way of contrast to Hardt & Negri, De Angelis sees no such necessity for constitutional moments. He argues that there is a “fallacy of the political”, through which there is a tendency to see in political recomposition, “a radical change in social relations and systems of social reproduction.”¹⁸⁰ Rather than a constitutional process that can be understood politically, De Angelis emphasizes the significance of social revolution.¹⁸¹ The significance of social revolution is that it attempts to build social power on a new basis, the social power necessary to expand the commons.¹⁸² De Angelis identifies the conflict between commons and capital as the cleavage around which social struggle takes place. Social revolution must expand the commons as the basis of social power, and for this reason De Angelis advocates campaigns to decriminalize commoning actions such as squatting and revindication, the cultivation of identity through nourishing ‘ludic energies’, and the extension of a non-commodified field of social reproduction into new areas of life.¹⁸³

The final category through which I have opposed these two thinkers is their conception of how commons relate to capitalism. Whilst Hardt & Negri seem to understand it in the Hegelian terms of an expressive totality, De Angelis views it as a sub-system of human action that has become hegemonic in the present era (and is driven by a logic that drives it to *attempt to become* hegemonic). The consequence of this is that while for Hardt & Negri, capitalism can only be challenged at the level of totality it operates at, De Angelis understands ‘capitalism’ (he is suspicious of the

¹⁷⁸ Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*.

¹⁷⁹ Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*.

¹⁸⁰ De Angelis, ‘Crises, Movements and Commons’, p. 6.

¹⁸¹ De Angelis, ‘Crises, Movements and Commons’, p. 17.

¹⁸² De Angelis, ‘Crises, Movements and Commons’, p. 10.

¹⁸³ De Angelis, ‘Crises, Movements and Commons’, p. 12.

term) as something that can co-exist with other structures, institutions, and political agencies (including the commons) which can be used to work against capital. This has important implications for the way that each of these thinkers conceptualise political action: whereas Hardt & Negri are drawn to the idea of constituent power, De Angelis' understanding of capitalism leads him to a strategy of de-coupling society from capitalist hegemony.

What are the implications of this discussion? There are fundamental disagreements about the nature of the commons, but these disagreements arise from wider conceptual disagreements about the relationship between commons, political action, and capitalism. This suggests that discourses around the commons within the autonomist tradition are not simple sociological descriptions of a phenomena so much as they are attempts to understand them in terms of political action, triangulated against a wider appreciation of what capital(ism) is, with the wider aim of achieving social emancipation. At its heart, this discussion is the classic political philosophy problem that lies at the heart of Marxist thought: the problem of how to act against capitalism in such a way as to overcome it.¹⁸⁴ I hope that this discussion has shed some light on what is significant- and unique- about the autonomist method, particularly *vis a vis* the emergence of many neo-Gramscian methods for making sense of social movements through a Marxist lens.¹⁸⁵ Unlike some of these approaches, the strength of autonomism is that it develops theory (including its theories of commons) that places *capitalism* at the heart of its understanding of the world, and the transcendence of *capitalism* as the social and political problem with which any transformative political project must engage. If social movement theory in the neo-Gramscian vein has not really taken this *problematique* seriously, tending to see struggle as the conjuncture of 'social movements from above' and 'social movements from below',¹⁸⁶ and "the political economy of organized capitalism is arguably best understood in terms of truce lines that congealed as subaltern groups mobilised around social movement projects that challenged the hegemonic

¹⁸⁴ An interesting history of these discussions can be found in: Thomas, P., (2010), *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*, (Abingdon, Routledge).

¹⁸⁵ See for example Cox, & Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*.

¹⁸⁶ Cox, Nilsen et al.

constellations of the long nineteenth century”,¹⁸⁷ autonomism holds firm to the belief that it must engage in a struggle against capital(ism) as a specific social form.

There are also a number of points of commonality that emerge from this discussion. First, autonomist theories rely on a conceptualization of capitalism that- although manifest in diverse forms- is derived from Mario Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’ within Marxist theory. Following Tronti, these autonomist conceptions of commons understand commons through the active role of labour in contesting capital.¹⁸⁸ Commons emerge either in terms of the productive forces unleashed by cognitive capitalism, or in terms of the contestation between values systems. Although they emerge in different place and for different reasons within the conceptual systems of Negri and De Angelis, their theories of commons bear the marks of a wider conceptual unity in their common adherence to the ‘Trontian turn’.

Both authors agree that- although this very soon becomes the basis of a new *dis*-agreement!- the emergence of commons as a social force requires a new political recomposition. The working class is an active political subject, and responds to the problems it faces as a class through a recomposition of its political organization. The emergence of spontaneous struggles over commons are not then sufficient for working class project that overcomes capital, but is only the first stage in a longer project of transformation. Both Hardt & Negri’s and De Angelis’ projects give some hints of what a longer project of political recomposition might look like, but stop short of spelling this out. It is to the challenge of political recomposition to which my project is a response. It seeks to explore the forms of political recomposition that are already going on within the movements themselves as well as what these movements can tell us about the future possibilities for class recomposition around commons.

The Problematique of the Thesis & the Autonomist Method

At the same time that this chapter has outlined two conceptions of what commons are, it leaves this investigation with a number of puzzles. These puzzles require further

¹⁸⁷ Cox & Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, p. 152.

¹⁸⁸ Tronti, ‘Lenin in England’.

elaboration, because they animate the remainder of this thesis. The most obvious puzzle is the difference in perspectives between Hardt & Negri and De Angelis. Both believe that commons are important, and activism around the commons potentially augurs a post-capitalist future, but they disagree about what exactly commons are, how they relate to capitalism, and what their significance is for political action. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the nature of their disagreement is perhaps less important for its content than it is for the way that it indicates what is at stake in any theory of the commons. In particular, it demonstrates that concepts of commons are bound up within accounts of political action accounts of the nature of capitalism, and the possibility of capital's transcendence, as discourses around the commons are political philosophical accounts about the overcoming of capitalism. These ideas about what commons are and how they might challenge capital is significant for any wider political recomposition based in commons. This is not to suggest that Hardt & Negri and De Angelis have not thought about this: both have published on the commons following the 2007-2009 financial crisis, and in doing so, have attempted to 'update' their ideas in such a way as to take into account new movement dynamics.¹⁸⁹

This leads to the second puzzle, which is whether discourses of the commons are a useful basis for a project of political recomposition at all? Each of these approaches were developed in a very specific context, where commons have emerged at the forefront of social movements. It does not immediately follow either that commons necessarily *can be* 'scaled up' to the type of mass political movement oriented towards the supersession of the global value form, or that commons are necessarily the best way of grounding an anti-capitalist movement in the contemporary world. The political resurgence following the financial crisis of 2007-2009 has ignited social movements (particularly in the form of organisations such as *Podemos*, *Syriza*, *Bene Comune*, and the revival of mass leftist engagement in *Eurozone* countries) with different political strategies than just those involving commons.¹⁹⁰ In this context,

¹⁸⁹ See for example:

Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*,

De Angelis, M., (2014), 'Social Revolution and the Commons', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 113(2), pp. 299-311.

¹⁹⁰ See for example Žižek, *A Year of Dreaming Dangerously*,
Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*,

there is empirical and theoretical utility in establishing whether or not these movements can be explained in terms of commons and what the political stakes are within these commoning movements.

This problematisation leads to a third puzzle, about whether the autonomist method is the best way of understanding these phenomena at all? Attempting to grasp these movements immanently, and tracing the internal logic of these practices, brings with it explanatory, political, and methodological baggage, each of which might themselves create problems both for an analysis of the significance of commons within social movements, but also- and potentially more problematically- the potential of commons to transcend capitalism. To this end, my project operates as an immanent critique of the assumptions made by autonomist theory in investigating commons in terms of the potential transcendence of capitalism, and whether the autonomist method is adequate for theorizing the political recomposition of the working class around commons. In conducting an immanent critique, I hope to be able to tease out the political-theoretical implications of autonomism, and assess the significance of the autonomist way of understanding the relationship between commons and political action in terms of a wider political project of the supersession of capital. In particular, I want to explore whether autonomist interpretations of commons based on commoning practices that emerge as local, associational action in the social sphere are sufficient for theorizing the commons as a transformative project.

In order to conduct this immanent critique, I begin with the methodological, theoretical, and philosophical precepts of autonomism. In this section, I outline how I understand the autonomist method, and how my research draws on it. As the clearest outline of the autonomist method, its political significance, and the reasons why it was adopted can be located in the early writings of autonomist theory, the introduction to this chapter has already covered much of this ground. Significantly, outlined in the writings of authors such as Mario Tronti, Harry Cleaver, and Raniero Panzieri, early autonomism assumed an approach to Marxist inquiry that began with investigation into the *praxis* of resistance against capitalism.¹⁹¹ As these authors suggest,

Van Gelder, S., (2011), *This Changes Everything! Occupy Wall Street and the 99% movement*, (San Francisco, Barrett-Koehler Publishers).

¹⁹¹ Tronti, 'Lenin in England',

autonomism begins with the assertion that the *praxis* of social movements against capitalism possesses a particular epistemologically privileged position, one that we must adopt if we are to escape the epistemological standpoint of capital.¹⁹² This priority is not just epistemological: autonomists begin with the struggles of workers because they believe that these struggles have ontological priority, driving developments within the capitalist economy,¹⁹³ something that other theories about the relationship between resistance and the structure of the global economy has failed to recognize.

Indeed, it has been suggested that- despite some notable exceptions- prior to this intervention, Marxists were not very much interested in the activities of the masses.¹⁹⁴ With the emergence of autonomism as a theoretical current within Marxism, we see theory written from the perspective of the proletariat coming to increasing prominence. This methodology, beginning with the practices and ideas of the movements themselves has become a *de facto* part of Marxist social movement theorization, even where authors explicitly reject the tradition of autonomism.¹⁹⁵ However popular these ideas have become, they owe much of their intellectual debt to worker inquiry and co-research efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Quaderni Rossi* and *Quaderni del territorio* in Italy, *The Johnson-Forest Tendency* in the United States, and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France.¹⁹⁶ In particular, much of the intellectual

Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*,
Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery'.

¹⁹² Tronti, 'Lenin in England'.

¹⁹³ Tronti, 'Lenin in England'.

¹⁹⁴ This assessment is challenged by the existence of works such as Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, in which he engaged in long investigative attempts to uncover the condition of the poor in Manchester, and more importantly- to uncover their orientation towards their conditions, and the ways in which they navigate through the city of Manchester. Also of interest, is Marx's own 1880 proposal for a survey that examined the conditions and political activities for workers in France. Marx, K., (1880), 'A Workers' Inquiry', first published in *La Revue Socialiste* April 20th 1880, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm>), (accessed on: 09.02.2015).

¹⁹⁵ See for example the neo-Gramscian social movement theorization of Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen:

Cox & Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*.

¹⁹⁶ See for example

thrust of the autonomist method was developed by the so-called *Quaderni Rossi* group under the hegemony of Raniero Panzieri, who prioritised workers investigating their own working conditions in order to promote the growth of class consciousness.¹⁹⁷ Central to this practice is the idea of class composition.

The concept of class composition contains three basic notions: first, an understanding of the ongoing conflict between workers and the capitalist organization of labour; second, a conviction that the forms of organization employed by capitalism are a response to workers' struggles; and third, an intuition that cycles of struggles will leave certain residues that become subjective components of the labour force.¹⁹⁸ Further distinction was made between 'technical composition' (which refers to the way that the workforce relates to capital in a concrete historical moment), and 'political composition' (which refers to the agonistic behaviours, which at that concrete historical moment defines that class).¹⁹⁹ This distinction became central to understanding politics for Antonio Negri, for whom the process of political

Castoriadis, C., (1988), 'Proletariat and Organization, 1', *Political and Social Writings Volume 2, 1955-1960: From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press), pp. 193-222.

¹⁹⁷ This is not to suggest that the workers' inquiry approach in general, or even *Quaderni Rossi* was a unified intellectual project. Damiano Palano has suggested that, within *Quaderni Rossi*, "a rather basic fracture emerged around the form and goals of the survey, since the formation of the first *Quaderni Rossi* group. On the one side there was the faction of 'sociologists' (led by Vittorio Rieser) and at that time the most numerous. This section understood the inquiry as a cognitive tool in order to understand a transformed worker reality, and oriented towards provide the tools for producing a theoretical and political renovation of the worker movement's official institutions. On the other side, we find Alquati and a few more (Soave and Gaparotto), who, based on factory experiences in the US and France, considered the inquiry as the basis for a political intervention oriented towards organising workers' antagonism. It was a considerable difference from the point of view of the concrete goals of the survey. The distance was even greater though in terms of method: in fact, while the first faction was actualising Marxist theory with themes and methods from North American industrial sociology, Alquati was proposing a kind of strategic research in the study of the factory."

Damiano Palano, 'Il bandolo della matassa. Forza lavoro, composizione di classe e capitale sociale: note sul metodo dell'inchiesta', quoted in:

Malo de Molina, M., (2004), 'Common notions, part 1: workers-inquiry, co-research, consciousness-raising', (available online at:

<http://eicpc.net/transversal/0406/malo/en/#sdfootnote10anc>), (accessed on: 08.02.2015).

¹⁹⁸ Malo de Molina, 'Common notions, part 1: workers-inquiry, co-research, consciousness-raising'.

¹⁹⁹ Malo de Molina, 'Common notions, part 1: workers-inquiry, co-research, consciousness-raising'.

composition is always derived from the material conditions of workers' subjection, but nonetheless contains within it the active role of the worker in producing a political programme from it.²⁰⁰ As Robert Lumley has argued, an organizing tradition built around politically educated militants was vital to the success of *Operaist* and *Autonomist* politics.²⁰¹ Texts in this vein include Sergio Bologna's *The Tribe of Moles*, which sought to explain the irruption of student militancy in 1977 as an expression of a specific process of class recomposition.²⁰² In writing on student militancy in this way, Bologna sought to help reorient revolutionary activists to those points of the economy that was most capable of producing militant radicalism. In this regard, the autonomist method amounted to a mapping of the terrain of class conflict with a view towards understanding *where* militancy will emerge, and *how* militancy can be utilized politically.

For many of its proponents, 'militant inquiry' cannot be treated as a tool that produces knowledge that can later be applied to political struggle; it was seen as potentially yoking together the production of knowledge with political organization and forms of militancy. As Raniero Panzieri suggested, "[n]ot only is there no discrepancy, gap or contradiction between inquiry and the labour of building political relations, inquiry is also fundamental to such [a] process."²⁰³ Panzieri, and authors who followed in his footsteps, such as Romano Alquati, were suggesting that co-research is not simply of *epistemological* significance; its procedure also has a deeply political dimension, which means that social inquiry and political organisation are intrinsically linked.

This history of *workers' inquiry*, and the history of militant inquiry more generally, demonstrate two main ways in which the autonomist method has been employed. The most consistent of which is a dedicated 'workers' inquiry' approach. It assumes the identity of the worker as a way of investigating the way they negotiate their surroundings. It is particularly interested in the way that they resist and disrupt the

²⁰⁰ Negri, *33 Theses on Lenin*.

²⁰¹ Lumley, R., (1990), *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978*, (London, Verso).

²⁰² Bologna, S., (1977), *The Tribe of Moles*, E. Emery (trans.), (available online at: <http://libcom.org/files/Sergio%20Bologna-%20The%20Tribe%20of%20Moles.pdf>), (accessed on: 26.02.2015).

²⁰³ Panzieri, R., (1965), 'Socialist Uses of Workers' Inquiry', A. Bove (trans.), (available online at: <http://cipcp.net/transversal/0406/panzieri/en>), (accessed on: 08.02.2015).

workplace at a local level. I am not adopting this methodology for two main reasons: first, while it gives detailed, empirically rich data about a locality, but it is less useful for generalizing inquiry about a wider social terrain; and second, this is not the methodology that neo-autonomists such as Hardt & Negri and De Angelis use. Indeed, their methodology is the second approach, influenced by workers' inquiry- and as the previous chapter demonstrated, their assumptions about capitalism and the nature of political action are *conditioned by* their acceptance of the workers' inquiry methodology- but not identical with it. Rather than empirically studying what it is that workers actually believe, or attempting to investigate how the activist negotiates her terrain, neo-autonomist method *theorises from the place of* the worker or the activist. Paying attention to what the social movements do, what they say, and what they believe is an indispensable part of their method, but in the final instance they are writing works of political economy, or political theory. Here we can identify the second methodological position, what I- at the risk of creating a neologism- call 'neo-autonomism'. These authors accord to the second way in which workers' inquiry has been taken up and employed by scholars, which is to theorise *from the perspective of* the social movements, without sharing the sociological and epistemological rigour of the workers' inquiry.

This being the case, this has a number of implications for the way that this investigation proceeds. First of all, my analysis commences with the actions of movements themselves. To this end, I have chosen to take two cases, the *Bene Comune* movement in Rome, and Occupy Oakland, exploring their practices in order to assess, with autonomist tools, the way that commoning contests capitalism. In order to assess the efficacy of the autonomist theoretical framework for exploring this process of recomposition within capital-transcending political action, and the way that autonomist theory yokes together the commons with theses about the nature of capitalism, and the capacity of political action to overcome it, I use these two case studies to explore what autonomist approaches can offer the analysis of political recomposition. These cases are interesting because, in different ways, they demonstrate processes of political recomposition beyond the immediate emergence of commons. The inclusion of two case studies is not intended to be comparative, but rather to demonstrate the different ways in which movements have attempted political recomposition through commons since the 2008 financial crisis. In Italy and America

there are distinct organizational cultures through which political action is framed, and different material problems facing social movements. The political recomposition taken place in Italy and Oakland reflects these protest cultures within these respective locations. Nonetheless, there are certain similarities between them. What yokes these two cases together is the presence of discourses of ‘the commons’ - on the ground, in the words and deeds of activists, and in the analysis of secondary literatures that (written by authors who often inhabit the interstitial space between activist and academic) attempt to make sense of them-²⁰⁴ and a desire to ask questions about political recomposition around these commons.

I approached each of these cases through visits to Rome and Oakland and interviews and participant based observation with activists in each context. As this material is not intended to carry explanatory weight within this thesis- recalling my CRQ, I am not attempting to answer *what* the participants *believed* in carrying out their actions- my interactions with participants primarily helped me orient myself towards my research material, and to see the types of explanations that lie immanently within the particular cases. Where corroboration of factual material is required, I have provided textual references, to media or ‘indymedia’ reports on events. Independent readings of events such of those within ‘indymedia’ have the benefit of shedding light on the explanatory efforts of the movements themselves, as they appeared in the writings of the movements. Much of my analysis comprised interrogation of the many documents and written materials produced by the movements themselves. Although researching social movements in the 21st Century means that much of the material produced by movements is now reproduced online, some of this material can only be found in the physical form of pamphlets, leaflets and books. Given that I attempt to practice immanent critique, I have tried to develop this analysis using autonomist tools and autonomist ideas about political recomposition in order to reveal its contradictions and its limitations. This allows a more comprehensive assessment of the opportunities that autonomism offers for thinking about political recomposition through the commons.

²⁰⁴ I will recap some of how commons have been talked about within each case study in the following empirical chapters two and three.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has done two things. First, it has presented a brief history of the autonomist tradition, and two of the main ways in which commons have emerged within it. Secondly, the chapter has explored the significance of the autonomist method, and the way that the epistemological foundations of autonomist inquiry are bound up within ontological assumptions about the nature of capitalism, and political prognoses about how to overcome capital. This can be seen in their contending accounts of where commons emerge: for Hardt & Negri, the common is the substrate of all production within late capitalism, and needs to be freed from its capitalistic fetters; whereas for De Angelis, the commons are created through the voluntaristic act of ‘stepping outside of capitalism’. The distinction between these two accounts shows that autonomist theories of commons are, in actual fact, theories of three things: an account of common property; an account of the kind of political action that is required to establish commons; and an account of the nature of capitalism, and the way that commons and political action relate to it (as well as what it would mean for commons to transcend capital). The chapter concluded by identifying the most significant aspects of the autonomist method, and established that by beginning with the practices of commoning, we can explore social movements as acts of commoning. It then suggested that the way the thesis proceeds is through carrying out an immanent critique of the type of political recomposition found within post-2008 social movements. To this end, the following two chapters explore the *Bene Comune* movement in Italy, and *Occupy Oakland* in the U.S.A. in order to analyse how effective autonomist tools are for assessing these movements. In assessing these, I am not interested in the extent to which Hardt & Negri’s or De Angelis’ accounts are more persuasive (aspects of each approach are present within each case), so much as I am interested in using both of these theoretical frameworks to analyse how movements themselves have developed political action that draws together claims about the nature of capital and commons.

Chapter Two: *Bene Comune*, The Commons and Social Movements in Austerity Italy

The case of the Italian commons movement is significant for a number of reasons. The first of which is that Italy is perhaps the country where a commons movement has had the largest impact in domestic politics, both spurring and winning a plebiscitary referendum, and having a significant impact on the electoral manifestos of a number of political parties. In this way, it has made more of an impact on the formal sphere of political debate. Of course, this is hardly a priority for autonomist thought, and at the same time as its representational successes, the movement has had a number of significant successes in terms valued by autonomists themselves. The Italian case is also of significance because it is in Italy where autonomist thought has had the greatest influence on the theory and practice of class struggle. Across Italy, the establishment of a network of autonomous social centres ‘run as commons’, and other practices of commoning that have taken place in Italian cities, have demonstrated a willingness not simply to legislate ‘the commons’ into existence, but also to actively make them. *Prima facie*, the success of these practices in creating an alternative, self-organised ethos of the commons, as well as of the prominence of autonomist ideas within the intellectual culture of the movement is consistent with the autonomist perspective outlined in the previous chapter. It is altogether less clear, however, what the autonomist perspective gives us in the way of explanatory power.

The aim of this chapter is to explore social movements that have sought to establish or restore commons in Italy since the 2008 financial crisis in order to trace the points of convergence between the theoretical and practical dimensions of the Italian commons movement. To this end, the chapter attempts to answer what autonomist theories of commons, and associated concepts such as living labour, constituent power, and exodus gives to an analytics of social movements that organize around commons. Providing this kind of an analysis can tease out the way in which autonomist analysis frames the conjuncture between capital, commons and capital-transcending political agency, and its applicability to the case of Rome. Consistent with the imperatives of the autonomist method outlined by Tronti and his peers, I will begin the analysis with the experience of the movement itself, taking this movement up with the events of the

summer of 2011, and the national referendum on the continued public ownership of the country's water infrastructure. In what follows, I will attempt to distill the significant dimensions of the water referendum, and the activism that immediately followed it through the social movements in Rome.²⁰⁵ Although the water referendum appeared to be a relatively marginal legislative event, its significance far exceeds the limited impact it had on the austerity programme put into place by the technocratic government of Mario Monti, and later that of Enrico Letta.²⁰⁶ It spawned a movement that articulated its political action in terms of 'commons', and gave new discursive tools to old movements.

Rome and the Water Referendum

Water has always been central to Rome's existence. From the baroque fountains of Trevi, to the Fontana Dell'Aqua Paola, that sits on the Janiculum hill, marking the end of the Paola aqueduct that brought clean drinking water to the West bank of the Tiber, water is prominent within the symbolic register of Roman civic space. Water has, of course, been a key problem that the technics of government have had to respond to since the earliest days of human association, and along with food and sanitation, the provision of clean water has been one of the key impediments to the expansion of cities throughout history. As recent research from the University of Virginia has demonstrated, the urban expansion of Rome, from the days of its earliest settlement to the present day, has been heavily influenced by the availability of water supplies. The banks of the Tiber were, of course, chosen as a site for settlement because of their suitability for transport, but also because of the plentiful supply of fresh water. But soon, by at least 312 BC, the local springs had been exhausted by the demand of the rapidly expanding metropolis, when the first aqueduct was built to bring water to the city. The problem of fresh water continued to be a problem throughout the Republican and Imperial periods, and many of the water courses built during this period continue to be in use today, supplying the city with its fresh water. In the modern era, water has

²⁰⁵ Although dynamics are similar across the country, for the sake of analytical convenience, I have limited this analysis to social movements within Rome.

²⁰⁶ 'Letting Go, Slowly: The Government Promises Sales But Shows Little Taste for Ceding Control', *The Economist* 05.04.2014 (<http://www.economist.com/news/business/21600126-government-promises-sales-shows-little-taste-ceding-control-letting-go-slowly>), (accessed on: 05.04.2014).

continued to be a key civic good, provided either by city administration, or by the state.²⁰⁷ As a matter of public health, water was key to the state's role as provider of welfare for the people, as state power became deeply imbricated in the conditions for the reproduction of life,²⁰⁸ and alongside forms of welfare such as healthcare and education, sanitation became central to the 20th Century state project.

In recent times, however, in the face of spiralling budget deficits, and a neoliberal governmental consensus more concerned with increasing profitability in the economy, and balancing budgets than providing the forms of care that became a 'traditional' part of the state's role during the 20th Century, the provision of water has become conceived less as a civic duty and more as a site from which profit can be derived.²⁰⁹ Much of this intellectual re-invention took place during the 1980s and 1990s, amid the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy after 1979.²¹⁰ Italy is far from unique in this regard, and across the world water privatisation has been both a common feature of neoliberal policymaking and a source of considerable tension and contestation between governments and social movements.²¹¹ In some countries, the privatisation of water infrastructure has been rather painless, or at least it has not raised too much opposition. For example, water privatisation was undertaken in 1989 by the U.K. government, with the sale of previously public Regional Water

²⁰⁷ *Aquae Urbis Romae: The Waters of the City of Rome*, (available at: <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/waters/>), (accessed on: 21.09.2013).

²⁰⁸ Foucault, M., (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: The Will to Knowledge*, (London, Allen Lane).

²⁰⁹ The movement towards privatization has been far from sudden, and must be understood as part of a long-term process through which public services became partially owned by the private sector. For more on this, see:

Asquer, A., (2014), 'Explaining Partial Privatization of Public Service Provision: The Emergence of Mixed Ownership Water Firms in Italy (1994-2009)', *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 85(1), pp. 11-30.

²¹⁰ Asquer, 'Explaining Partial Privatization of Public Service Provision: The Emergence of Mixed Ownership Water Firms in Italy'.

²¹¹ See for example:

Shiva, V., (2002), *Water Wars: Privatisation, Pollution, and Profit*, (London, Pluto Press).

Finger, M. & Allouche, J., (2002), *Water Privatisation: Trans-national corporations and the re-regulation of the water industry*, (London, Spon Press).

Liotard, K. & McGiffen, S.P., (2009), *Poisoned Spring: The EU and Water Privatisation*, (London, Pluto Press).

Sjolander Holland, A-C., (2005), *The Water Business: Corporations Versus People*, (London, Zed Books).

Authorities,²¹² and although the merits and demerits of this move continue to be debated, the move brought surprisingly little public resistance.²¹³ In other countries, the politics of water privatisation has been altogether more fractious, such as in Cochabamba Bolivia, where water privatisation became a *cause celebre* for anti-neoliberal critique in 2000,²¹⁴ and resistance against its implementation was the spark that set the indigenous movements aflame, and ultimately led to an electoral politics which saw *Movimiento al Socialismo-Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos (MAS)* and Evo Morales come to power.

Where the collective ownership of water and water systems has been defended, it has often not been defended through articulating or defending the desirability of ‘the public’ as a way of providing collective goods, but through invoking a notion of ‘the commons’. This is certainly the case in Italy, where the commons movement I am addressing in this chapter came to particular prominence after the July 12th and 13th 2011 national referendum, which sought to decide on the privatization of Italian state goods. With a turn out of over twenty-seven million (an absolute majority of the population), over 95% of voters voted against privatisation,²¹⁵ and legislatively prohibited the private management of water systems, and the possibility of water being run as a ‘for profit’ enterprise.²¹⁶ This was the first 50 per cent quorum (required for referenda to be successful) in over sixteen years, and prompted the swift revision of the country’s constitution to prevent future referenda being called so easily. In some ways, this epitomises the on-going struggle within Italian politics between direct and representative democracy, and that between ‘neoliberal’ forms of technocratic managerialism and popular sovereignty. Nowhere has this current of managerialism been more sharply felt than in the resignation of the government

²¹² Parker, D., (2012), *The Official History of Privatisation, Vol. II: Popular Capitalism, 1987-1997*, (London, Routledge), chapter 9, pp. 219-249.

²¹³ Jenkinson, T. & Meyer, C., (1994), ‘The Costs of Privatization in the U.K. and France’, Bishop, M., Kay, J. & Mayer, C., (eds.), *Privatization & Economic Performance*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 290-298.

²¹⁴ Shiva, *Water Wars*, p. 102.

²¹⁵ Bailey, S. & Mattei, U., *Social Movements as Constituent Power: The Italian Struggle for the Commons*, (available at: http://p2pfoundation.net/Italian_Struggle_for_the_Commons), (accessed on: 08.08.2013), p. 967.

²¹⁶ Mattei, U., (2013), ‘Protecting the Commons: Water, Culture, and Nature: The Commons Movement in the Struggle Against Neoliberal Governance’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112(1), p. 367.

deemed ‘untrustworthy’ by the European neoliberal establishment, and forced to resign in favour of a ‘technical’ government headed by Mario Monti.²¹⁷ Although the technical government was rejected in the polls during the 2013 general election, a ‘gross-coalition’ model has continued to predominate in Italian politics, under the premiership of another relatively minor figure in the Italian political landscape, Enrico Letta,²¹⁸ before he himself resigned in February 2014 under pressure from centre-left candidate Matteo Renzi.²¹⁹ Although ‘of the left’, Renzi cites Tony Blair as a role model, and has already faced fierce criticism for his so-called ‘Jobs Act’, which if rhetorically framed as something designed to ease Italy’s crippling high unemployment levels, appears only to have increased labour insecurity, and the number of part-time and short-term contracts for workers.²²⁰ The clear implication of this is that- in the current circumstances of crisis, and with three consecutive leaders who were unelected- popular sovereignty has been marginalised in favour of forms of government that serve the interests of capital.

Given the technocratic tendencies of contemporary Italian politics, it is unsurprising that Italian social movements have not had much to do with the Italian parliamentary left. With austerity tightening its grip on Italian public finances, and the ideological climate of the last five years affecting a retrenchment of the neoliberal values that produced the 2008 crisis, resistance to the government’s attempts to restore financial stability through savage spending cuts have been catalysed not by the parliamentary left, but through extra-parliamentary politics embedded within the social movement ecology of the last 15 years. Since the financial crisis of 2007-2009, a number of

²¹⁷ ‘Italy crisis: Silvio Berlusconi resigns as PM’, *BBC News* 13.11.2011, (available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15708729>), (accessed on: 02.02.2014). ‘Berlusconi Resigns as Monti Prepares New Italian Government’, *Bloomberg.com* 13.11.2011, (Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-11-12/berlusconi-resigns-as-monti-prepares-new-italian-government.html>), (accessed on: 02.02.2014).

²¹⁸ ‘Enrico Letta nominated as Italy’s new Prime Minister’, *The Independent* 24.04.2013, (available online at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/enrico-letta-nominated-as-italys-new-prime-minister-8586460.html>), (accessed on: 11.02.2014).

²¹⁹ ‘Italian PM Letta to Resign’, *The Guardian* 13.02.2014, (available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/13/italian-pm-enrico-letta-to-resign>), (accessed on: 13.02.2014).

²²⁰ ‘Will Matteo Renzi achieve anything as Italy’s Prime Minister?’, *The Irish Times* 08.04.2013, (available online at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/will-matteo-renzi-achieve-anything-as-italy-s-prime-minister-1.1753238>), (accessed on: 11.04.2014).

social movements have been prominent in Italy, including the long-running no- TAV movement in the Susa Valley,²²¹ the neo-Fascist Pitchfork protests of 2013,²²² and the parliamentary if resolutely ‘anti-political’ *5-Star Movement* (5SM) led by comedian Beppe Grillo.²²³ Whilst it is worth noting that Italy’s neoliberal aporia has not just spawned left-wing anti-neoliberal movements but others with a more questionable character (the Pitchfork protests and the 5SM among them), there has also been the emergence of a truly broad left consensus in Italian anti-capitalist politics.²²⁴ Alfredo Mazzamuro has suggested that the highpoint of this emerging movement has so-far been the General Uprising Against Austerity of 19th October 2013, which took to the street under the slogan of ‘Only One Big Project: Income and Houses for Everyone!’ The purpose of the October event was “to bring together in a few big national events all the grassroots movements and the local groups who work every day in their neighborhoods to oppose and resist the neoliberal attempt to make workers and the lower classes pay for the crisis of capitalism.”²²⁵

Central to this wider movement has been *bene comune*. In the aftermath of the referendum of 2011, the ‘political commons’ has emerged as “a strategy for reclaiming fundamental common goods (like water, culture, and education) and the

²²¹ ‘The no-TAV Struggle in the Susa Valley’, (available online at: <http://strugglesinitaly.wordpress.com/reappropriation/en-the-no-tav-struggle-in-the-susa-valley/>), (accessed on: 11.04.2014).

²²² ‘Italian farmers, truck drivers’ protest disrupts transport, clashes with police’, *Globaltimes.cn* (available online at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/831193.shtml#.U108cFVdV8E>), (accessed on: 11.04.2014).

‘Italy’s Pitchfork Movement mapped’, (available at: <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2013-12-12/italys-pitchfork-movement-mapped>), (accessed on: 11.04.2014).

‘Forconi: The new pitchfork protest’, *www.libcom.org* 17.12.2014, (available online at: <http://libcom.org/blog/forconi-new-pitchfork-protest-17122013>), (accessed on: 06.02.2014).

²²³ Ciccarelli, R., (2013), ‘Interview with Wu Ming: Beppe Grillo lives on the ruins of the movements’, (available online at: <http://libcom.org/blog/wu-ming%E2%80%99s-interview-%E2%80%99Cbebbe-grillo-lives-ruins-movements-03032013>), (accessed on: 06.02.2014).

²²⁴ This sense of consensus is represented by the emerging collaborative networks, which link up local struggles within Italy’s different urban centres, such as *Rete Arbitare Nella Crisi*, whose activities can be found at: <http://www.abitarenellacrisi.org/>

²²⁵ Mazzamuro, A., (2014), ‘Only One Big Project: Italy’s burgeoning social movements’, (available online at: <http://roarmag.org/2014/01/italy-movement-housing-income/>), (accessed on: 20.03.2014).

democratic processes and spaces for governing their access and distribution.’²²⁶ Not just water, but culture, education, and urban spaces have been defended from the attentions of the neoliberal state. As the autonomist method in the previous chapter suggested, if we are to understand a movement, we must understand the organisational culture from within which it emerges, and in the case of the Italian commons movement, it must be understood in the context of the anti-globalisation activism that has been a predominant feature of the anti-systemic left in Italy at least since the Genoa G8 summit of 2001. In this regard, contemporary commons movements did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but built upon an existing lineage of radicalism and resistance. Although the anti-globalisation movement was known for its strategy of ‘summit hopping’ and is often perceived to have a comparative lack of interest in building an institutional base for its actions,²²⁷ in Italy at least it was responsible for developing both an intellectual tradition of critique aimed at neoliberalism, and the emergence of local, non-hierarchical, single-issue organisations, which in cell form have become the basis of resistance to austerity and the dictate of ‘the Troika’. Ugo Mattei suggests that there is a particular symbolic and organisational relationship between resistance to water privatisation and anti-neoliberal politics in Italy, perhaps epitomised by the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua*, which organised a citizen’s initiative for a water reform statute.²²⁸ The impetus for resistance against the neoliberal austerity regime has come through grassroots organising around particular commons that have been expropriated and threatened by Italy’s neoliberal regime. At the same time, Mattei notes that a systematic scholarly study (conducted at the *Accademia Nazionale de Lincei*, and one with which he was heavily involved) has been undertaken to assess the legal basis for privatisations in Italy, a particularly pressing matter considering that between 1992 and 2000, Italy led the world in total value of privatised assets (to the value of €140bn).²²⁹

²²⁶ Bailey & Mattei, *Social Movements as Constituent Power*.

²²⁷ Dwyer, M., (2013), ‘Where Did the Anti-Globalization Movement Go? Once the anti-globalization movement shut down a city. Not anymore’, *New Republic* 13.11.2013, (available online at: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115360/wto-protests-why-have-they-gotten-smaller>), (accessed on: 27.04.2014).

²²⁸ Mattei, ‘Protecting the Commons’, p. 368.

²²⁹ Mattei, ‘Protecting the Commons’, p. 368.

What Does Autonomist Political Practice Signify?

In this second section of the chapter, I want to map more coherently the autonomist commons that have emerged in Rome since the financial crisis. What kind of autonomist theoretical pillars have been used within these social movements? To assess this, I want to begin with the writings of *bene comune*, the lawyers and activists who began the constitutional campaign to prevent water privatisation and constitutionally safeguard the commons from accumulation, to extract what exactly it is that advocates of this kind of ‘commoning’ see as political action.

One of the most convincing aspects of the autonomist analysis is its portrayal of a commons movement as an exercise in constituent power. In so doing, it provides an analysis of the way that common property orders challenge the liberal framing of the property question. The analytics of constituent power demonstrate the difficulties faced by social movements in transforming property relations. Property relations cannot be transformed within the liberal political sphere because the capitalist property order is the ineluctable horizon of liberal political order. As theorists of the *Bene Comune*, Saki Bailey and Ugo Mattei argue,

“[The institution of property is effectively rendered invisible]: it constitutes constituents- and constituent power- within the limits of individual private property relations, thus placing private property- and the resulting unjust distribution of wealth- beyond contestation and beyond the reach of constituents, in a neutralized, constitutionally-produced political sphere.”²³⁰

They go on to argue that in Italy, property is paradoxical insofar as the limitation of the property order according to the modern categories of law- the public and the private- prevents ‘the multitude’ from altering the property order, but also renders the property settlement of the 1948 constitution, where certain goods were held in public trust, under threat.²³¹ The distinction between public and private is a quantitative distinction rather than a qualitative one. This means that the distinction between

²³⁰ Bailey & Mattei, *Social Movements and Constituent Power*, p. 973.

²³¹ ‘The Constitution of the Italian Republic, 1948’, (available online at: <http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/Italy.Constitution.pdf>), (accessed on: 09.10.2013).

public and private property doesn't distinguish between two different types of property, but that each of these forms depend upon on the commodity form, and therefore there is always a danger that something included within the property order of the constitution can be transferred from public to private ownership. To privatise something is, under the terms of the 1948 constitution merely to transfer ownership from one private owner (the state) to another private owner (usually a multinational corporation). Whilst, on the one hand, the constitution upholds property rights in such a way as to prevent the uprooting of the property order, on the other, it fails to provide adequate legal protection to those public assets that might be sold off or privatised. As Ugo Mattei has demonstrated in an article, 'Emergency Based Predatory Capitalism: The Rule of Law, Alternative Dispute Resolution, and Development',²³² states today-acting in a state of emergency- behave in the manner of medieval, feudal states, selling assets to the private sector in order to meet debt obligations and/or the requirements of international institutions. At the same time as permitting 'primitive accumulation' by movements from above, these same movements disqualify and delegitimise movements from below which attempt to transform the property order in a countervailing direction.

The liberal constitutional model is no longer seen in its historical role, as the role of the state has been transformed by the neoliberal project. Consequently, rather than a clear basis of political order, the constitutional order is an ongoing site of constant, ongoing intervention. In Italy, this was the traditional 'myth' that the constitution of 1948 found balance between the interests of the three constituent groups who contributed to the liberation of the Italian peninsula from Nazism: the liberals; the socialists/Communists; and the popular Catholics.²³³ Since 1948, despite notable Marxist critiques,²³⁴ most interpreters have understood the Italian constitution as a mediation of competing interests. Mattei & Bailey describe the mechanisms by which this 'truce' was achieved:

²³² Mattei, U., (2010), 'Emergency Based Predatory Capitalism: The Rule of Law, Alternative Dispute Resolution, and Development', in Fassin, D. & Pandolf, M., (Eds.), *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, (New York, Zone Books).

²³³ Bailey & Mattei, *Social Movements and Constituent Power*.

²³⁴ Negri, A., (1977), 'Towards a Critique of the Material Constitution', available in Negri, A., (2005), *Books for Burning*, (London, Verso), pp. 180-230.

“the broad delegation of authority to the formal (ordinary) law to define the limits of economic activity (so called “riserva di legge”), and trade union negotiations, supported by the constitutional right of strike, which were seen as a wait and see strategy functional to the interests of all the political parties represented in the Assembly. As a consequence, while the Constitution emphatically sides with labor in its struggle against capital, (in particular Art. 1), the actual text of what is usually known as the ‘economic constitution’ is much more ambiguous and clearly divided in zones of cultural and political influence.”²³⁵

Effectively, this meant that although the Italian constitution was a workers’ constitution- specifically, Article 1 of the Italian constitution of 1947 states that ‘Italy is a Democratic Republic, Founded on Work’,²³⁶ it favoured free enterprise in all circumstances except those which directly endanger “safety, liberty, and human dignity.”²³⁷ If the constitution was to favour free enterprise when it was written in 1947, by the second decade of the 21st Century, the Italian state was not simply the arbiter of free enterprise, but a state that actively pursued the production and extension of market relations. The legal and regulatory functions of the state *vis-à-vis* the economy emphasised in 1947 have come to be superseded by the state’s function as an interventionist force. There is nothing in the constitution that prevents the state from acting as a neoliberal market actor. Indeed, that is what the state has become in recent years, and “[i]n the last two decades, the ‘economic constitution’ ... was transformed by privatization and the development of the idea of the ‘regulatory state’ replaced by that of ‘entrepreneur state,’ which intellectually justified the dismantling of the welfare system in the name of competition and efficiency.”²³⁸

²³⁵ Bailey & Mattei, *Social Movements and Constituent Power*.

²³⁶ Article 1., The Constitution of the Italian Republic, approved by the Constituent Assembly on 22nd December 1947, (accessed online at: <http://legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/1613/file/b4371e43dc8cf675b67904284951.htm/preview>), (accessed on: 11.08.2013).

²³⁷ Article 41., The Constitution of the Italian Republic, approved by the Constituent Assembly on 22nd December 1947, (accessed online at: <http://legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/1613/file/b4371e43dc8cf675b67904284951.htm/preview>), (accessed on: 11.08.2013).

²³⁸ Bailey & Mattei, *Social Movements and Constituent Power*.

Given these interventions, the state can no longer be relied upon as the guarantor of 'the public' as a sphere in which goods are pursued, and through which they are provided. The state's retreat from 'the public' as a way of providing goods common to all citizens, is both the spur for, but also the chief impediment towards, the implementation and recognition of 'commons' within Italian law. It might be tempting to suggest, then, that claims to the commons have emerged in inverse relation to the ability of centre-left activists to mobilise coherent claims to 'the public' as a site where goods can be secured. It should be of no surprise that it is in those countries where centre-left anti-austerity movements have been weakest. Indeed, in Italy, these protests have been sporadic and ill-coordinated, and despite student activism opposing the so-called 'Gelmini reforms' of the education system in 2010, it was not until autumn of 2013 that a movement arose speaking the language of anti-austerity. Even then, the 'Pitchfork movement' was deeply anti-political, and many participants and affiliates have not inconsiderable links to the Italian far right.²³⁹ In

²³⁹ "The Pitchforks Movement self-declares itself as 'non-political' and 'against party politics', while many observers have denounced the presence of far-right and neo-fascist organisations and parties within or in support of it. After the second day of protest the biggest Italian parties, instead, have yet to make statements about it, and are ignoring the events. Among the few exceptions, Italia dei Valori, an ideologically vague political party for "values" and "honesty", historically allied of the centre-left, which has declared its support to the "peaceful Pitchforks"; and La Padania, newspaper of the xenophobic and north-independentist party Lega Nord, is, only apparently unexpected (given its historical hatred for the southies, but also their claims of separatism) the only one major newspaper to show support and report the news on its first page.

But, as mentioned before, lacking others, the worrisome political presence is another one. Forza Nuova (New Force), a neofascist movement and party, has showed full support to the Pitchforks, with the words of its leader Roberto Fiore, claiming that this is only the first stage of a forthcoming Italian "revolution". A few Forza Nuova representatives have taken part in the parades with their banners and a local leader spoke to the Pitchforks some weeks ago. Moreover, according to some observers, this is not just the classical "fascist infiltration". Morsello Martino, the Pitchforks spokesperson and somehow "leader" and one of the founders of its inner movement Forza d'Urto (Shock Force), would be a seignioragist and the father of Antonella Morsello, fascist and Forza Nuova affiliate, with whom organized a seignioragist meeting, just in a Forza Nuova centre. Another shifty backing comes from Maurizio Zamparini, president of Palermo soccer club and recently founder of "Movimento per la Gente" (Movement for the People) a populist propaganda organ against Equitalia (the private agency that collects unpaid taxes in Italy, object of widespread hate and Forza Nuova "symbolic" attacks, and also victim of several letter bombs in the last few months).

Also Beppe Grillo, leader of the Movimento 5 Stelle, stated support for the Pitchforks,

this regard, then, it is difficult to see the ‘Pitchfork movement’ as an anti-austerity movement so much as it is an anti-political, populist one.

So, what of the political action of *bene comune*? Political action is understood in its most basic form; as constituent power that is opposed to the constituted power of the existing legal order. This constituted power is nothing more than alienated, dead constituent power which, in the Italian legal system, works against the interests of the masses. As a result, the invocation of constituent power begins with the premise that in order to counter the state’s tendency to engage in this kind of behaviour, a transformation of the property order is required. This can only be effected by re-opening the foundational moment of law, something that is embodied within the constituent power of a social movement that is oriented around the establishment of common property as the new, collective foundation of the civic order. For theorists of *bene comune*, this can be achieved is prefiguratively,²⁴⁰ that is to say that it can be achieved through enacting civic politics, and engagement in the running of the city as a *bene comune*. The proliferation of civic movements across Italy suggests that this movement has had a modicum of success, but does this political action speak to the original focus of the thesis, commoning as political action oriented towards the supersession of capital?

These movements are more than just countercultural or anti-political: they are an attempt to transform the property order through collective action and strategic interventions into the legal order. At the same time, this is also an instructive framing of the problem, for it is not capitalism- understood as a particular configuration of the social relations of production- but property that is the referent object of this

not without condescending to some anti-unitarian and south-independentist rhetoric. Curiously, he also directed his populism against Equitalia lately, going as far as being apologetic about the letter bombings. At this quite gloomy panorama one should add the myriad of little and minuscule far-right groups, “think-tank”, facebook and twitter clicktivists, crypto-fascist web pages, all of them perkily enthusiastic about the Pitchforks.”

‘The Pitchfork Movement in Sicily’ *Struggles in Italy*, 18.01.2012 (Available at: <http://strugglesinitaly.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/the-pitchforks-movement-in-sicily/>), (accessed on: 21.04.2014).

²⁴⁰ For the best definition of prefigurative politics, please see Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead*.

movement. In this regard, although constituent power is exercised at the level of the civic, its referent object is the property order of neoliberal capitalism. Perhaps this is a wider problem with movements that are predicated on notions of constituent power: they are about taking political power in a foundational sense, a political foundation from which the property order emerges. Whilst they are about human needs, and the construction of new structures through which human needs can be identified, it is not in the face of capital that these needs are located, but through a re-formulation of the political quality of the polity. Equally, although the movements have neoliberalism their ineluctable backdrop, they do not seem to locate movement dynamics in the context of the structural transformation of the mode of production, or in terms of class. Again, it is property rather than production that is the basis of the movements, and their theorisations. As a result, the movements are oriented towards political forms rather than capital itself.

The movements described by Ugo Mattei are not, however, the only commons movements in Italy. Indeed, there are several examples of more radical political attempts to articulate a politics of the commons. In many cases, these movements have been inspired by *Bene Comune*'s attempts to establish commons as an integral part of the Italian legal order. However, they have differed from *Bene Comune* in their tactics, engaging not with the legal system, and constituent power at the level of the national legal code, but instead by performing more direct interventions into the provision of human needs. Pursuing autonomist ideas about exodus from the capitalist economy, they have established alternative structures of organization, decision-making, and in doing so, attempted simply to act outside both the existing economy of capitalist exchange and existing forms of state provision. Throughout these movements, commons have been the dominant discursive trope for understanding their actions. The links between autonomist theories and these movements, although not always having been made explicit, have led to the *Bene Comune* adopting a perspective in which political engagement is framed as constituent power. Elsewhere, activities around the commons follow different logics, albeit logics that have origins within the autonomist thought described in the previous chapter. The purpose of the second half of this chapter is to explore other aspects of the commons movement in Italy, and how these autonomist conceptual tools inform action, our analysis of it, and the relationship between capital and political action.

“Con la cultura, non si mangia”?, Teatro Valle as Factory of Subjectivity

The day after the water referendum, 14th June, a group of cultural and precariously employed workers occupied *Teatro Valle*, at the heart of Rome’s central district. The oldest theatre in Rome, having originally been constructed in 1721, the theatre was best known for its operatic programme, but in recent years the theatre had become subject to the threat of privatisation, as government spending was no longer considered appropriate, or there was insufficient money available to continue to fund the extensive cultural programme it once had. Before the theatre was occupied in 2011, it was managed by a national network that administered public theatres nationwide, called the Italian Theatres Authority (ETI).²⁴¹ The aims of the occupation were threefold: first, the occupation was rooted in a desire to safeguard the theatre from closure, and the subsequent etiolation of Roman cultural life that would ensue from any closure; second, the occupation was primarily carried out by precariously employed and unemployed cultural workers, for whom the economic landscape of Italian culture meant insecurity and precarity; and finally, the occupation was also an exercise in the collective self-management of space and resources, with the cultural goals of creating and sustaining a shared space in which cultural projects can be explored co-operatively.

Teatro Valle is by no means the only action of this kind in Rome, but it is certainly the most prominent such project in the city. Elsewhere in Rome, artists and citizens have staged ‘sit ins’ at the *Teatro del Lido di Ostia*, the *Teatro Volturno*, and the *Cinema Palazzo di San Lorenzo*,²⁴² though none of these occupations have had either the longevity or the popular support enjoyed by *Teatro Valle*. The rhetorical strategy of the project has been heavily linked with that of the *bene comune*, and the idea that culture must necessarily occupy a ‘third space’ in the property order, between- or outside of- the binary distinction between public and private. As Andrea Galatà, an

²⁴¹ Belingardi, C., Caleo, I., Giardini, F., & Pinto, I., (2014), ‘Spatial Struggles: Teatro Valle Occupato and the (right to the) city’, (available online at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/chiara-belingardi-ilenia-caleo-federica-giardini-isabella-pinto/spatial-struggles>), (accessed on: 24.02.2014).

²⁴² Amodeo-Vickery, T., ‘Velvet Revolution: Inside the arts protests at Rome’s Teatro Valle’, *The Guardian*, 07.10.2011, (available online at: <http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it/velvet-revolution-inside-the-arts-protests-at-romes-teatro-valle>), (accessed on: 24.02.2014).

activist involved with the occupation has suggested, “[T]here’s the public sector and there’s the private sector. We want to create a third sector that is controlled by no one and everyone.”²⁴³ Again, in the rhetoric of *Teatro Valle*, we see both the anti-political themes that permeate the critique of the complicity of the political class with neoliberal economic policy, and the idea that what is required to provide an adequate response to contemporary problems is a new form of collective, communal property.

One of the most significant aspects of *Teatro Valle*’s praxis has been the creation of an assembly as the constitutional cornerstone of its operation. The challenge facing the newly formed *Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune* was to create an institutional and administrative structure that encompassed the idea of the commons, at the same time recognising that the movement’s strength lay in the organic, and often spontaneous energy of its participants, and avoiding the deadening effect of bureaucratisation and the pernicious emergence of hierarchies in the operation of the centre.²⁴⁴ If constituent power has been central to the constitutional model upon which the theatre has been built, it has also been central to its praxis, as the theatre has been conceived as an *agora*, a space in which encounters, interactions, sharing, learning, discussion, and conflict can take place without the hierarchical tendencies of most conceptions of political space.²⁴⁵

The occupation not only created a space in which new political encounters can take place, it also politicised the forms of social reproduction upon which the space, and the lives of those involved in it, depended. This was epitomised by the series of seminars the theatre organised on the relationship between space and property in the neoliberal city attended by well-known academics and public intellectuals such as David Harvey and Costas Douzinas. The *Teatro Valle* came to understand the importance of building links and collective projects with the a federation of similar projects, “through which new perspectives can emerge and be disseminated, and from which different forms of knowledge and expression [can be created]...allow[ing] the Valle not only to progress beyond the standardization of disciplines, but also to

²⁴³ Amodeo-Vickery, ‘Velvet Revolution’.

²⁴⁴ Belingardi et al, ‘Spatial Struggles’.

²⁴⁵ Gentili, D., (2011), ‘Topografie della piazza: agora, arengo, square’, in Laboratorio Verlan (Eds.), *Dire, fare, pensare il presente*, (Quodlibet, Macerata).

account for the complexity of the urban condition.”²⁴⁶ Whilst this is at the academic end of the project’s activities, the entire project has a pedagogical dimension, bringing together critique of the urban dynamics of ‘austerity Italy’ with formal critique of political association. Aesthetic practices in the *Teatro* are precisely organised around this dynamic, with the artistic programme developing political themes, but also performing the constitution of new political associations, and the creation of a new political and social bond. The processes of producing commons are co-operative and shared endeavours that result in the production of active forms of citizenship, through which people come to re-imagine their relationships with one another, as collectivities, rather than the neoliberal imaginary of a society of atomistic individuals mediated by the ‘society effect’ of markets in which individual actors pursuing their own rational preferences can produce- albeit indirectly- some kind of common good. Rather than demanding the protection of some kind of social resource- the commons- from accumulation in the abstract, *Teatro Valle* seeks to embody that which it defends in its own social relations.

But why should this amount to the emergence of new forms of imagination, and new practices of cognitive mapping, as opposed to- for example- the defence of the public? In the most obvious sense, *Teatro Valle* was opposed to the public ownership insofar as it rejected the public as the bureaucratic form through which culture should be funded and administered. But more than this, *Teatro Valle* was an attempt to create a political form through which artistic and aesthetic projects could be pursued for the good of the community, and in a way that the political principles of the project were embedded at its most local level. In this sense, the project is prefigurative, because it seeks to institute the values that it hopes to bring into being at its most basic level. The political action of the commons does not merely seek to defend certain resources from primitive accumulation, but create another kind of sociality.

As Dario Gentili and Andrea Mura argue, the power of projects such as *Teatro Valle* lies in their capacity to provide a new vision of man, against and in opposition to the utility maximising homo economicus of neoliberal theory.²⁴⁷ It is this that sets the

²⁴⁶ Belingardi et al, ‘Spatial Struggles’.

²⁴⁷ Gentili, D. & Mura, A., (2014), ‘The Austerity of the Commons: A Struggle for the Essential’, (available online at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make->

bene comune, and theories of constituent power more generally, apart from liberal theories rooted in the limitation of the subject's essential nature. The 'constituent' perspective of these movements is that which enables the construction of a new human nature, based in mutuality, solidarity, and co-operation, rather than individualistic competition. Dario Gentili and Andrea Mura go on to suggest that "[these movements] throw up and reflect new forms of socialisation: to express practices and actions of *commoning*. In this sense, as both action and practice, the *commoning* traverses contemporary reflections on the 'being-in-common', and the 'commonwealth' as social and political alternatives to the neoliberal 'society of individuals' in competition with one another. It stands as a new subjectivity which is alternative to the self-made man, the neo-liberal entrepreneur-of-the-self who, in the age of the debt economy however, can only take on itself the costs that the state and trade no longer assume."²⁴⁸

The practices of *Teatro Valle* emerge here as a counterpower against the material procedures of austerity, the attempt to prefigure one vision of humanity against another. Precisely because the neoliberal vision of the world run according to the logic of the market is not the revelation of some kind of deeper human 'essence', but the construction of a particular kind of human subject through processes of 'proletarianisation', it means that the aesthetic and political practices of the *Teatro* constitute a certain form of 'cognitive mapping' through which both participants and the wider community might come to understand their situation, its possibilities, and the forms of consciousness and organisation that are necessary to overcome it.²⁴⁹ As a

it/dario-gentili-andrea-mura/austerity-of-commons-struggle-for-essential), (accessed on: 25.02.2014).

²⁴⁸ Gentili & Mura, 'The Austerity of the Commons'.

²⁴⁹ Frederic Jameson's work on 'cognitive mapping', in the essay of the same name, and in his book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, suggests that one of the key areas that critical intellectuals should be investigating today is the way that the political unconscious, and political imaginaries are constructed. Jameson's argument suggests that the history of the unfolding of the capitalist mode of production has been accompanied by a series of distinct aesthetic forms that have been responsible for synthesising experience, structuring imagination, and making the world intelligible. Jameson draws his methodology from that of Kevin Lynch, developed in *The Image of the City*, where he uses the term 'cognitive mapping' to explain the way in which people make sense of their urban surroundings. Jameson suggests that this works at the intersection of the personal and the social, and, in articulating the dialectical relationship between "the here and now of immediate

result, the commons are both something that should be defended, but also something that necessitates practices of ‘commoning’ as material interventions into the political economy of Italian austerity, and as the (re)composition of a new class subject, as a new way of experiencing, seeing, and being in the world. In this regard, for the participants of the *Teatro Valle*, the commons are not something that we- as activists and as social scientists- think about, so much as they are something that we think through. This is what Adorno might have called “thinking *out* of things.”²⁵⁰ The commons are not simply a positive social form to be constituted, so much as they are a decomposition of the social reality that reproduces the capitalist mode of production. The social centres are social experiments, born of the crisis of the capital relation- the break down of the reproduction of the working class as a class *for* capital- and an attempt to prefigure new social relations through the active re-constitution of relationships in small sections of the city. In doing so, the aim is not simply to liberate this or that district of the city from certain evils, but to catalyse a wider political transformation of the city, and Italy more generally, through the

perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent, provides an analogue for Althusser’s famous formulation of ideology as “the imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence.” The advantages of this are manifold, both for mapping the post-Fordist city, in which imaginaries are constructed by a deeply spatialised structural logic, but also in terms of developing a new politics, which mediates between the local, ‘micropolitical’ dynamics within which most anti-systemic movements organise, and the social totality against which any transformative project must, inevitably, be pitched. The implication of this is that representation- although there is a sense in which Jameson would rather that we spoke of ‘figuration’- is intrinsic to the political horizon of ‘late capitalism’. For all that social movements, and the Italian commons movement is no different, have held up the idea of ‘representation’ as a *shibboleth* that inhibits the emergence of a new emancipatory politics, Jameson suggests that what is at stake is the emergence of a new form of cognitive representation. Jameson’s interest in pursuing the study of this type of mapping is twofold: on one hand, it speaks to the historic problematic of ‘postmodernism’, an aesthetic horizon that we currently inhabit, but it also speaks to the need for any putative socialist project to escape the problem of creating a transcendent alternative. If, as Jameson suggests, capitalism is the first (and thus far only) social system in human history not to be based on some form of transcendence or religion, the key crisis of Marxism faced in the late 20th Century is not a crisis of positive science, but a crisis of the imagination.

See for example Jameson, F., (1992), *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press),

Jameson, F., (1990), ‘Cognitive Mapping’, in Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L., (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Chicago, University of Illinois Press), pp. 347-360.

²⁵⁰ Adorno, T.W., (1973), *Negative Dialectics*, (New York, Seabury Press), p. 33.

spontaneous pursuit of the imagination.

Fascism, social centres and the critique of capitalism in the case of *Casa Pound*

Not all attempts to re-image commons within political action have been as progressive, or indeed, as welcome as the efforts of *Teatro Valle*. Indeed, these themes have appeared in the rhetorics and practices of many deeply conservative groups. In the first instance, that anti-politics of the commons has been central to the cultivation of links between *bene comune* and groups such as Beppe Grillo's 5-star movement. Although its theorists are by no means 'Grilloists', the overlap is significant insofar as the support bases have considerable overlap. The same populist, anti-political critique of neoliberalism through which 'the commons' have been developed touches upon many of the central dimensions of the critique of politics. Although articulated from a fundamentally more conservative subject position, the pathologies of modern politics to which the movement points are similar. Depoliticisation, a deep unease at the growing disjuncture between democratic institutions and the people and the simultaneous imbrication of the political elite within the economic 'movers and shakers' imply a sense in which both movements are a critique of the fragmentation of political community by the alienating forces of (post-)modernity, and the only way in which it might be possible to restore its former completeness is the return to older, less-alienated forms of political association.

If the rhetorical strategies of *bene comune* bleed into the anti-politics of the 5-star movement, more problematically, the anti-political rhetoric of the *bene comune* has also been appropriated in the spirit of the anti-politics of contemporary Italian fascism. The parallels between the anti-politics of Bepe Grillo and 5-star and fascism are well documented,²⁵¹ but this association with the commons has been taken to new

²⁵¹ See for example: Fleischhauer, J., (2013), 'Green Fascism: Beppe Grillo is the Most Dangerous Man in Europe', *Spiegel Online International*, (available online at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/beppe-grillo-of-italy-is-the-most-dangerous-man-in-europe-a-889104.html>), (accessed on: 20.03.2014).

Farrell, N., (2013), 'Beppe Grillo: Italy's New Mussolini', *The Spectator*, (available online at: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8854261/italys-new-duce/>), (accessed on:

levels by the openly fascist *Casa Pound*. Beginning as a social centre in the highly diverse *Termini* district of Rome, *Casa Pound*- named after the anti-semitic poet Ezra Pound- has sought to establish a foothold for fascist activists in the city using tactics that have historically been associated with the left. Since its inception, *Casa Pound* has ‘branched out’ and embraced more orthodox electoral strategies, including standing in both local and national elections. One of its electoral aims, reprinted in all of its election literature, was the promise to ‘safeguard the commons for Italians’. Clearly this was a departure from the way that the term was employed by *bene comune*, but also the way in which it has been used historically. Nonetheless, it is an interesting perversion of the concept, and one that perhaps cannot ever be truly insured against.

Casa Pound is a- sociologically, at least- interesting phenomenon, because it speaks to the paradoxical dialectics of political and economic dislocation and centralisation, spatial and temporal compression and fragmentation, that are key to the constitution of the post-modern subject. More specifically, *Casa Pound* speaks to a crisis of politics, and the crisis of a neoliberal political model that is based on a conception of the state as a market actor, which have increasingly inter-twined the institutions and personnel of the political and economic spheres. The project’s choice of Ezra Pound as the source of its name is telling for its political content. On the one hand, whilst Ezra Pound was best known as a poet, he was also a noted anti-semitic, and his poetry deals with a set of themes comparable with those of T.S. Eliot: the transformation of the world according to new rationalities of government and production; and the changing social certainties that these transformations have brought about. On the other hand, however, Pound’s poetry also draws upon other political themes, particularly the critique of usury. This interest in Pound’s politics, as well as his

20.03.2014).

Fe, L., (2013), ‘How Beppe Grillo stole the left’s clothes’, *Red Pepper*, (available at: <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/how-beppe-grillo-stole-the-lefts-clothes/>), (accessed on: 20.03.2014).

Bacchi, U., (2013), ‘Beppe Grillo’s M5S, Human Microchips, Fascism and the Limits of ‘Revolutionary’ Movement’, *International Business Times*, (available online at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/italy-beppe-grillo-m5s-five-stars-442980>), (accessed on: 20.03.2014).

Dinmore, G., (2014), ‘Italy’s Beppe Grillo Battles to Sustain Anti-Establishment Message’, *The Financial Times*, (available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ac527eb2-d5ce-11e3-a017-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3OixF1W7h>), (accessed on: 13.01.2015).

poetry, coincides with *Casa Pound*'s particular understanding of the financial crisis in which Italy is currently trapped. Usury, and the predatory practices of lending are a perversion of the relatively simple social and productive relations upon which everyday life depends. *Casa Pound*'s political philosophy, although bound up with a certain centralising logic of political power, can often be distilled to the principle of "letting bakers bake, and letting farmers farm". The financial world, they suggest, is an epiphenomenon, but one that has ultimately been cancerous to Italian political life. Although this seems to contravene most of the most significant recent research on the relationship between financialisation and production- for example, the writings of Costas Lapavistas, or Maurizio Lazzarato- it has proved successful in mobilising relatively large numbers of people to action, as has been witnessed in the most recent 'pitchfork' protests. However, it is interesting, because (even if this theoretical framework is not Marxist) in *Casa Pound*, there is a social movement of the right that is articulating movement practice in terms of capital.

Commons in Italian Social Centres

Even more interestingly for this study, however, the commons have become a key discursive trope within the social centres that comprise at least the warp thread of the fabric of Italian far-left political life. The social movements developed through these centres are interesting because they articulate the Marxist (& autonomist) project of creating an alternative system for the provision of human needs, and do so through commons. Although in some way they have been inspired by the emergence of *bene comune*, it is inaccurate to describe the emergence of 'the commons' in the discourse and practice of the social centres as something that sprang into existence *ex nihilo* in 2010 or 2011, and some contextual material is therefore required to understand the context in which the discourse of the commons has emerged. Unlike the practices and the theory of *bene comune*, the emergence of the commons in the social centres is not rooted in a republican vision of lost political fullness so much as it is rooted in a belief in the significance of prefigurative politics, and practices which make and sustain certain social realities. These prefigurative practices question the way that capital, or more particularly the capital relation, produces communities, lived environments, and the experience of the urban. The forms of life brought into question by their praxis are

not limited to the political, but extend to the legal, and particularly the commodity form.

According to existing academic studies, the tradition of social centres seems to be generally European, as Italy is by no means the only place in Europe where social centres are a significant part of the fabric of left politics. Hodgkinson and Chatterton suggest that social centres are examples of “urban resistance movements in...European countries [that] have politicized and confronted the use and control of public space as part of a broader contestation to the enclosure of everyday life.”²⁵² In defining social centres, Hodgkinson and Chatterton go on to link the practices of social movements organizing in social centres to the provision of needs: “[o]ccupied social centres (OSCs) turn unused or condemned public buildings and factories into self-organized cultural and political gathering spaces for the provision of radical social services, protest-planning and experimentation with independent cultural production of music, zines, art and pirate micro TV.”²⁵³ This definition of social centres seems to describe very well the oldest and most prominent social centres of contemporary Rome. Whilst these social centres can be understood generically as the product of counter-culture seen across Europe, in Italy they are the product of a unique political history of resistance and anti-systemic contestation.

The story of these social centres is tied to the story of the radical anti-systemic movements that came to prominence in Italy during the late 1970s, and the decade of “cynicism, opportunism, and fear” that followed its dissolution.²⁵⁴ At the same time that the social centres are the result of a political history, their origins speak of a time when connections between the organised left and counter culture were stronger than they are today. In his writings on the origins of social centres in Italy, Pierpaolo Mudu suggests that the emergence of the culture that underpins the social centres was the result of an encounter between a number of different political and cultural movements, most notably: the Anarchist movement and its tradition of free radio, and self-management; an Autonomist movement in retreat, ‘looking for an exit strategy’

²⁵² Hodgkinson, S. & Chatterton, P., (2006), ‘Autonomy in the City? Reflections on the Social Centres Movement in the UK’, *City* 10(3), p. 305.

²⁵³ Hodgkinson & Chatterton, ‘Autonomy in the City’, p. 306.

²⁵⁴ Balestrini, N. & Moroni, P., (1987), *L'orda d'oro*, (Milan, Sugar Co), p. 387.

from the overt workplace antagonisms that had structured their practice throughout the previous decade; and the nascent punk movement which harnessed dissatisfaction and alienation as aesthetic and cultural practice.²⁵⁵ The first and most notable conclusion of this is that social centres are never subject to unitary practices, but are in and of themselves, hybrid and plural. Secondly, their origins lie as much in aesthetic forms of ‘counter conduct’ as they do in resistance to capitalism or the spatial reconfigurations brought about by the neoliberal restructuring of the city. Indeed, to this day a counter-cultural dimension can be detected in many of the social centres in Rome.

A good example of this is the social centre *Forte Prenestino* established on the site of a 19th Century military base in the Eastern outskirts of Rome. Every May 1st since 1986, it has held an annual ‘Festival of Non-Labour’ which is both a celebration of the ways in which social movements have secured forms of ‘freedom from work’, and a celebration of various forms of aesthetic and artistic ‘counter conduct’. *Forte Prenestino*, shielded by a series of large tower blocks, lies- perhaps rather ironically- just off Via Palmiro Togliatti in Rome’s Eastern suburbs, in an area which despite 25 years of attempted gentrification, remains desperately poor and witnesses high levels of unemployment and heroin addiction. The centre has developed a reputation as a place from which political campaigns are co-ordinated, but also as a site for experimentation in forms of alternative living, and a space in which various popular musical and cultural events have been held.²⁵⁶ We could talk about *Forte Prenestino* as a space in which the collective aesthetic fulfilment of disenfranchised (and, equally, culturally literate) youths takes place. But this is only to analyse one dimension of its space: even its focus on art, the reappropriation of cultural capital, and the aesthetic re-engagement of people and space can be read as a deeply political project.

For many, *Forte Prenestino* functions as a space within which practices of autonomy can be experimented with. The experience of running the centre was, for the

²⁵⁵ Mudu, ‘At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists’.

Mudu, P., (2004), ‘Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism: The Development of Italian Social Centres’, *Antipode* 36(5), pp. 917-941.

²⁵⁶ Purely anecdotally, *Forte Prenestino* features in the ‘nightlife’ section of recent editions of both *Time Out* and *Loneley Planet* guides to the city.

participants, an experience of collective liberation. Taking control of an abandoned, military space within the community and putting it to use for the community worked to counteract the alienation and disempowerment that characterises life in the neoliberal city. As one participant suggested when interviewed by Steve Wright in the early 1990s, "[a]ll of a sudden, we were inside, 'running' the place - we who had never managed anything except our unemployment, our homelessness."²⁵⁷ This sense of empowerment fostered by taking and operating space emerges not just from the 'outcome' of the movement, but also through its process. It is important not just because it turns spaces that have been treated as abstract exchange values by recent rounds of property speculation into spaces that everyone can use, but through the way that this reformulates social relations and political consciousness in the barrios in which it takes place. Steve Wright's anonymous interlocutor again: "[m]any people are convinced that the Forte is run by just a handful of people, a management committee that makes decisions in the name of and on behalf of everyone else. Such people simply can't conceive - whether for reasons of ideology or cynicism - that a micro-society of equal persons can survive and prosper..."²⁵⁸

The rhetoric of autonomy continues to underpin many of the social centres in the city, and has been central to many of the new social centres that emerged after the financial crisis. Responding to the alienation and disempowerment faced by the citizens of Rome, new social centres emerged that sought to place the management of the neighbourhoods in the hands of their residents, and struggle against the 'vast and impersonal' forces that shape and reshape their everyday lives. In the face of the neoliberal city, taking control of buildings and spaces challenges the alienation and disempowerment the city produces, at the same time allowing for the abandoned detritus of our military, industrial, and bureaucratic heritage to be repurposed for the pursuit of emancipatory spaces in the city. The invocation of commons feeds upon this rhetorical trope of autonomy, suggesting that 'the commons' names the desire to appropriate and manage the resources, and the shared social space of the city, autonomous from the formal political abstractions of the city and the nation. In this

²⁵⁷ Wright, S., (1996), 'In the Shell of the Old: Italy's Social Centres', *Black Flag* 209, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://libcom.org/library/in-shell-old-italy-social-centres-wright>), (accessed on: 27.09.2013).

²⁵⁸ Wright, 'In the Shell of the Old'.

regard, the activities of activists at social centres like *Forte Prenestino* is not fundamentally different to how it has ever been: rather, old activities have been discursively re-imagined as defending of the commons. But, if in *Forte Prenestino*, the commons invoked by social centres is the product of an encounter between a new language of politics and older trajectories of an already relatively sedimented politics, there are social centres which have sprung up more recently, in direct response to accumulation by dispossession and the encroachment of the interests of capital on local autonomy.

One such example of a social centre is *Communia*. *Communia* was established with the aim of recomposing urban relations around the communities formed by reclaiming parts of the city against accumulation, and against the logic of dispossession that has seen speculative capital tear the social fabric of the city's working class suburbs apart. In the face of this massive alienation, brought about by the redevelopment and gentrification- taking place in response to the need for new forms of capital accumulation²⁵⁹- *Communia* sought to develop a space in which to articulate this critique, but also to allow for the creation of new social relations. If the antagonism upon which this activism is based is deep-seated, there are also very specific triggers that have caused it, particularly the proposed development of high-end private flats on the site of an abandoned warehouse deep in the barrio. For many, these developments are symptomatic of an urbanism concerned more with living space as a site of profit and capitalist speculation, rather than a habitable space constructed for the benefit of the community, and of the complicity of government- at both city and national levels- in these processes of expropriation.

Located in San Lorenzo, a community outside the city's historic limits, but near the industrial areas surrounding the city's main, 'Termini' station, the occupied space drew upon the district's historic working class politics,²⁶⁰ but managed to remain free of any sedimented relations with existing party or other political groupings. If the occupation drew upon the mythology and political tradition of the barrio, it also drew

²⁵⁹ See for example Smith, N., (1987), 'Gentrification and the Rent Gap', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77(3), pp. 462-465.

²⁶⁰ There is a myth- of questionable veracity- that the area was continually in revolt against the Mussolini regime, and actually halted his 'march on Rome'.

on an older and more distant political tradition, the radical theology of the Anabaptist preacher Thomas Müntzer, and the philosophy of mutual aid developed by, among others, the 19th Century Russian anarchist, Peter Kropotkin. As the occupiers stated in a communique released upon the occupation of the property, “*Communia* is a space, created to escape the speculation and degradation that envelops our city, taking a lead from those who have occupied the abandoned theatres; inspired by those who try to self-manage their own factory, from those who have first hand prevented the construction of new hazardous waste incinerators, by those who have occupied their school or faculty to make it accessible to everyone and all. All this from our concrete solidarity with the struggle of citizens ... A space in which to create new tools of "mutual aid "for the reconstruction and the very idea of democracy.”²⁶¹ Although the intervention was local- not attempting to reform the civil code in the fashion of *bene comune*- the action was envisioned in a wider milieu of solidarity, and the emergence of a wider solidarity between different attempts to manufacture the commons in the city. Although the daily life of the occupied space was animated by attempts to provide mutual aid, from providing study space for students, legal and psychological counselling, and cultural events available to all,²⁶² it can also be situated in a wider discursive critique of neoliberalism, and the hollowing out of political space produced by the neoliberal project. As time has gone on, the prefigurative dimensions of the project have become less significant to its praxis, and its ideological critique had become more significant.

By the summer of 2013, the social centre that had been controlled and operated by local people for over a year had been evicted on ‘public health’ grounds,²⁶³ but its ‘spirit’ continued to animate politics in the district. As members of the project suggested, whilst it was possible to evict the physical manifestations of their actions, it was not possible to evict the idea that had animated the project. In addition to local manifestations and acts of resistance, the movement continued to “practice and

²⁶¹ Communique released when *Communia* first went into occupation, extract taken from (<http://ilmegafonoquotidiano.it/news/communia-roma-prove-di-autogestione>), (accessed on: 17.02.2014).

²⁶² Michela Picchi, (2013), ‘I Omnia Sunt Communia’, (film available at: <http://vimeo.com/82835276>), (accessed on: 17.02.2014).

²⁶³ ‘Roma, sgomberato “Communia”. Corteo per le vie di San Lorenzo’, (available online at: <http://tv.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/08/17/roma-sgomberato-communia-corteo-per-vie-di-san-lorenzo/242373/>), (accessed on: 17.02.2014).

develop experiences of employment, repossession, mutualism, recovery and the management of spaces which may formerly have been public or private through antagonistic strategies of reclamation.”²⁶⁴ Since its eviction by the Roman police, *Communia* has continued as an idea, holding conferences to draw together the various forms of activism around the commons in Italy, and developing a journal through which activist-led inquiry can be developed and disseminated. As the project has moved from direct intervention to ideological reformulation, it is easy to interpret the project as a class compositional one. *Communia* now acts as a discursive bridge between different projects of ‘commoning’, inspiring and showing solidarity with the many occupations and projects going on across the Italian peninsula. There has been a tendency within the movement to see the project as something that promotes and sustains a nascent form of class consciousness,²⁶⁵ albeit a class consciousness that is based in the shared experience of inhabiting the commons, rather than the shared alienation of engaging in wage labour. Consistent with the autonomist perspective articulated within the previous chapter, we might understand this activity as fundamentally about ‘class composition’, or the political relationships that emerge through changing patterns of work and the reproduction of labour power.

The occupation of space, and its collective repurposing for the reproduction of different social relations speaks to the way that commons have become a key strategic dimension of the struggle between capital and other forms of life in an urban context. As David Harvey has indicated in *Rebel Cities*, where the key anti-systemic struggles of the contemporary era encounter capitalism, they encounter capitalism as a question of the reproduction and valorisation of capital rather than, as suggested in most Marxist theory, a question primarily concerned with production.²⁶⁶ As the Fordist factory system has broken down, and become less central to the experience of proletarian life in the 21st Century, struggles against capital have moved from the

²⁶⁴ Information taken from the movement’s website, on a page called ‘Reappropriation/Self Management/New Mutualism’, translation by the author, (available at: <http://www.communianet.org/contenuto/riappropriazione-autogestione-nuovo-mutualismo>), (accessed on: 11.10.2013).

²⁶⁵ Lidia Cirillo, (2014), ‘Sulle tracce della classe’, (available online at: <http://www.communianet.org/news/sulle-tracce-della-classe>), (accessed on: 17.02.2014).

²⁶⁶ Harvey, D., (2013), *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, (London, Verso).

sphere of production- that is to say in the factory- to the sphere of circulation.²⁶⁷ The fragmented workforce of the early 21st Century, spatially dispersed- if not necessarily dispersed within the work process- is less effective organising within the workplace, and thus the sphere of reproduction has become the locus of political action. More than this, it is a response to the precarity of the city, as housing (once apparently free from the imperatives of capitalism) has become subject to financial and accumulative imperatives. As a result, questions of social reproduction have become the fundamental questions that these movements answer.

Indeed, in this vein, we can interpret these movements not just as a critique of the shifting contours of property through neoliberal government, but also in terms of the process of class-formation that takes place through the contestation of this transformation in property relations. The voluntarism of this process has been explored elsewhere, but I would like to, briefly, explore the structural dimensions of this phenomenon, through the microcosm provided by the *Lab Puzzle* project in the Tufello district on Rome's northern fringe. The significance of *Lab Puzzle* is that it emerges from the unravelling of the social 'contract' between the people and the state, the people and the city. New political forms emerge in *Lab Puzzle* because the conditions of the reproduction of capitalism- particularly the way that we produce ourselves as proletarian subjects- have been transformed. *Lab Puzzle* responds both to certain forms of 'primitive accumulation', insofar as this term is understood as forms of expropriation used to overcome crises of capitalism, and the way in which individuals' reproduction is affected by the emergence of new forms of accumulation in the city.

Lab Puzzle is another newly formed social centre that has emerged around the issues of housing, education, and immigration among the young and student population of the city. In particular, the actions have had strong connections to the education activist networks that emerged in opposition to the so-called 'Gelmini reforms' of education associated with Law 133. The underlying narrative behind this opposition was the idea that education was being transformed from a universal good to something that was intelligible only through the neoliberal lens of the monetised exchange of

²⁶⁷ Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.

services.²⁶⁸ As the campaign encountered its limits in the Universities and schools, it soon took on other dimensions, seeking intersection between the lives of students and those they lived behind in the poorer barrios of the city. Questions of the reproduction of daily life soon became central to their praxis: educational struggles could no longer be understood in the isolated context of the University as the site in which one receives a classical liberal, or humanist, education, or indeed the neoliberal vision of the University as a place in which one receives technical training that might be mortgaged against the security provided by future income. In part, this involves the group in the vision of democracy articulated by *bene comune*, the democracy of municipalities each producing a local vision of the common good,²⁶⁹ but it has also sought to situate its activism in the context of what we might call ‘the crisis of the class relation’. In particular, it sought to develop resources for precarious students and workers in the barrio. From language lessons for the migrant workers in the neighbourhood, to providing communal housing, *Lab Puzzle* sought to occupy the spaces of human activity where the state has withdrawn the forms of care it formerly provided. Housing becomes politicised, again prefiguratively- attempting to create new, co-operative social relations through co-operative housing projects- but also in a critique of the way that the state has lost its traditional role, and instead acts in the interests of the market, even when this market comes at the expense of the city’s student and precariously employed population. Again, in the same way as *Communia*, much of *Lab Puzzle*’s activity is tied to the critique of property speculation and the way that this is transforming the urban environment, but it differs from *Communia* insofar as its discourse focuses less (although these themes are still present) on questions of local autonomy and direct democracy, and more on the political economy of crisis, and the way that work and the reproduction of labour power have been affected by austerity and the neoliberal restructuring of the state.

One of the theoretical assumptions that underpins the praxis of *Lab Puzzle* is that the political strategies of European anti-austerity movements have not always been

²⁶⁸ Lab Puzzle, ‘2010- Le premesse’, (available at: <http://www.labpuzzle.org/index.php/puzzle/storia/18-puzzle/storia/22-2010-premesse>), (accessed on: 18.02.2014).

²⁶⁹ Lab Puzzle, ‘2011- Un anno intenso’, (available at: <http://www.labpuzzle.org/index.php/puzzle/storia/18-puzzle/storia/23-2011-anno-intenso>), (accessed on: 17.02.2014).

brilliant at inserting themselves into the social context in which they find themselves. The tent encampments that have sprung up in squares and public spaces, from Syntagma Square to Puerta Del Sol, have not always been able to translate the micropolitics of association- the coming together of diverse political forces in a common place- into something that speaks to the ongoing social struggles that exist in late capitalism. *Lab Puzzle* attempts to situate itself in social struggles over the availability of affordable social housing for students and low paid, often transitory, workers in the city. Where once the social-democratic state saw its role as extending to the provision of care to its citizens, and the provision of affordable housing being a considerable part of this care, the restructured neoliberal state has placed housing policy in the hands of a small cadre of private landlords. The housing in which students and low paid workers are forced to live place increasing amounts of money in the pockets of private landlords through the extortionate rent that they are charged, reproducing class relations not as relations between producers and the owners of the means of production, but as relations between proletarians seeking to reproduce their labour power and the owners of the means through which they might reproduce their labour power.

This is not an entirely new suggestion, of course, and has echoes in Marx's writings on humanity as a 'mode of life' in which he speaks of the reproduction of human life as a whole. It also speaks to a particular Marxist current within the most recent literature on 'the urban', which has sought to resuscitate *Capital, Vol. II* to complement, if not at the expense of, the often prioritised *Vol. I*.²⁷⁰ *Capital, Vol. II* suggests that the circulation of capital has a significant impact on the political and social forms observable in the world.²⁷¹ The urban, then, is not simply the aggregate result of numerous individual decisions, but subject to the laws of capital's reproduction.²⁷² The distinct problems of housing and other urban dynamics are political- they are the result of a particular class project- but they also speak to a particular phase of the capital relation in Italy, where the reproduction of capital is increasingly forcing labourers into new forms of self-reproduction. The contradictory

²⁷⁰ See for example David Harvey's recent writings on the city, and his recent re-interpretation of the significance of *Capital, Vol. II*. Harvey, D., (2013), *A Companion to Marx's Capital: Volume 2*, (London, Verso Books).

²⁷¹ Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital: Volume 2*.

²⁷² Merrifield, A., (2014), *The New Urban Question*, (London, Pluto Press).

unity of production and circulation has become central to the new idiomatic understanding of proletarian resistance within contemporary Human Geography literatures, reproduced in the writings of David Harvey,²⁷³ Andy Merrifield,²⁷⁴ or Neil Smith,²⁷⁵ which recognises the fact- often thought to have been first articulated by Henri Lefebvre- that the urban is key to the way that capitalist social relations are reproduced.²⁷⁶ If the urban is key to the way that capitalist social relations are reproduced, the urban is also key to the way that capitalist social relations are contested.

This means that in the practices of social movements such as *Lab Puzzle* and *Communia*, the turn to the urban is a response to the particular form that capitalist social relations take within late capitalism. In an age where immaterial production is becoming hegemonic, speculative finance is dominant, and logistical organization is central to global value chains, the possibility of political intervention into capital appears even more difficult than it ever has been, and interventions into the urban are one of the few ways that 21st Century subjects can hope to carve out meaningful life from the constant flux of life that is determined by capital. However, the particular notion of the urban here is deeply historical, and embedded within various sets of changing social relations, and it has been suggested that this turn to the urban within social movement practice has coincided with the formal abandonment of a certain type of seeing, perceiving, and experiencing capitalist globalisation: the turn to the contradictory unity of production and circulation as the predominant hermeneutic through which political struggle might be understood, is an attempt to “conceive a *theoretical* object that is no longer a *physical* object, and a new way of reclaiming a *nonobject* as a *political* object. How to give form to a reality that is now seemingly formless? And how to recenter oneself on a planet in which urbanization creates a decentered polycentricity?”²⁷⁷ In the practices of these movements, we see an attempt to grasp the contours of capital in an age where it is fragmented and obfuscated by its

²⁷³ See for example Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.

²⁷⁴ Merrifield, A., (2013), *The Politics of Encounter: Urban Theory and Protest Under Planetary Urbanization*, (Athens, University of Georgia Press).

²⁷⁵ Smith, N., (1996), *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, (London, Routledge).

²⁷⁶ Lefebvre, H., (2003), *The Urban Revolution*, R. Bononno (trans.), (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).

²⁷⁷ Merrifield, *The Politics of the Encounter*, p. xv.

complexity.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored points of convergence between the theoretical and practical dimensions of the Italian commons movement and the autonomist framework established in the previous chapter. Although I will offer a more comprehensive assessment of the efficacy of this framework for interpreting commons movements in chapter four, I would like to offer some provisional conclusions about the case here. In particular, I would like to do so by way of offering a summary of the themes that have emerged here, and a broad outline of the way that these movements have conceptualized the relationship between human agency and the structures of capitalism.

- 1) The proximate target of these movements does not appear to be capital *per se*. Rather than capital understood as a more generalized system of social relations through which production is organized in the interests of the valorization of capital, these movements confront acts of accumulation by dispossession. By accumulation by dispossession, I mean capital's tendency to extract absolute surplus value by the appropriation and monetization of goods that already exist within the city. Another area where political action mobilized around the commons has emerged in Rome, is where reconfigurations of state welfare and assistance programmes have meant considerable disruption for the reproduction of life. An example of this is the *Lab Puzzle* project in Tufello, where the withdrawal of housing support for students in Rome resulted in groups of activists politicizing the conditions under which students, migrant workers, and the working classes live. These projects aim at defending living standards in the face of a neoliberal policy portfolio that protects returns on capital over and above living standards and human lives.

As a result of these dynamics, it appears to be the issue of property and consumption rather than production that stands at the forefront of these movements. Rarely, if ever, do these movements come into contact with

labour organisers. Nonetheless, they do seem to have a particular view about what labour is and how it can be used to overcome capitalism. Indeed, the movements seem to have deep prefigurative content,²⁷⁸ by which I mean that the movements appear to be about creating something *here and now*, rather than struggling for some future emancipation of capitalism. In this regard, they seem to rely on a notion of labour that is not directly subsumed by capital: labour, if it were only to operate under its own initiative, is capable of remaking an entirely new world. In this regard, capital appears to be nothing more than the parasitic extraction of that which labour has produced.

- 2) At the same time, if it is property and not production that the movements target, this is not simply a voluntaristic decision on the part of activists. This reflects the conditions under which this action has emerged, and transformations within the productive base of Italian society that have made the factory a less significant part of collective life. It appears that the factory, as a point where workers come together for the collective, technologically-mediated production of commodities in one place is no longer the synthesizing condition of anti-systemic political imaginaries. In part, this reflects sociological transformations within the class-composition of the working class in Rome, where the proportion of people employed in this way has decreased since the heyday of Fordist production. More than this, where employment is centralized and concentrated, the increasingly precarious and fragmented production process has made organization within the workplace harder than it once was.

As well as being material, some of the difficulties with organizing at the point of production are ideological, with the defeat of labour in the political and economic sphere in the 1970s and 1980s damaging the ideological conditions for union organizing in the workplace. This is not to say, however, that organization against capital *tout court*- or even workplace organization itself- has disappeared. Rather, the transformation of the class composition of the workplace, and the mutation of the productive process itself, have produced

²⁷⁸ Day, *Gramsci is Dead*.

forms of political action that take the civic or the circulatory as their starting point. Indeed, in a transformation that Marxist urban theorists such as David Harvey and Andy Merrifield have observed in the United Kingdom and the United States, the sphere of circulation has become more significant to the lives of everyday people than the sphere of production. Even more than this, the weaknesses within the capitalist mode of production do not lie at the point of production, but in the productive process' dependence on values finding realization through circulation. If, as Marx suggested, the capitalist mode of production is a contradictory unity of the production of value and the realization of this value through production, it is through preventing its realization that it is most readily challenged.

- 3) The state is significant to these movements, but largely in a negative sense. The absence, or the withdrawal, of the state is felt within projects such as *Lab Puzzle*, and acts as the condition of possibility of their action. It is only *because* of the state's interventions into ongoing processes of social reproduction that the arts, education, or housing become politicized. At the same time, there is little positive knowledge of the state employed by these social movements. Where it is understood theoretically, it appears to be understood as an elite project, or what Cox & Nilsen call "a social movement from above."²⁷⁹ In this regard, they identify little that is unique within the neoliberal state, or its relationship to capitalism, rather seeing it as a tool that is being used by elite actors in order to pursue a class project.

Much of this is compatible with the conception of autonomist political action articulated in the previous chapter, with social movements operating to attempt to construct commons as social structures within which value-systems other than those of capital predominate. These movements are made possible by two key dynamics: accumulation by dispossession and the withdrawal of the state from certain areas of life. These two conditions of possibility correspond with two of the key autonomist tropes outlined in the previous chapter: capitalism conceived as a conflict between two social forces (constituent power vs. constituted power; the multitude vs. Empire;

²⁷⁹ Cox & Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History*, p.

living labour vs. the dead hand of alienated labour), and the pursuit of a politics that is effectively an exodus from the existing conditions of capitalism. An autonomist analysis tells us much about how and where people struggle against the social forms of capital in contemporary Italy. That the analysis of Italian social movements through autonomist tools proves fruitful, is not particularly surprising, for the movements themselves have employed such tools to orient themselves towards their struggle. The purpose of the next chapter is to ask whether conducting a similar analysis of a movement that is not self-consciously autonomist, should prove as fruitful. Are commons a prominent feature of contemporary social movement practice beyond where they have been self-consciously invoked? By turning to the Occupy movement in the United States, I hope to be able to examine whether autonomist concepts of commons can tell us more about the constitutive problems of anti-capitalist social movements more generally.

Chapter Three: Commons Beyond the Discourse of Commoning, the Case of Occupy Oakland

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it deepens the analysis of contemporary commons movements presented in the previous chapter. Some of the dynamics present in Rome are also present in Oakland. However, there are also significant differences between the two contexts. Some of these differences are in the context of these movements, and the way that they have emerged. However, the most pronounced difference between the two is the rhetorical prominence of ‘commons’ within each. Whilst in Rome, ‘commons’ and the notion of *Bene Comune* are very visible, with all of the specific movements encountered employing its rhetoric to a greater or lesser extent, this cannot be said of Oakland, where the rhetoric of commons is much less prominent. As such, this chapter serves a second purpose, which is to explore whether the analytics of commons outlined in chapter one and applied in chapter two is a useful tool for understanding movements that do not explicitly adopt the rhetorical language of ‘commons’. Although it is not the primary aim of this thesis, this approach means that the chapter also offers something of an alternative perspective on the American *Occupy* movement. Inevitably, in the four years since Americans took to the streets in opposition to the hegemony of Wall Street within U.S. politics, and the American political system’s apparent inability to counterbalance this influence, much ink has been spilt writing about how these movements should be interpreted, and their significance for anti-systemic thinking in the United States. Much of this analysis has focused on the movement itself as a ‘new way of doing politics’. Interpreting this movement through the prism of commons offers a new heuristic through which to understand it.

The Occupy Movement as Constituent Power

It is commonly accepted that the Occupy movement began in September 2011 in New York’s Zuccotti Park, when a number of activists set up camp in the city’s financial district, in opposition to growing wealth inequalities in the United States and the conduct of the nation’s banks in the lead up to the 2007-2009 financial crisis. From its

earliest instantiations, however, was not limited to this square, and the movement was self-consciously global, with organisers citing the *Indignados* protests in Spain and Greece, protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, and even the 2010 British student occupations against University fee rises, as inspiration for the occupations.²⁸⁰ Equally, the occupation of Zuccotti Park spawned similar actions across the world. By the 9th October 2012, more than 600 communities in the United States were under 'occupation', and 2,556 cities in 82 countries were 'occupied' in some form.²⁸¹ In its early days, much was made of the movement's apparent confusion about what it was and what it stood for, as the movement soon became known for its refusal to articulate clear demands, distinguishing itself from many so-called new social movements,²⁸² and earning the opprobrium of many on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Despite attempts by the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*- the magazine can take much credit for inspiring the initial occupation of New York's financial district- to get the movement to organise around the single goal of instituting a so-called 'Robin Hood tax',²⁸³ to this day the movement perhaps remains best known in the popular imagination for this refusal to make concrete demands.

Interestingly, perhaps the most articulate summary of why the movement eschewed demands was developed by Occupy Oakland when they said:

“To the Politicians and the 1%: This occupation is its own demand. Since we don't need permission to claim what is already ours, we do not have a list of demands to give you. There is no specific thing you can do in order to make us 'go away'. And the last thing we want is for you to preserve your power, to reinforce your role as the ruling classes in our society.

“It may not be obvious to you, but the decisions you make daily, as well as this system you are a part of, these things are not working for us. Our goal is bring power

²⁸⁰ Occupy Wall Street website, (available at: <http://occupywallst.org/about/>), (accessed on: 01.03.2013).

²⁸¹ Statistics taken from www.occupytogether.org, (accessed on: 01.03.2013).

²⁸² Pichardo, N.A., (1997), 'New Social Movements: A Critical Review', *Annual Review of Sociology* 23, pp. 411-430.

²⁸³ 'Robin Hood Global March', *Adbusters* 17.10.2011, (available online at: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/robinhood.html>), (accessed on: 01.03.2013).

back where it belongs, with the people, so we can fix what politicians and corporations have screwed up.”²⁸⁴

This suggests a movement oriented less towards concrete, external ‘problems’ than it is towards the structures through which political and economic power are wielded. Political form becomes their central preoccupation. There are many overlaps with populism, a political tradition that has a long and considerable history in the U.S., insofar as it suggests that politics is failing the masses because it structurally excludes the masses from decision-making processes.²⁸⁵ However, from an autonomist perspective, as with *bene comune* in Italy, it is possible to understand Occupy as an exercise in ‘constituent power’, suggesting that what is required is a new constitutional process based on the active engagement of the masses with the political sphere not in terms dictated by political parties, the media, or the state, but in terms dictated by the masses themselves. For some, the tendency to think of a movement in constituent terms, rather than with reference to external political transformation, made the movement’s decline “inevitable.”²⁸⁶

The focus on ‘constituent power’, however, is a trope that has been central to the movement’s reception. It has garnered altogether more positive attention from political theorists and commentators, for example Martin Coward, who understands the movement as the “re-imagination” of Western political culture through the intertwined concepts of democracy, the citizen, and the city.²⁸⁷ Similar positions are articulated by authors as diverse, and from positions as contradictory, as those of Radical Orthodox theologian Adrian Pabst²⁸⁸ and autonomist commentators Michael

²⁸⁴ Available at www.occupyoakland.org (accessed on: 01.03.2013).

²⁸⁵ See for example Laclau, E., (2005), *On Populist Reason*, (London, Verso).

²⁸⁶ See for example Beaumont, P., (2013), ‘Global Protest Grows as Citizens Lose Faith in Politics and the State’, *The Observer* 22.06.2013, (available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/22/urban-protest-changing-global-social-network>), (accessed on: 22.06.2013).

²⁸⁷ Coward, M., (2012), ‘Between us in the city: materiality, subjectivity, and community in the era of global urbanization’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, pp. 468-481.

²⁸⁸ Pabst, A., (2011), ‘The Resurgence of the Civic’, *Possible Futures: A Project of the Social Science Research Council*, 29.11.2011, (available at: <http://www.possible-futures.org/2011/11/29/the-resurgence-of-the-civic/>), (accessed on: 21.05.2013).

Hardt and Antonio Negri.²⁸⁹ In particular, analysis of Occupy as constituent power has been developed by Hardt & Negri in their short monograph on the Occupy movement, *Declaration!*²⁹⁰ In this work, Hardt & Negri return to the theme of constituent power that underpins Negri's earlier work on legal and constitutional theory, suggesting that it "names the democratic forces of social transformation, the means by which humans make their own history."²⁹¹ Although this is a form of radicalism that can exist within any political culture, it is of particular significance in American history.

This notion of 'constituent power', although perhaps not expressed in these terms, has been a significant explanatory trope within commentaries on the movement. These dimensions of the Occupy movement have been explored by David Graeber in his book on the Occupy movement, *The Democracy Project*.²⁹² Graeber talks about the movement in terms of the creation of a democratic culture, a moral and political transformation of individuals and social relations. The disconnect between the politics of Washington and the politics of the movements of 2011 is described thus:

"While the world's financial and political elites skate blindly toward the next 2008-scale crisis, we're continuing to carry out occupations of buildings, farms, foreclosed homes, and workplaces- temporary or permanent- organizing rent strikes, seminars, and debtors' assemblies, and in doing so, laying the groundwork for a genuinely democratic culture, and introducing the skills, habits, and experience that would make an entirely new conception of politics come to life."²⁹³

For Graeber, the constitutive politics of Occupy has the potential to revive a popular revolutionary imagination- an imagination that suggests, in the words of the World Social Forum, that 'another world is possible'- that has been occluded by the

²⁸⁹ Hardt, M., & Negri, A., (2011), 'The Fight for "Real Democracy" at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street', *Foreign Affairs* 11.10.2011.

²⁹⁰ Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*

²⁹¹ Hardt, M., (1999), 'Foreword: Three Keys to Understanding Constituent Power', in Negri, A., *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press), p. vii.

²⁹² Graeber, D., (2013), *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement*, (London, Allen Lane).

²⁹³ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, p. xviii.

hegemonic oligarchy of American politics.²⁹⁴ Much of *The Democracy Project* is concerned with differentiating between the tradition of American Republicanism according to which American ‘democracy’ was founded, and what Graeber considers a more ‘adequate’ democratic culture, built on principles of consensus, local democratic assemblies, and a common attitude of mutuality and sharing.²⁹⁵

These constituent notions also appear in Cynthia Weber’s analysis of the Occupy movement, documented in her ongoing *I Am an American* video project, which suggests that the Occupy movement was populist politics writ large.²⁹⁶ Slogans such as ‘we are the 99%’ went viral, and occupied large amounts of airspace for several weeks, but the movement soon dissipated, and by September 2012, when a number of New York based activists attempted to hold a series of actions on the anniversary of the original occupation of Zuccotti Park, the movement had almost entirely lost momentum. Where Occupy- at least in New York- succeeded, she argues, is in getting across a relatively simple message about the inequalities, hierarchies, and exclusions which make up the contemporary American nation. Where it did not fare so well was in producing a lasting movement which spoke to political projects through which these specific conditions might be ameliorated. Weber’s account- although deeply sympathetic to the concerns of the Occupy movement- finds little of interest in the constituent praxis of the movement, because of its populist rhetoric.

Others academic commentators have developed a far more positive interpretation on these dimensions of the movement’s praxis. Judith Butler for example, sees merit in its constituent praxis, and suggests that rather than populism, ‘we the people’ leads to a new, and fecund, performative ground. For Butler, the Occupy movement was marked by a group of people enacting the constituent phrase of modern politics: "standing here together, making democracy, enacting the phrase, 'We the People'."²⁹⁷ She went on to explore this trope at further length in a lecture given in Venice,

²⁹⁴ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. xvi-xvii.

²⁹⁵ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. 202-203.

²⁹⁶ See for example Weber, C., (2012), ‘Uniting States of Americans: We Are the 99%!’, *Open Democracy* (available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/cynthia-weber/uniting-states-of-americans-we-are-99>), (accessed on: 16.01.2015).

²⁹⁷ Judith Butler at Occupy Wall Street, 23.10.2011, (available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=JVpoOdz1AKQ), (accessed on: 23.06.2013).

suggesting that- contrary to the thoughts of commentators such as Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri- the phrase ‘we the people’ might not be caught completely on one side of the binary between unity and diversity that underpins contemporary discussion of ‘the multitude’ in political thought. Indeed, she suggests that:

“assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment. And when crowds move outside the square, to the side street or the back alley, to the neighborhoods where streets are not yet paved, then something more happens. At such a moment, politics is no longer defined as the exclusive business of public sphere distinct from a private one, but it crosses that line again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighborhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square....”²⁹⁸

Rather than being the foundation of a univocal political articulation, Butler seems to be suggesting that the unity found in the articulation of ‘we the people’ works more as an unworking of the dominant order of bodies and political subjects than it does as the foundation of new unity. We do not need to dig deeply into the canon of Western philosophy to see how this goes against the grain of how most have interpreted the way that ‘we the people’ relates to the conception of law and sovereignty that has become dominant since the early modern period.

For Butler the act of speaking as a people does not elide social conflict, but instead makes this the basis of political practice. In the face of the democratic and republican traditions, which give exalted status to the unified people as the basic ontological feature of politics, Butler suggests that politics begins with disunity, fragmentation, and contestation. This being the case, the performance of ‘we the people’ has more in common with anarchist, prefigurative politics than it does with the foundation of a Hobbesian politics, as “we see quite clearly not only that there is a struggle over what will be public space, but a struggle as well over those basic ways in which we are, as

²⁹⁸ Butler, J., (2011), ‘Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street’, (available at: <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>), (accessed on: 06.03.2013).

bodies, supported in the world – a struggle against disenfranchisement, effacement, and abandonment.”²⁹⁹

So what can this act of constitution become if it is not simply the articulation of a unity-as-people? For Butler, writing on this subject in a volume co-authored with Athena Athanasiou, “the collective assembling of bodies is an exercise of the popular will, and a way of asserting, in bodily form, one of the most basic presuppositions of democracy, namely that political and public institutions are bound to represent the people, and to do so in ways that establish equality as a presupposition of social and political existence.”³⁰⁰ This performance of political equality is prefigurative in as far as “some set of values is being enacted in the form of a collective resistance,”³⁰¹ and as such the performance amounts to a struggle over the values according to which we recognise participation in collective life. This is a theme that is not unfamiliar for autonomist theory, as the notion of value struggles is something addressed by Massimo De Angelis, for whom discussion of political action begins with ruminations on what it means for bodies to come together and re-shape their collective moral encounters.³⁰² If De Angelis’ writings have had a more clearly anti-capitalist focus than Butler’s, both Butler’s and De Angelis are interested in theorizing encounters and the way that these comprise the social body. This is a deeply autonomist way of understanding the political: to talk about encounters and questions of possession is to talk about the conflictual, negotiated composition of a social body, which cannot be reduced to overcoming abstractly defined social relations, and must always involve the problematisation of these divisions as the object of our overcoming.³⁰³ Unlike De Angelis’ more materialistically oriented analysis,³⁰⁴ for Butler, this is largely a question of emotions and affect, or the question of why we grieve, feel, and recognise some ethical relationships, but shy away from recognising other forms of suffering, pain, and subordination. Nonetheless, both authors retain a heavy focus on humanist forms of praxis, suggesting that subjects do not struggle *for* recognition, dignity, or

²⁹⁹ Butler, ‘Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street’.

³⁰⁰ Butler, J. & Athanasiou, A., (2013), *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, (Cambridge, Polity Press), p. 196.

³⁰¹ Butler & Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, p. 197.

³⁰² De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*.

³⁰³ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 238.

³⁰⁴ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 239.

the commons, but instead, the very methods through which subjects struggle are recognition, dignity, and the commons.

These approaches demonstrate that not only does the perspective of constituent power have a valence for the analysis of the Occupy movement, but that it is also already an incipient feature of some academic commentaries on the movement. This dimension of the analysis could be developed further, particularly in teasing out the relationship between conceptual thought about constituent power, the tradition of this type of thought in the United States, and the conceptions held by activists and groups of activists on the ground. However, this is not the focus of this thesis, and so the next section of the chapter will look at how autonomist thought- and autonomist thought more specifically about commons- can illuminate some of the key dimensions of the praxis of the movement in Oakland. Oakland has been chosen as a specific case study over and above the manifold other occupations across the United States, for a number of reasons. The first reason for this is that it is one of the most radical Occupy protests in the U.S., at one point shutting down the entire Oakland port authority for a brief period. In addition, the movement had connections with long-standing cultures of activism in the Bay Area, from the radical anti-racist organization of the 'Black Panthers' to the politically active International Longshore and Warehouse Union. These connections were not simply the *mise en scene* of Occupy Oakland, but made meaningful connections with the type of organization taking place in the city, and fundamentally shaped the types of actions that took place within Occupy Oakland. Finally, it was in Oakland that the Occupy movement most clearly developed practices that lend themselves to analysis through the prism of the autonomist conception of commoning. In order to analyse these practices, I will again begin by highlighting what happened on the ground, and the implications of an autonomist analysis for interpreting it.

Oakland as anomaly? The Occupy movement on the U.S. West Coast

If the general reading of the Occupy movement has been centred on what we know about New York, and the Occupy movement there, then there is a strong and divergent tradition of political activism that has taken place in the Bay Area. In many regards, this gives the lie to the tale that has been told about Occupy: that it is a movement that began in New York and emanated from there, expressing similar concerns and inspiring a similar politics in other cities in the United States. The inspiration of this political activism is diverse: as well as a response to the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York, activism in Oakland was inspired by the occupation of the Wisconsin capitol building in response to repressive anti-union legislation,³⁰⁵ the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, and the re-emergence of student movements in Europe in the form of *Los Indignados* in Spain and Greece.³⁰⁶ Nor indeed, is it possible to offer one simple narrative framing of the events in Oakland. As the protests began to take on a life of their own in Oakland, a number of narratives emerged about them. Initially, most prominent among them was the East coast discourse of ‘occupation’, but soon alternative framings emerged, which led to discussions of the events as ‘Decolonise Oakland’ or the ‘Oakland Commune.’³⁰⁷ The camp encapsulated both a national mood, as well as an international upsurge of popular movements against capitalism, but also cut across local traditions of political activism, including the *Black Panthers*,³⁰⁸ and its traditions of local labour militancy, in particular the activities of America’s most radical Union, the *International Longshore and Warehouse Union*.³⁰⁹ Each of these components contributed to Occupy Oakland’s simultaneously syncretic

³⁰⁵ Crimethinc, (2011), ‘Spread the Chaos from Capitol to Capital’, (available online at: <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2011/03/10/spread-the-chaos-from-capitol-to-capital/>), (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

³⁰⁶ Castañeda, E., (2012), ‘The *Indignados* of Spain: A Precedent to Occupy Wall Street’, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest* 11(3-4), pp. 309-319.

³⁰⁷ Crimethinc, (2013), ‘After the Crest pt. II: The Rise & Fall of the Oakland Commune’, (available online at: <http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/atc-oak.php>), (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

³⁰⁸ For more on the Black Panther party’s history in Oakland, see Searle, B., (1970), *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party*, (New York, Arrow Books).

³⁰⁹ For more on the role of the ILWU in the Occupy Oakland protests, see Conatz, J., (2012), ‘Solidarity Unionism, Occupy, and the moral right of the working class to control the workplace’, www.libcom.org, (available online at: <https://libcom.org/library/solidarity-unionism-occupy-moral-right-working-class-control-workplace>), (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

and radical composition.

This syncretic character is compatible with Oakland's multiple characterisations as the United States' last radical city, a portent of America's post-industrial present, an industrial city built on the remains of a pre-colonial civilisation, and a city where America's racialised past meets its racialised future. Oakland is all of these things, and each of these dimensions play a part in determining the cultures of activism that were drawn together by the 'event' that was 'Occupy Oakland'. If the city is multiple, it is also laced with contradictions: it is both the centre of many long-running and successful social movements, as well as being a city fragmented by racial and class divisions. For example, despite having *soi-disant* 'progressives' and people of colour integrated into every level of the political and administrative institutions of the city at least since the city's first black Mayor, Lionel Wilson- who was elected in 1977- the city has remained profoundly unequal, with brutal regimes of exclusion and bitter racial hierarchies remaining, and in some cases intensifying.³¹⁰ The political movements of Oakland in the 21st Century are born of the structural conditions of the city, the rich tradition of social movements that have taken action in the city and the profound contradictions that have emerged between them.

Oakland has long been seen not as a 'middle class' city- in the classic American sense of the term- but as a truly working class city. The city is primarily industrial, expanding rapidly after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake forced many working class citizens to move across the bay to Oakland, and then experienced a second wave of growth during the 1940s as the city became a hub for shipping and ship building during the Second World War. Demographic pressures on the Californian population meant that these jobs were often filled by immigrants from other parts of the United States. Significant for the contemporary politics of Oakland, the incomers during this period of rapid industrialization were black and ethnic minority citizens, and to this day, the city is comprised 75% of people of colour.³¹¹ As a result, Oakland is home to

³¹⁰ For an excellent history of the city's inequalities, and political attempts to overcome this, see:

Oden, R.S., (2012), *From Blacks to Browns and Beyond: The Struggle for Progressive Politics in Oakland, California, 1966-2011*, (San Diego, Cognella Academic Publishing).

³¹¹ Healy, J., (2012), 'Occupy Oakland: Whose Streets? Our Streets', *Red Pepper* April 2012.

a large, ethnically diverse and class-conscious working class, and has witnessed radical political action from the 1946 General Strike to the *Black Panther Party* set up by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, and the U.S.'s most radical union, the *International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10*. If this working class consciousness is the product of the city's industrialization, understanding the way it is manifest in contemporary politics necessitates an understanding of its relationship to the city's deindustrialization, and the way that the city's social problems have been racialised and spatially policed. The city is characterised by its division into racialised 'ghettos' and clusters of poverty and joblessness, a consequence of the way that mechanisation and automation of the productive process have changed the class-composition of the working class in Oakland, but also of the way that new forms of transport have outmoded the productive base of the city. Indeed, despite its industrial heritage, the city underwent rapid de-industrialisation during the 1970s and 1980s, and it is now a city without enough work for the large, largely immobile population who live there.

As well as bearing the scars of Oakland's spatial organisation, Occupy Oakland is also the result of a temporal crisis, marking a particular point within the history of the capitalist world economy, as particular regimes of accumulation collapsed under the weight of their own contradictions. This is not simply about the dominance of Wall Street over American politics and economics, but an altogether more materialist interpretation of the situation, by which this cycle of accumulation, albeit rooted in speculative finance, dominates the reproduction of life in the interests of the valorization of capital. The politics of finance and debt are not simply immaterial: they have deeply material manifestations in the way that capital circulates. Equally, at least how it plays out in Oakland, capital's crisis does not mark a slowing down of accumulation so much as it signals a transformation in its mode of accumulation. As the initial debt crisis, sparked by the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2007-2008, was taken on by the state, through progressive bank bailouts and 'quantitative easing', new forms of capital accumulation have opened up. This was not simply a return to the status quo, and the underlying assumption of the analysis in this thesis is that "neither the cyclical business downturns nor the upturns, nor a whole series of capitalist counter-measures (local and international), have resolved the underlying problems of the system in such a way as to lay the basis for a renewal of stable

accumulation.”³¹² As David Harvey suggests, capital neither resolves its accumulation problems nor its inherent crisis tendencies; the best it can manage is to move these crises around.³¹³ Although the counter-measures employed by capital towards resuscitating the global economy have been dictated by the imperative of absorbing surplus liquidity, ensuring that capital surplus is invested in goods and services—primarily through financialisation and privatisation—this has not ameliorated the fundamental crisis at the heart of the capitalist economy, a crisis described as ‘secular crisis’.³¹⁴ As Costas Lapavistas and the other contributors to the book *Crisis in the Eurozone* have argued, both the crisis and its effects are the product of, but also the motor driving, the neoliberal restructuring of economies in the global North, as economies are being restructured, and more importantly, labour forces are being recomposed in order to stave off the crisis of profitability currently befalling the global economy.³¹⁵ This is not exactly an unexpected dimension of the current crisis, for as autonomists Peter Bell and Harry Cleaver have suggested, “the central characteristic of the capitalist organization and control of society is the generalized imposition of commodity producing work, and that capital tries to organize the rest of society so that its activities contribute to the reproduction of human life as the capacity to work for capital.”³¹⁶ Nonetheless, the effects of this recomposition of the labour force are very real, affecting the capital-labour relationship both from the perspective of the wage, but also in terms of the way in which the proletariat reproduces itself through access to food and housing. Secular crisis threatens to accentuate that class-antagonism that underlies capitalism as a social system:

“[t]he working class persistently threatens the survival of capitalism both because of its struggles against various aspects of the capitalist form of society and because it tends to drive beyond that social form through its own inventiveness. As opposed to

³¹² Cleaver, H., (1993), ‘Theses on Secular Crisis in Capitalism: The Insurpassability of Class Antagonisms’, (Available at: <https://webspace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/secularcrisis.html>), (Accessed on: 27.05.2013).

³¹³ Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capital*, p. 4.

³¹⁴ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, p. 28.

³¹⁵ Lapavistas, C. et al (2012), *Crisis in the Eurozone*, (London, Verso).

³¹⁶ Bell, P. & Cleaver, H., (2002), ‘Marx’s Theory of Crisis as a Theory of Class Struggle’, *The Commoner* 5, (available online at: <http://www.commoner.org.uk/cleaver05.pdf>), (accessed on: 15.07.2013).

all bourgeois ideologies of social contract, pluralism and democracy, Marxism has shown that working class antagonism derives from capitalism being a social order based on domination, i.e., on the imposition of a set of social rules through which, tendentially, all of life is organized. Class antagonism is thus insurpassable by capitalism within its own order because that antagonism is inseparable from the domination which defines the system.”³¹⁷

The three main ways in which global crisis of the ‘class relation’ is manifested in Oakland are changes to the amount and nature of ‘wage labour’ in the city (including wage rates and the availability of paid employment); ‘austerity’ policies on the part of local and national governments, resulting in the erosion of public services and the biopolitical mechanisms which in the absence of adequate wage levels have been able to provide the material and biopolitical substratum for the reproduction of the working class; and finally the politics of property, embodied in the ‘foreclosure crisis’ that California is currently suffering. The chapter will now go on to look at the way that this was manifest in the practical politics of Occupy Oakland.

Work and the Wage in Contemporary Oakland

Between 2000 and 2010, real median household income in the East Bay (Oakland and its surrounding urban area) declined by -\$7, 267.³¹⁸ In the same period, the area’s poverty rate increased from 9.7% to 11.7%, or 296,611 residents.³¹⁹ This trend suggests that the area’s poorest have not just lost out in relation to the region’s wealthiest, but that they have also lost out in real terms. Whilst the poorest citizens have had their incomes and living conditions squeezed by the recession, the income of the state’s wealthy elite has increased over this same period.³²⁰ In addition to historical disparities between the wealthiest and the poorest Bay Area citizens, the region’s ‘dot com’ boom, and the technology sector that has followed it, has further

³¹⁷ Cleaver, ‘Theses on Secular Crisis in Capitalism’.

³¹⁸ East Bay Alliance for Sustainable Economy, (2012), ‘Report on the state of work in the East Bay and Oakland’, (available online at: <http://workingeastbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/State-of-Work-in-the-East-Bay-and-Oakland-2012.pdf>), (accessed on: 29.04.2013).

³¹⁹ EBASE, ‘Report on the state of work in the East Bay and Oakland’.

³²⁰ EBASE, ‘Report on the state of work in the East Bay and Oakland’.

widened the gap, providing a ‘technology heavy’ industry which is reliant on a small number of highly paid staff.³²¹ The knock-on effect of their prosperity is to drive house prices and rent up, precipitating a forced exodus of the poor from inner cities and contributing to the gentrification of cities in the Bay Area. Although capital’s crisis of speculative mortgage lending reached its apotheosis in 2008, with the government takeover of mortgage lenders *Fannie Mae* and *Freddie Mac*, this has seen little let-up in the steady increase of house prices in the Bay Area.

The disparity between rich and poor in Oakland is deeply racialised and disproportionately affects the youngest members of society. This is particularly true for unemployment rates in the area, which for the whole of California stood at 10.4% in 2012.³²² This is comparatively high compared to national levels of unemployment which, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, stood at 8.1% in 2012. Black men have historically faced unemployment rates that are roughly double those of their white counterparts. Preliminary statistics for 2012 released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that the average unemployment rate for white men in California stands at 10.1% whilst the comparable figure for black men stands at 17.8% and 12.1% for Hispanic men.³²³ Unemployment figures taken at this level of generality detract from the spatial distribution of unemployment and poverty. Within the Bay area, Oakland’s unemployment rate (11.8% in May 2013) is considerably higher than its sister cities of San Francisco (6.0%) and San Jose (7.6%), and as a consequence the social and political issues affecting the cities are very different. Within Oakland itself there are areas of the city with exceptionally high unemployment- particularly East and West Oakland- and other areas which have

³²¹ Bay Area Council Economic Institute and Booz & Company Joint Report, (2012), ‘The Culture of Innovation: What Makes San Francisco Bay Area Companies Different?’, (available online at: <http://www.bayareaconomy.org/media/files/pdf/CultureOfInnovationFullWeb.pdf>), (accessed on: 30.04.2013).

³²² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2012), ‘Preliminary Data on Employment Status by State and Demographic Group’, (available at: <http://www.bls.gov/lau/ptable14full2012.pdf>), (accessed on: 10.06.2013), There are a number of methodological issues with the way that this data is collected which suggests that many people ‘drop off the statistics’, and that the real unemployment figures are considerably higher than this.

³²³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, ‘Preliminary Data on Employment Status by State and Demographic Group.’

relatively low levels of unemployment- particularly the Oakland Hills area. These statistics reflect the ‘ghettoization’ of certain populations which are locked into generations of un- and under-employment, as well as the way in which secular crisis hits the most vulnerable citizens of the city most severely.

The disparity between the income and the power of the wealthiest and the poorest in Oakland is enormous. California is just one of seven states in the U.S. that ranks higher than the national average for all three indicators of income inequality.³²⁴ Although the initial sub-prime mortgage crisis knocked millions from the property portfolios of the wealthiest Californians, the government and the international community’s response to the crisis have stabilised house prices and ensured that the wealthiest residents of the Bay Area have lost very little. By way of contrast, and in addition to the wage depreciation caused by the crash, the politics of property have severely penalised the area’s poorest citizens.

Debt and the Property Crisis in Contemporary Oakland

If wage levels and employment rates have been hit hard in Oakland, some of the cost of the hit taken by household income has been met by individuals taking out loans in order to meet the necessities of household reproduction. Rather than being an anomaly, debt has become something of the *sine qua non* of the precarious working class in the United States.³²⁵ Much of this debt has been taken out to meet the inadequacy of the wage, as personal debt for education, medical fees, and credit card spending are all at record levels,³²⁶ and today more than one in seven Americans is being pursued by some kind of debt collection agency.³²⁷ The externalities of social reproduction, that- in the glory years of enlightened ‘social capitalism’, the 20th Century- were met by adequate wages, and Keynesian social policies, are increasingly

³²⁴ Weinberg, Daniel H., (2011), “U.S. Neighborhood Income Inequality in the 2005-2009 Period,” American Community Survey Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, October, 2011.

³²⁵ See for example:

Schram, S.F., (2013), ‘Occupy Precarity’, *Theory and Event* 16(1).

³²⁶ ‘U.S. Household Debt Increases’, *The Wall Street Journal* 13.05.2014, (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

³²⁷ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, p. xix.

being met by the worker themselves, either through savings, or more commonly through debt. However, if debt to cover a shortfall in wages, or the inadequacies of social security has been significant, perhaps the most serious debt issue throughout the last decade has been that of mortgage debt.

The property crisis, related to the problem of home ownership and the consequences of sub-prime mortgage lending, has had a particularly harsh impact in Oakland. The sub-prime mortgage crisis, widely seen as the cause of the financial crisis of 2008-2009, was driven by the rapid increase in the number of mortgages taken out in the United States which had no chance of being paid back, up to 21% by 2006.³²⁸ Parcelled up and sold as Collateralised Debt Obligations, these instruments became toxic, as the financial sector lost track of whom exactly these debts were owned by, and which banks were exposed to them. The most publicized effect of this was the financial crisis heralded by the collapse of Lehmann Brothers bank, but it also had a significant impact on the economy of America's cities. Most obviously, this impact has manifested itself in a foreclosure crisis, a crisis that has had proportionally greater effect on America's post-industrial cities, and in 2011, Oakland had the second highest rate of housing foreclosure in the country. At its peak in summer 2008, there were almost 350 completed foreclosures in the city in a single month. Although the rate has decreased since then, in the autumn of 2011, at the height of Occupy Oakland's activities, there remained more than 100 foreclosures in the city per month.

³²⁸ Joint Centre for Housing Studies at Harvard University, (2008), *State of the Nation's Housing Report*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press), (available online at: <http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/publications/markets/son2008/son2008.pdf>), (accessed on: 20.06.2013).



*Foreclosures in Oakland 2007-2011.*³²⁹

It is no coincidence that many mortgages sold with little realistic hope of the loan holders paying back their initial debt should have been taken out in the country’s post-industrial cities. Predatory lending and speculation on property were particularly prominent in the poorest areas of American cities, where houses were aggressively used in the mortgage-backed security, credit default swap, and collateralized debt obligation sub-sectors of the financial services industry. The nature of these markets and the absence of regulation meant that many people were given loans they had little to no hope of ever repaying. Once markets crashed- due to the way that these home loans had been parcelled up and traded with little to no idea of which loans were and were not ‘junk’- interest rates rose, and banks (often not the bank with whom the loan was taken out, but other banks which had bought the debt) began to repossess the properties against which these loans were collateralised. Many of these foreclosed upon homes have been purchased by investors, meaning that foreclosure has effectively operated as a mechanism of accumulation as real estate firms buy up foreclosed homes and turn them into rental properties. According to the Urban Strategies Council, a non-profit think tank, “real estate investors have purchased –

³²⁹ Information compiled by subscription service Foreclosure Radar, (available at: <http://www.infoalamedacounty.org/index.php/Research/Housing/Foreclosure/Foreclosures-in-Oakland-2007-through-2011.html>), (accessed on: 10.06.2013).

usually with cash – 42 percent of the 10,508 homes in Oakland that went into foreclosure between January 2007 and October 2011.”³³⁰ This has the effect of taking properties away from individuals and families and turning them into investments for a relatively small cadre of property owners.

Like many social problems within the city, the foreclosure crisis is heavily racialised, with statistics produced by the ‘Center for Responsible Lending’ suggest that the threat of foreclosure disproportionately affects Oakland’s black and Hispanic populations.³³¹ This reflects the way in which foreclosure is an issue predominantly facing those from low income families, clustered in geographically concentrated areas of the city. From this aspect, we can get a sense of how other issues, such as the gentrification of the city, and urban renewal as a mechanism of capital accumulation,³³² are deeply imbricated within the racialised politics of home ownership and foreclosure. Spatially, foreclosures tend to be located within very specific areas of the city; in 2006 for example, 90% of the foreclosures in the city came from 3 of the city’s 12 ‘zip codes’.³³³ It should come as no surprise to those familiar with the racial politics of the United States or the history of Oakland to learn that East Oakland is home to the highest proportion of Oakland’s Black and Hispanic residents.

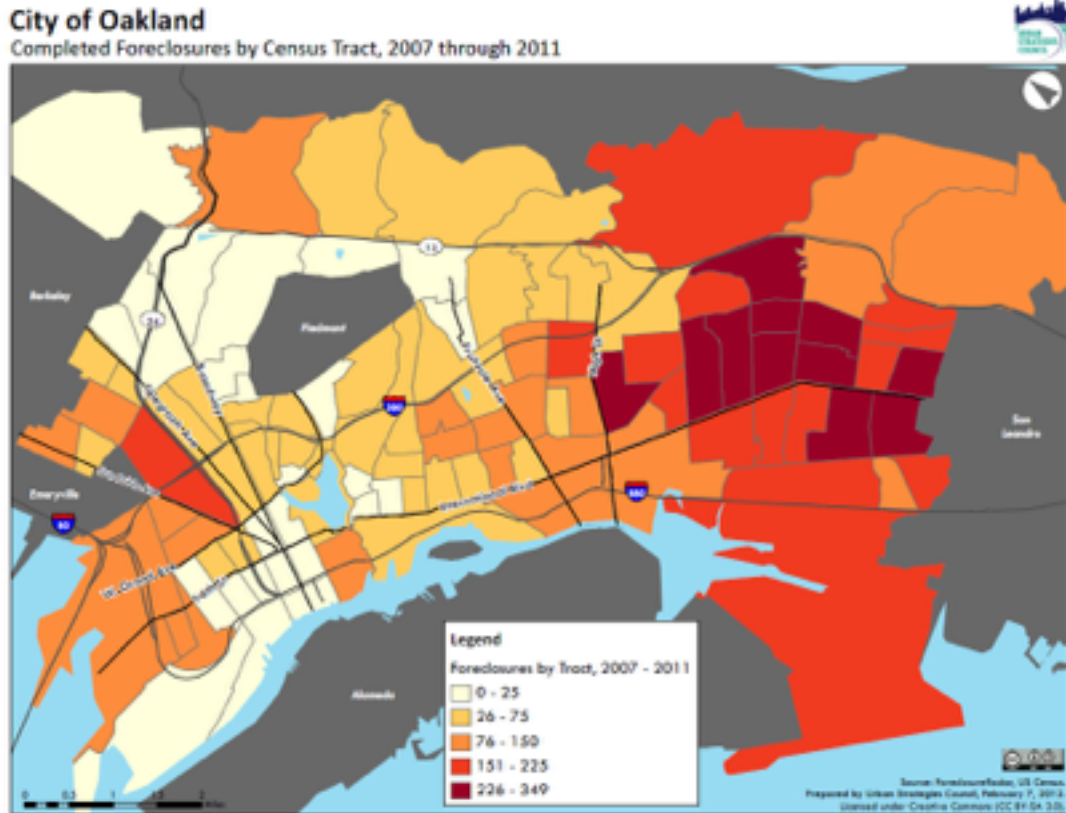
³³⁰ Glantz, A., (2012), ‘Investors Buy Nearly Half of Oakland’s Foreclosed Homes’, *The Bay Citizen* 28.06.2012, (available at: <https://www.baycitizen.org/news/housing/report-investors-buy-nearly-half-homes/>), (accessed on: 10.06.2013).

³³¹ Information available at: <http://www.responsiblelending.org/mortgage-lending/research-analysis/Lost-Ground-2011.pdf>, (accessed on: 10.06.2013).

³³² These issues are addressed eloquently in the case of Baltimore by David Harvey. See for example:

Harvey, D., (2000), *Spaces of Hope*, (Berkeley, University of California Press).

³³³ Housing and Economic Rights Advocates, California Reinvestment Coalition, (2007), ‘Foreclosed: The Burden of Homeownership Loss on City of Oakland and Alameda County Residents’, (available online at: <http://www.calreinvest.org/system/resources/W1siZiIsIjIwMTIvMDYvMTgvMTNmIjRfMzFmIjQ5X0ZvcnVjbG9zZWRFQ1JDX0hFUkFfcmlVwb3J0LnBkZiJdXQ/Foreclosed%20CRC%20HERA%20report.pdf>), (accessed on: 11.06.2013).



Although this map is organised according to census tracts rather than zip codes, it demonstrates the spatial concentration of foreclosure in the predominantly Hispanic and African American areas of East Oakland.³³⁴

Again, foreclosure was a problem that existed in Oakland before the sub-prime mortgage crisis reached its peak. In 2007, for example, a joint product of Housing and Economic Rights Advocates (HERA) and the California Reinvestment Coalition (CRC) suggested that foreclosure rates had reached a record high in the city, and that the issue was in need of serious consideration at the level of public policy.³³⁵ Given the scale of the problem, and the apparent disengagement of the city's authorities, it is little surprise the housing, and the broader politics of property became a burning issue for activists within the city. Given the emphasis on property that underpins neoliberal

³³⁴ Information Compiled by the non-profit Urban Strategies Council, (map available at: <http://www.infoalamedacounty.org/index.php/Research/Housing/Foreclosure/Foreclosures-in-Oakland-2007-through-2011.html>), (accessed on: 11.06.2013).

³³⁵ Housing and Economic Rights Advocates, California Reinvestment Coalition, 'Foreclosed: The Burden of Homeownership Loss on City of Oakland and Alameda County Residents', p. 3.

order and its ideology, it should be no more of a surprise that the aggressive defence of the city's dominant property order should have become such a central dimension of the Police Department and City Hall's response to the Occupy movement's activities in Oakland.

Occupy Oakland and its Origins in California Student Occupations

Occupation is an old political strategy, and one that has a long association with left wing politics. It has a historical connection to factory struggles, and student occupations of lecture theatres, classrooms and faculties.³³⁶ The significance of occupation within political thought has often been lost in recent discussions, and it is my contention in this chapter that analyzing the occupations of 2011 through the prism of commons helps to tease out this significance. In particular, the occupation is significant because it brings the economic and political spheres into contact,³³⁷ foregrounding questions of self-organization, subsistence, and social reproduction. The occupation of a particular square, or a particular city can be the basis of a more concrete programme of political transformation.

One of the key influences for the Occupy movement in Oakland, was the occupation of universities and colleges in the United States in the autumn of 2009. If commenators such as Karl Korsch have suggested that the significance of classical occupations lies in the power of workers' councils to organise production differently, according to principles of mutuality and equality, the student protests of 2009 operate according to a rather different political logic. Their actions do not attempt to organise material production in another way, so much as they have sought to make a particular space ungovernable, and turn it to new ends. This is sometimes used as leverage, in order to convince a University or academic institution to change its policies, and at

³³⁶ Ness, I. & Azzellini, D., (2011), 'Introduction' in Ness, I. & Azzellini, D. (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, (Chicago, Haymarket), p. 6.

³³⁷ Karl Korsch had a lot to say about this subject at the end of World War I. See for example: Korsch, K., (1919), 'What is Socialization? A Program of Practical Socialism', available in *New German Critique* 6 (Autumn 1975), pp. 60-81. Korsch, K., (1929), 'Revolutionary Commune', *Die Aktion* 19 (available at: www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1929/commune.htm), (accessed on: 21.05.2013).

other times it is a fragile experiment in autonomy and self-management. In the United States, a wave of student occupations preceded the ‘Occupy movement’, when in December 2008, students at the *New School for Social Research* occupied their college to protest the University administration’s investments in Israel, whilst in September 2009, students across the University of California occupied various colleges of the University in opposition to a 32% fee hike designed to solve the University’s budget crisis. The occupation of Universities was not merely instrumental: a lot of material was written by the occupiers of 2008 and 2009 about the role of the University occupation in wider struggles against neoliberal capitalism, and the University’s apparent function within wider processes of social reproduction.

Many of the texts that the students wrote about the occupations suggest that one of the key tactics was about ‘taking buildings out of the regime of property’, and as such taking its occupants out of their relationship of subordination to the University as an institution governed by financial imperatives, and as an attempt to abstract oneself from the social relations which are produced and maintained by the University.³³⁸ In this way, the occupation of the University served to both negate the dominant social relations reproduced by the University, and experiment with the development of new value practices and performances. For these students, it is a material intervention into the time and space of the class relation, and an attempt to subtract oneself from these relationships of domination. The students who occupied UC Berkeley in 2009 suggest that “[to occupy] is therefore to subtract ourselves, as much as possible, from the protocols and rules and property relations which govern us, which determine who goes where, what, and how. To close it down means to open it up- to annul its administration by a cruel and indifferent set of powers, in order that those of us inside (and those who join us) can determine, freely and of our own volition, how and for whom it is to be used.”³³⁹

If the University is increasingly being understood as a place where young people

³³⁸ See for example Calder Williams, E., (2010), ‘Painting the Glass House Black’, *Mute Magazine* (available online at: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/painting-glass-house-black>), (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

³³⁹ ‘Anti-Capital Projects Questions and Answers: UC Berkeley’, *After the Fall*, p. 19. (Available at: <http://issuu.com/afterthefall/docs/communiques>), (accessed on: 06.06.13).

receive training to enter the neoliberal workplace, these activists attempted to use the University as a space that can be used to develop countervailing logics. If it can be used to prepare bodies and subjects for the workplace, it can also be used to develop capacities to resist the neoliberal economy. These capacities are embodied in the subjects of the occupation, and in the experiences left behind in written form which were accessible not only by those who were involved in the action, but all over the world. Indeed, some of the occupiers of UC Santa Cruz suggest that “while an occupation within the university may be ephemeral, the traces left from an occupation are embedded in the bodies that travelled the terrain of such an autonomous space and can be deployed within the greater social field once these bodies exit the university. Since the university is this juncture of transition, it is fertile ground for disseminating the tactic of occupation and generating the kind of social fabric that can counter the fabric of capital.”³⁴⁰ It is no surprise that a number of participants in the occupation of Oakland previously took part in the student occupations of California and beyond, taking tactics, experience, and inspiration and bringing them to the streets of Oakland.³⁴¹

The Occupation of Oakland

Responding to the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York, Oakland’s Frank H. Ogawa plaza was occupied on 11th October 2011. Frank Ogawa plaza- the initial site of the Occupy Oakland encampment- is the closest thing to an agora the city of Oakland has. It is a 15,000m² public area in the heart of downtown Oakland, located where San Pablo Avenue meets 14th Street and Broadway. The area is surrounded by office buildings, a shopping mall, and City Hall. The plaza comprises of two main areas, the ‘arena’, which is a semi-circular set of steps facing the City Hall, and the ‘commons’, a large area of grass with a single Coast Live Oak in the centre.³⁴² The

³⁴⁰ ‘Occupy Everything: A Roundtable on US Student Occupations’, *Upping the Anti*, (available at: <http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/10-occupy-everything-a-roundtable-on-us-student-occupations/>), (accessed on: 07.06.2013).

³⁴¹ Similarities include naming the Business Building at San Francisco State University ‘Oscar Grant Memorial Hall’.

Calder Williams, ‘Painting the Glass House Black’.

³⁴² This information is taken from the Wikipedia entry for the plaza. I have been able to verify this elsewhere, but I think that the distinction between the political arena and the

tree is clearly symbolic, given that the Coast Live Oak is the symbol of the city. But what of the symbolism of the whole square? Around the civic symbol of Oakland, there are two other symbols, symbols of the two constituent components of the city: the *oikos* and the *polis*.

Significantly, the *oikos* and the *polis* correspond to the two dominant features of Occupy Oakland: the first of which is the General Assembly and the second of which is actions which actualise forms of ‘commons’. In this section of the chapter, I argue that Occupy Oakland is, as the academic interpretations of the Occupy movement discussed at the beginning of this chapter suggest, an exercise in producing a polis, but also- and this is something often missed by that academic literature- an exercise in ‘commoning’. As such, Occupy Oakland was an attempt by activists to both give meaning to the idea that the city is a *polis*, or a political space, but that this space is neither useful nor possible without forms of action which subvert the dominant property relations, exclusions, and inequalities of the city. The *polis* and the *oikos* intersect politically, and rely upon one another for their mutual efficacy. Without the *oikos*, the *polis* is not rooted in such a way that challenges the value practices, wage relations, and exclusions that mark life in the neoliberal city, but without the *polis*, individual acts of social deconstruction, reproduction, and dissent are mere alternativisms, unable to have traction on the reproduction on the whole city, and merely offering temporary moments of autonomy from the dominant logics of the wage, the secular crisis, and state power.

Indeed, it is at the intersection of the camp and the General Assembly where the political dimension of Occupy Oakland lies. Occupy as a political force must be understood in relation to *both* of its main practices: the development of horizontal, democratic practices of organisation; and the development of new forms of care and values beyond the commodity form. In this way, Occupy Oakland cannot be understood simply as an exercise in populist politics, or an attempt to return to, or reactualise the absent foundation of the body politic. The Occupy Oakland General

‘commons’ is a nice metaphor for the two constituent components of the camp. The Coast Live Oak is a tree native to California, and the civic symbol of Oakland. (available online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_H._Ogawa_Plaza#cite_note-3), (accessed on: 09.05.2013).

Assembly was not just a constituent assembly of the people, it was also a way of bringing together the multifarious forms of activism and resistance in the city, giving them momentum and allowing new forms of co-operation and affinity to emerge between activists. By bringing people together and giving them common purpose, it allowed new capacities and possibilities to emerge, making it possible for them to work out collectively both what is possible and what is desirable.

The camp, therefore, earned the paradoxical status of being both a space which anyone can enter, and a set of practices, including the arrangement of property, social co-operation, and political decision which was profoundly subversive, challenging the right of the city's legal authorities to maintain the city's dominant property order. Anyone, so long as they were not law enforcement officials, was welcome at the camp.³⁴³ As Jaime Omar Yassin, a prominent organiser at the camp suggested,

³⁴³ The camp refused numerous attempts from the city authorities to make contact with the camp. See for example this video message by Jean Quan in the aftermath of the October eviction and the injury caused to Scott Olsen. Jean Quan had attempted to speak at the Occupy General Assembly after the violent eviction of the camp, but she was not permitted to do so. Instead, she released this video statement. The quiet measure of the prepared statement is contrasted to the ebullient and joyous engagements quite clearly taking place outside here office. (available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xT2OO1Y_o), (accessed on: 16.05.2013).

Not allowing the police present inside the camp meant that the camp found it easier to deal with the incursion of police informants, or attempts from the police to control actions that take place in the camp. This is a strategy that has been used repeatedly to suppress activist movements in the United States. However, the absence of police also presented certain challenges: in the first instance, this ensured that relations between the police and the camp hardened; individual acts of theft, assault, rape, and even murder were reported in the camp (whether this was any more common than the usual incidence of these acts in the city of Oakland is a matter for debate), which were dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Occasionally, in the case of the most serious crimes, this meant negotiating with the police, but for the most part it meant attempting to find creative solutions to social problems within the camp. Some, including Jamie Omar Yassin, have suggested that despite the prevalence of these issues, there is a sense in which having to deal with these issues was an essential part of the political space of the camp: "Those who had never considered their interpersonal relationships as being products of political paradigms were forced to do some soul searching about how to deal with the mildly and radically problematic among them—as well as mental illness, class antagonisms, sexism, racism and just about every other societal fault that people are prevented from experiencing at levels of crisis by a reliance on police." Perhaps these events then, rather than simply being problems to be eradicated or elided by the institution of social order, also served as opportunities through which social praxis, experience, and politics could be re-assessed. This lack of foundation to social experience, and life lived in the absence of any law beyond that which is practiced in the General Assembly perhaps forced many

“[f]rom the evening of October 10, the camp at Frank Ogawa Plaza/Oscar Grant Plaza was open to all who wanted to join. Donated tents assured that the homeless and poor had an equal shot as their camping aficionado counterparts up the class chain to occupy.”³⁴⁴ The collective experience of living together, and making political decisions in conjunction with the administrative and social task of organizing an encampment was central to the experience of the Occupy movement, and the collective identity it created. Whereas some people were long-term residents of the encampment, others attended General Assembly meetings after work or study, with still others choosing to get involved with the minutiae of the various working groups, but living offsite and avoiding the procedure and tension of the GA.

The camp was a porous, open space, and one that accommodated both long-term residents and visitors, as well as local citizens who visited the camp around other activities such as their education, employment, and other roles. The strength of the Oakland camp- over and above many of the other occupy camps- emerged from its capacity to bring together middle class (predominantly white) activists with those from the poor West of the city.³⁴⁵ Although by no means everyone felt comfortable with the occupation- one only needs to recall the media’s reaction to Occupy Oakland to see this- those who actually engaged with the camp tend to refer to its sense of openness and community in glowing terms. The camp operated as a ‘heterotopic’ space of encounter where individuals from many races, places, classes, and experiences could encounter each other politically. As Yassin goes on to suggest, “No observer who’d encountered the camp could leave without feeling as if they’d just experienced something exceptional and unique.”³⁴⁶

But much of this account lends itself to the description of political action that has

to reconsider their own subjectivities and the way that this related to their social relations against the backdrop posed by their own precarious experiment in self-organisation.

³⁴⁴ Yassin, J.O., (2011), ‘Boilerplate End of Year Piece: The Four Factors that Made Occupy Oakland the Occupy Game Changer’, *A Year in the Life of Occupy Oakland*, 29.12.2011, (available at: <http://hyphyoo.wordpress.com/2011/12/29/boilerplate-end-of-year-piece-the-five-factors-that-made-occupy-oakland-the-occupy-game-changer/>), (Accessed on: 16.05.2013).

³⁴⁵ Rust Bunny Collective, (2012), ‘Under the Riot Gear’, *SIC: International Journal of Communitisation* 2, (available online at: <http://www.sicjournal.org/en/under-the-riot-gear/>), (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

³⁴⁶ Yassin, ‘Boilerplate End of Year Piece’.

been produced within existing accounts of the Occupy movement. What does an autonomist account of the commons add to this? I think it shifts the focus from the notion of ‘encounter’ within the camp and puts issues of biopolitical reproduction centre stage. The question of social reproduction was certainly central to the way that the people of Oakland engaged with the camp: “[i]f people came to the camp at Oscar Grant Plaza, it was first and foremost for what it could offer them, i.e. food, shelter, security from the police and the chance for social interaction.”³⁴⁷ Almost immediately, Occupy Oakland began cooking its own food with a steady supply of food given to the camp by supporters and activists from the wider Bay Area. Cooks, servers, and washers-up varied from day-to-day, with the type of food, how it was cooked and how the cooking was organised varying from day-to-day depending upon who was around, and available to cook. At no point did a division-of-labour become staid or ossified, and those who wanted to cook- or wash up- vastly outnumbered the amount of people required to feed the camp. But the significance of the Occupy kitchen was wider than simply its organisational dimensions. Food and shelter became key aspects of the camp. In this way, social problems caused by the housing crisis, chronic poverty and the absence of an adequate welfare system were displaced to the camp, simply because the camp was a space in which care was given. ‘Hoovervilles’ previously located in other parts of the city- and often subject to closure by the city’s law enforcement forces- relocated to the Occupy Oakland encampment, bringing with them many social ‘problems’ caused by extreme poverty, including: mental illness; alcoholism; internal rivalries,³⁴⁸ social problems which were at times accused of causing a ‘dilution’ of the political issues around which the movement began. On the contrary, rather than diluting political issues, the absence of care for the ‘surplus population’ in Oakland *is* one of the political issues. As one homeless man who camped with the Oakland occupiers suggested, it was the state, and the city’s, refusal to help their citizens that drove people like him to the camp, “I needed help, man, and where did I go? I went to my local Occupation. Because my city services didn’t help me. I been here one day, these kids give me a place to stay! And the fucking cops are the ones doing shit to us! I get arrested! And I’m a good

³⁴⁷ Rust Bunny Collective, ‘Under the Riot Gear’.

³⁴⁸ Newman, S., (2011), ‘Safer Spaces of Decolonize/Occupy Oakland: Some Reflections on Mental Health and Anti-Oppression Work in Revolutionary Times’, *Journal for Social Action Counseling and Psychology* 3(2)pp. 138-141.

guy!"³⁴⁹ It is precisely a crisis of traditional forms of care that makes the interventions of the Occupiers necessary.

The way in which the camp interacted with the city of Oakland has often been cited as one of the group's strengths. As it took on social functions that the state had ceded (or never possessed) in Oakland, the camp generally maintained very good relations with the rest of the city. This dynamic- an openness based on care such as food and shelter- was to the benefit of the camp. As Jamie Omar Yassin suggests, "[T]he effect that this [taking on other functions, such as feeding people] had on the camp and surrounding community is hard to exaggerate. Over the next weeks, dozens, perhaps hundreds of people who never slept at the camp, and may never have had any interaction with it whatsoever, were invited to enjoy a [often] delicious meal and share a conversation with an eclectic mix of the city's politicizing, political and apolitical at all hours of the day and night. The sense of entering a new phase of social and political development-not seen, if ever, for decades-was palpable and intoxicating."³⁵⁰

If relations within the camp were generally harmonious, relations with city authorities were not necessarily as peaceful. In part, this is because anti-police rhetoric was prominent, with the camp re-naming Frank Ogawa plaza 'Oscar Grant Plaza' after a young black man killed at Fruitvale station in Oakland in 2009. Grant, footage recorded by a witness and subsequently posted on Youtube confirmed, was unarmed and being pinned down by several police officers when he was shot. His killer was charged with, and later convicted of, involuntary manslaughter. The failure to convict his killer of murder caused 'race riots' in the city in the summer of 2010, a tension that was never resolved. This anti-police rhetoric, combined with the *a-nomie* of Oscar Grant plaza,³⁵¹ was anathema to the Oakland police. The city authorities' reaction to Occupy Oakland reflects a deep confusion about how to react to the occupiers and their attempts to become autonomous from law. Throughout the

³⁴⁹ Binelli, M., (2012), "Doing What's Right, Not What's Legal: Boots Riley on Occupy Oakland", in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 30.01.2012 (available at: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/national-affairs/doing-whats-right-not-whats-legal-boots-riley-on-occupy-oakland-20120130#ixzz2TIKRDeb5>), (Accessed on: 12.05.2013).

³⁵⁰ Yassin, 'Boilerplate End of Year Piece'.

³⁵¹ For more on the concept of anomie and its relation to social movements, see: Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*, p. 99.

autumn of 2011 and the spring of 2012, successive attempts by activists to ‘take’ and ‘common’ the centre of Oakland were met with resistance by police, who repeatedly raided and evicted the Downtown site (particularly on October 25th 2011, and November 14th 2011), and blocked later attempts by activists to Occupy the abandoned Kaiser Center (on January 28th 2012). At various points, the city’s mayor, Democrat Jean Quan expressed support for the occupiers, but simultaneously authorised police raids on the camp. This was the catalyst for the violent police reaction to the Occupation, including the famous eviction in which Iraq war veteran Scott Olsen was hospitalised after being shot in the head with a beanbag round. This, however, is a topic which has been chewed over many times,³⁵² and although the violence of the confrontations over space and the commons is interesting, there is little that I can add to this already rich discussion. By way of contrast, I would like to briefly examine the concept of *anomie* from the perspective of the occupiers themselves.

The weakening of the normative force of law explains the emergence of a commune that disregarded the legal structures in place in Oakland. On the one hand, this reflects the attempt to construct an alternative system of social administration, but on the other, it also signifies the orientation of the occupation towards the state. The referent object of the actions become overdetermined, as the state’s ‘abandonment’ of citizens to unemployment becomes equivalent to Oakland Police Department’s role in killing Oscar Grant, or the city’s role in pursuing policies that promote aggressive neoliberal gentrification. Each of these equivalent grievances makes a case for ‘not being governed like that’, and the volume and strength of these claims soon make a case for

³⁵² Epstein, B., (2012), ‘Occupy Oakland: The Question of Violence’, *Socialist Register*.

Hedges, C., (2012), ‘The Cancer in Occupy’, (available online at:

<http://www.occupyqueens.net/wp-content/uploads/group-documents/30/1329873031-TheCancerinOccupy.pdf>), (accessed on: 11.04.2013).

King, M., (2013, forthcoming), ‘Disruption is Not Permitted: The Policing and Social Control of Occupy Oakland’, *Critical Criminology*, DOI: 10.1007/s10612-013-9198-z

Roberts, A., (2012), ‘Why the Occupy Movement Failed’, *Public Administration Review* pp. 754-762.

Wright, A.L., (2012), ‘Counterpublic Protest and the Purpose of Occupy: Reframing the Discourse of Occupy Wall Street’, *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 2(2), pp. 138-146.

Yangfang, T., (2012), ‘A Review of the Occupy Wall Street Movement and its Global Influence’, *International Critical Thought* 2(2).

not being governed at all.³⁵³ As such, and although the vast majority of the actions were peaceful, the ‘strategy of refusal’ practiced by the Oakland insurrection is deeply disconcerting for sovereign power. Occupy Oakland came to be known for being one of the more radical occupations, and one of the reasons for this was the violent clashes between police and protestors, culminating in the shooting by police of Iraq war veteran, Scott Olsen.³⁵⁴ Black Block tactics were adopted by only a few members of the occupation, however, and the camp faced police repression began long before Black Block tactics were ever put to use. Much of the post-occupation discourse has viewed police violence as a *response* to Black Block tactics, but considering the periodization of these events, it seems that there was something about the camp itself that the police and the city authorities were deeply uncomfortable about before this. Indeed, this is all the more reason for our analysis to look at the dynamics within the camp.

Nonetheless, it is deceptive to suggest that the encounter with the police was the most significant part of the movement in Oakland. For *Rust Bunny Collective*, this dynamic is significant because it demonstrates the ‘becoming autonomous’ of social reproduction in the hands of the proletariat itself: “[u]ltimately, for most the memories of the Oakland Commune are more about gigantic kitchens, huge general assemblies, crowds, tensions between different parts of the camp, concrete questions such as how to ‘treat a wound’ or how to ‘bring toilets’, rats, fights, brawls and dances than pitched battles against the police. The Oakland Commune, in that respect, was a turning point: the space of the struggle was no longer restricted to the face to face struggle against the police, but leapt to the face to face encounter with the reproduction of the proletariat.”³⁵⁵ If the ‘arena’ in Oscar Grant Plaza became the *polis* of the ‘liberated’ city, the ‘commons’ were in many ways more interesting. The commons, previously a lawn in the city centre, was turned into spaces where social

³⁵³ There are clear parallels between these processes and those described by John Holloway in Mexico and elsewhere:
Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*,
Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*.

³⁵⁴ Democracy Now!, ‘Scott Olsen, U.S. Vet Nearly Killed by Police Beanbag at Occupy Oakland, Settles Lawsuit with City’, 21.03.2015, (available online at: http://www.democracynow.org/2014/3/21/scott_olsen_us_vet_nearly_killed), (accessed on: 22.03.2015).

³⁵⁵ Rust Bunny Collective, ‘Under the Riot Gear’.

practices prevailed that were based on the non-commodified reproduction of life. The ‘commons’ was transformed into a space that prefigured an alternative Oakland based not on relations of capitalist equivalence, but on those of solidarity, co-operation, and *commoning*. Observing another occupation, in Zuccotti Park NY, McKenzie Wark suggested that these actions, far from being directed at government, policy makers, or Wall Street, were about a “living experiment in *communism*.”³⁵⁶ Far from being a politics based in concern about the excesses of life at the top of American social hierarchy, the politics of the Occupy movement seems more concerned with the way that the most vulnerable sustain themselves. Indeed, what the Oakland Commune seemed to confirm is that struggles against capital take place in the sphere of reproduction rather than that of production. Most of Occupy Oakland’s activities, from mutual aid in Oscar Grant plaza, and subsequent activities such as the occupation of a farm in Berkeley, to the provision of first aid training for the treatment of knife and gunshot wounds, the occupation of an abandoned library in East Oakland, and the occupation of a Downtown building, have all had more to do with reproduction than they have had to do with production. The absence of organization at the point of production- in factories, and other workplaces- is a significant feature of the contemporary cycle of struggles.

The mutual dependence of the reproduction of labour-power and the reproduction of capital is central to the strategies of social movements that attempt to produce forms of commons. In challenging the way in which humans reproduce themselves as labour-power through the production of the commons, the commons also challenge the reproduction of capital. In the first instance, this takes place through the satisfaction of needs directly, rather than through a system mediated by the value form and the valorisation of capital through the production of surplus value.³⁵⁷ This attack is facilitated by the fact that these relations are breaking down due to the secular crisis. The fact that a surplus population has been created which is not necessary for the reproduction of capital means that many people are already beginning to fall outside of this class relation. The strategies that the movements have

³⁵⁶ Wark, M., (2011), ‘This Shit is Fucked Up & Bullshit’, *Theory & Event* 14(4).

³⁵⁷ Astarian, B., (2010), ‘Crisis activity and communisation’, *Hic Salta- Communisation*, (available online at: <http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/english/crisis-activity-and-communisation#I.1>), (accessed on: 17.01.2015).

adopted have attempted to create equivalence between those in work and those outside of work by focusing around taking workers and non-workers alike out of the conditions that constitute them as proletarians.

The Occupy Movement and the Oakland Port Strike

Oakland's protest movement was only initially focused on the reproduction of life in Oscar Grant Plaza. After its eviction from the site by Oakland City Police, the camp adopted different tactics and developed a new focus. In conjunction with the International Longshoremen and Warehouses Union, Occupy Oakland was successful in shutting down the port of Oakland on 2nd November 2011. Occupy Oakland had initially called for a General Strike in response to the violent eviction of their camp, and particularly the shooting of Scott Olsen by the Oakland police. Reports in the local media claimed that despite the refusal of official Union bureaucracy to participate in the strike, the strike was orchestrated by Occupiers and numerous branch members of the ILWU. On the afternoon of November 2nd, Occupiers- who had spent the morning at rallies near 14th and Broadway at the heart of the city- marched on the port. While official police sources estimated the number of marchers at 7,000, attendees suggested that there may have been between 20,000 and 100,000 people who descended on the port. The tactics adopted by the protesters were to create a blockade around the port in order to prevent lorries from entering or exiting.³⁵⁸ In total, this action has been estimated to have cost The Port of Oakland more than \$4m.³⁵⁹ In part, this action was an attempt to demonstrate class power in the face of police violence, and send a message to city authorities that they were to be taken seriously. It is interesting, then, that it is only at this point that the protesters disrupt the valorisation of capital. Indeed, it is not the foremost aspiration of these activists to adopt a strategy that places the disruption of capital at its heart. Rather, the first instincts of the protesters appeared to be to engage in the activity of becoming

³⁵⁸ Zennie, A., (2011), 'Occupy Oakland Strike Draws 100,000; Violence Caused By 100', *San Francisco Chronicle*, (article available online at: <http://blog.sfgate.com/abraham/2011/11/03/occupy-oakland-strike-draws-100000-violence-caused-by-100/>), (accessed on: 23.04.2013).

³⁵⁹ 'Occupy Oakland Throng Closes Down Port', *San Francisco Chronicle* 02.11.2011, (available online at: <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Occupy-Oakland-throng-closes-down-port-2324685.php>), (accessed on: 23.04.2013).

autonomous from capital, producing and reinforcing structures of social organization that are not dependent upon capital. It was only when these structures were themselves threatened, that attempts to disrupt the valorization of capital were explored. Again, an equivalence appears in their rhetoric about the property of the state and the property of private capital: the actions of the state justify attacks on private capital, in much the same way that the excesses of capital within the contemporary world system appear to be used as justification for abandoning structures of government, both local and national.

In Oakland, capital appears not in its direct form, as something that controls the work process, and to which one sells labour power in exchange for a wage. Rather, capital appears indirectly. It appears as a shadowy social force that throws families out of their homes, makes workers destitute, and- in league with the city's political class- engages in the management of the *polis*. Shorn of their traditional reference points, the strong factory unions, the working class of Oakland are faced with the task of having to try to make intelligible a social force that while very present in their lives, and the impact of which can be seen everywhere, constantly recedes from view. Not faced by a social force that they can clearly confront, and deeply disillusioned with the existing structures of government, where- at local and national level- they perceive that these structures have been permeated by the influence of capital, they proceed to withdraw from the world created by capital, attempting to establish an entirely new system of social reproduction. Social conflict emerges not because the movement has sought it out, attempting to directly contest capital's acquisitional tendencies, but because the withdrawal from its embrace threatened both capital's control over the city, and also the rationalities of government by which the city is run.

This turn to the disruption of the capital relation through blockade was matched by the attempt to 'reclaim' spaces and infrastructure abandoned by capital and public administration. Inspired and emboldened by the success of the Port Blockades, members of Occupy Oakland began attempts to occupy various buildings in the city for the purposes of experimenting in ways of living beyond the value form and the capital relation. On January 28th 2012, members of Occupy Oakland planned a so-called 'move-in day' to take over a vacant building adjacent to Lake Merritt and turn it into a social centre. The Kaiser Convention Centre on the shores of Lake Merritt

had long been empty, and subject to continued debate about its long-term use. Formerly known as Oakland auditorium, the Kaiser Center had been built as a public arena in 1914, closed due to the prohibitive cost of repairs in 2006, and sold to a development agency in 2011. As such, the occupation of the Kaiser Center had both pragmatic and symbolic value: as an empty building in the heart of town, it offered an excellent place to base activities away from the elements and police repression of Oscar Grant Plaza, as well as speaking to the ongoing issue surrounding the redevelopment of the city. It raised questions about in whose interests, and with whose agency, the city is being redeveloped, as well as highlighting the ways in which public assets were being sold off for private gain. Moreover, in the imaginary of the activists, the Kaiser Center was symbolic of how deeply imbricated the world of private finance was with the rationality of the city's government. Reclaiming the building- not in the name of the public that had abrogated its claim to it, but in the name of a common- was an attempted act of commoning, reclaiming land and space formerly held in public ownership in communal hands.



A flier distributed in the city advertising Occupy Oakland's move-in day.

The attempt to occupy the Kaiser Center was met with baton charges and serried

ranks of riot shields as, upon arriving at the Kaiser Center, activists discovered that the Oakland Police were waiting for them. Despite repeated attempts to gain entry into the building, their efforts were repelled and before long the attempted intruders were kettled and arrested. To this day, activists in Oakland discuss whether or not the police were ‘tipped off’ about the precise location of their action by informants. Irrespective of this, the message the police sent out was clear: public space, whether indoors or outdoors, was not to be used for practices of commoning. The attempt to ‘move-in’ to the Kaiser Center was perhaps the last hurrah of Occupy Oakland’s mass actions, as never again would it manage to challenge the property order on such a mass scale. For some people, the attempt to occupy the Kaiser Center was a transgression that created irreconcilable conflicts and divisions within the camp. For others, the finality of the violence of that day merely obviated the need to address longstanding latent tensions inherent in the movement itself: the movement burnt out because of a reluctance to deal with interpersonal conflicts and political divisions between different groups with different visions for the movement. Still others contend that the movement was unravelling because of its failure to establish a programme from the earliest days of its existence. However, whatever the reasons for its apparent unravelling in January 2012, the spirit of Occupy in Oakland did not disappear, and nor would the tendency towards commoning that it contained. Indeed, in the months after the failed attempt to occupy the Kaiser Center, the Occupy movement in Oakland returned to questions of autonomous self-reproduction over and above direct confrontation with the police or the property order. Indeed, if the camp has disappeared as a physical entity, its presence continues to be felt in the city. As late as the spring of 2015, affinity groups emerging from the General Assembly of Occupy Oakland continue to operate in the city, campaigning and acting on issues that were at the heart of the camp in autumn and winter of 2011. These same values of common living, the refusal to subordinate life to economic imperatives, and the prioritisation of use values over exchange values have been reproduced in the discourse and practice of the affinity groups that have emerged from the Occupy Oakland camp and strikes of 2011 and 2012. Indeed, many groups continue to operate in the city whose organisational structures are almost entirely inherited from affinity groups that were a part of the Oakland commune in autumn 2011.

Foreclosure Defence

First and probably most prominent amongst these affinity groups is the Foreclosure Defence Group, which organises around supporting- administratively, legally, and in some case physically- citizens whose homes have been foreclosed upon. Established in the autumn of 2011, the Foreclosure Defence Group has sought to organise people to resist the material effects of the American home ownership crisis. The sub-prime mortgage crisis and forms of resistance to it (on the part of the banks and on the part of American citizens) crystalizes the contortions of the global economy in local form.³⁶⁰ As suggested earlier in this chapter, the story of housing in Oakland since the mid-part of the last decade is a crisis of exchange value. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the housing within the city- where there are issues over the quality of housing, this tends to be in the private, rented sector, properties which quite comfortably remain in the hands of rentier landlords- it is only its status as commodity which has been affected. However, this failure of housing as an exchange value has very material consequences when bailiffs evict residents at gunpoint. Likewise, the homelessness, family break-up, and mental health problems caused by the housing crisis are not easily avoided. Of course, this is the paradox of the housing crisis: houses which are perfectly usable stand empty while large homeless populations inhabit soup kitchens and live beneath underpasses. In 2011, CNBC estimated that there were 18.4m empty homes in the United States, which is roughly 11% of America's housing stock at that point in time.³⁶¹ At the same time, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated that on any given night in January 2011, there were approximately 636,000 people sleeping rough across the U.S.³⁶² The implication of this is that there has been a profound failure of political economy, where use value- required to maintain the dignity, health, and life of citizens- has been trumped by the abstract right of the bank to keep its property empty and therefore maintain the exchange value of its investments.

³⁶⁰ Harvey, D., (2008), 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review* 53, (available online at: <http://newleftreview.org/II/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>), (accessed on: 11.06.2013).

³⁶¹ 'Nearly 11 Percent of US Houses Empty', *CNBC* 31.01.2011, (available online at: <http://www.cnbc.com/id/41355854>), (accessed on: 07.06.2013).

³⁶² Information supplied by *National Law Centre on Poverty and Homelessness*, (available at: <http://www.nlchp.org/program.cfm?prog=5>), (accessed on: 07.06.2013).

It is to these two conceptions of value that the housing activism that has emerged from Occupy Oakland speaks. Participants are engaged in ongoing value struggles over the status of housing, attempting to enact material and ideological strategies which recognise the value of housing as its use value rather than its capacity to be exchanged as part of a collateralized debt obligation.

'Occupy the Farm', Berkeley

Another form of commoning took place in Berkeley, just north of Oakland in April and May of 2012. Known as 'Occupy the Farm', a group of activists occupied a parcel of land known as the Gill Tract, land owned by the University of California Berkeley, in opposition to proposals to develop the land as for-profit housing and the site of a Wholefoods outlet. The land is the last remaining Class I land in the East Bay and has been used for scientific experiments since 1945. More recently, however, 9/10 of the land has been sold off or built on to make way for student housing and commercial developments.³⁶³ In April 2012, emerging from the energies and affinities that were central to the successes of Occupy Oakland, a group of activists occupied the remaining 10 acres of the Gill Tract, digging up the land and planting crops, including carrots, broccoli, corn, tomatoes, and squashes.³⁶⁴ Inevitably, this occupation faced resistance from the University authorities, who accused protestors of trespass, and denied the existence of plans for the land to be developed. Moreover, they co-operated with police to evict the activists from the site, taking action which included turning off water to the site in order to thwart the activists' attempts at cultivation.³⁶⁵ The site was evicted on 9th May 2012, as University of Berkeley officials and Berkeley police collaborated to remove the activists. This was not,

³⁶³ 'Protestors Occupy Berkeley-owned Farm Tract in Albany', *Oakland Tribune* 22.04.2012 (available online at: http://www.mercurynews.com/portal/breaking-news/ci_20456349/protesters-occupy-berkeley-owned-farm-tract-albany?_loopback=1), (accessed on: 01.07.2013).

³⁶⁴ 'Occupy vs. Whole Foods? Activists Take Over Land Slated for Development and Start a Farm', *alternet.org*, 24.04.2012, (available online at: http://www.alternet.org/story/155127/occupy_v._whole_foods_activists_take_over_land_slated_for_development_and_start_a_farm), (accessed on: 01.07.2013).

³⁶⁵ 'UC to Occupy the Farm: "A Stunning Degree of Arrogance" with Demands', *Albany Patch*, (available online at: <http://albany.patch.com/groups/politics-and-elections/p/uc-to-occupy-the-farm-a-stunning-degree-of-arrogance-9d681703fa>), (accessed on: 01.07.2013).

however, the end of the affair, as in May 2013, activists re-occupied the site and planted zucchini, kale and squash seedlings. By summer 2013, there continued to be an ongoing battle between University authorities, the police, and activists, about the future of this land, and to whom control of it should belong.



Activists at 'Occupy the Farm'

But what are the politics behind this action? Why were the activists so keen to take and cultivate the land? In some ways, it was an attempt to continue the momentum of the Occupy movement in the East Bay, but it also spoke to the political economy of food in the East Bay, and an attempt to find common spaces which escape the exploitation of primitive accumulation. Food sovereignty is a significant problem in U.S. cities, with access to healthy food limited for those without a car, and in some cases- particularly in poor and ethnic minority areas- liquor stores are the only food outlets within walking distance. Again, this action cut a transversal line across distinctions between the global and the local, with the farm's occupiers keen to link their action to *Via Campesina*, an international movement for landless peasants.³⁶⁶ Although no-one would suggest that the actions of those involved with 'Occupy the

³⁶⁶ 'Putting the Gill Tract Occupation in an International Context', *Albany Patch*, (available online at: <http://albany.patch.com/groups/opinion/p/column-putting-the-gill-tract-occupation-in-an-intern98f3ecc56e>), (accessed on: 01.07.2013).

Farm' are identical to the struggle of Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)*, both movements speak to a similar history of dispossession and disempowerment by the alienating dispossessions of primitive accumulation.

Knowledge Practices and the Occupation of Oakland

Occupy Oakland placed knowledge, thought and praxis at the heart of its activities. Central to this was the commoning of resources through which the people of Oakland could come to appreciate the context of their struggle. From early in the occupation of Oscar Grant Plaza, the occupiers stocked and maintained a library in the camp. In addition to providing a service to the encampment, the library was an attempt to make materials available that would help activists to understand their situation and to give articulate and coherent voice to their current struggles. Within the praxis of the movement was an emphasis on education not as technical knowledge, or the preparation for some kind of career, but in keeping with the California student occupations of 2009, as a form of collective liberation.

On 13th August 2012 another attempt at commoning intellectual resources took place at an abandoned library in East Oakland. Located in the Fruitvale District of the city, the library was donated to the city by the Carnegie Foundation some time between 1916 and 1918. However, the library was closed during the late 1970s,³⁶⁷ and despite briefly being used as a school, it has mostly since been used by city authorities for storing documents and other 'unwanted' items. Activists and those working on keeping a library stocked for participants in Occupy Oakland to use decided to turn

³⁶⁷ Interestingly, there are different accounts of the closure of the library. The 'Victor Martinez Community Library' Facebook suggests that it was during the 1970s. Alternatively, the Huffington post suggests that the library was shut down in 2010. (Facebook page available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Biblioteca-Popular-Victor-Martinez/406510572731289?id=406510572731289&sk=info>), (accessed on: 11.04.2013). (Huffington Post article available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/15/oakland-peoples-library_n_1783366.html), (accessed on: 11.04.2013).

the building back to its former use.³⁶⁸ The Victor Martinez Community Library, named after a Hispanic author from the Bay Area, was opened in order to serve as “the modest seed for a library and community center—hundreds of books donated by people who envision the rebirth of local, community-owned libraries and social and political centers throughout Oakland.”³⁶⁹ The police response to the occupation of the library was quick and decisive. In response to their eviction, activists set up the library in upturned fruit boxes and milk crates outside the site.³⁷⁰ Activism has continued around the site, with the library, but particularly the outside of the library, becoming the hub of both Occupy-style organising and longer-term community organising in Fruitvale, including the establishment of a community garden, and a space that can be used by the people of Fruitvale for whatever purposes they see fit.³⁷¹ Despite the apparently overwhelming support of the local community for the project, the police have often aggressively defended the city authorities’ right to control the space (even if their ultimate aim is to keep the space empty).

Given the hostility of the police towards the project, one of the major obstacles it faces is how to keep the space safe for community members to participate without fearing arrest or harassment from police. In this way, it suggests that something else is going on other than the continuation of local, alternative or community organisation. The seizure, or at least the attempted seizure of this space is directly tied to the current ‘cycle of struggle’, and the secular crisis within or through which this cycle of struggle is located. These actions, and similar actions in other cities across North America and Europe— notably the seizure of the recently decommissioned Friern

³⁶⁸ Biblioteca Popular Victor Martinez mission statement, (available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Biblioteca-Popular-Victor-Martinez/406510572731289?id=406510572731289&sk=info>), (accessed on: 03.07.2013).

³⁶⁹ Biblioteca Popular Victor Martinez mission statement).

³⁷⁰ Yassin, J.O., (2012), ‘Update on the People’s Library in Fruitvale’, 16.08.2012, (available at: <http://hyphenatedrepublic.wordpress.com/2012/08/16/update-on-the-peoples-library-in-fruitvale/>), (accessed on: 11.04.2013).

³⁷¹ Yassin, J.O., (2013), ‘Biblioteca Popular at the Crossroads: an Uncertain Future for the Six Month Old *ad hoc* People’s Library’, 03.02.2013, (available at: <http://hyphenatedrepublic.wordpress.com/2013/02/03/biblioteca-popular-at-the-crossroads-an-uncertain-future-for-the-six-month-old-ad-hoc-peoples-library/>), (accessed on: 19.04.2013).

Barnet Community Library in London³⁷²- mark a minoritarian, prefigurative response to the logic of austerity by which the crisis of accumulation that took place in mortgage and securities markets was translated into a crisis of the reproduction of the conditions of life. This goes beyond community organising insofar as it “can lead to new politicization of depoliticized communities and can also deliver tangible victories, while providing an answer to the never-ending grind of austerity logic.”³⁷³ Through this and similar schemes, the political logic of the Occupy movement in Oakland became embedded in the various barrios and ‘arrondissements’ of the city, affecting the self-reproduction of the poor and excluded in a way that brought them into the movement in ways that grand slogans and carefully crafted Political Theory cannot.

This is a terrain that is ‘given up’ by the aggressively restructuring state. The capacity to establish this type of common in the city is in part created by budget cuts at local, state, and national levels, which causes the forms of care found within the institutions of the common to be particularly necessary. As the state and the economy put a surplus population ‘beyond’ the ‘care’ of the state and its biopolitical regime, the movements such as Occupy Oakland make it clear that they are very happy to inhabit the ruins left behind by the withdrawal of the state.

However, this is not simply ‘alternativism’. I think we miss a key dimension of the politics of practice if we see such efforts at ‘commoning’ only as attempts to create public services in parts of the city from which resources, care, and facilities have been sucked by successive neoliberal public budgets. It does respond to the withdrawal of state provision, but it also seems to have a political purpose. Education and resources are crucial to the praxis of anti-capitalist movements, as education is not conceived of as a gift, or the self-achievement of the individual, but as a collective process of liberation. This is particularly important because the politics of information and education are deeply prefigurative, and the medium by which people come to learn has deep political consequences. In the same way that neoliberal public budgets which close libraries and reduce public support foster subjectivities of ‘independence’ and

³⁷² For more on the ongoing project at Friern Barnet community library, see: (<http://fbpeopleslibrary.co.uk/>), (accessed on: 21.03.2015).

³⁷³ Yassin, ‘Biblioteca Popular at the Crossroads’.

‘self-reliance’, the opening of community libraries and study groups produces different subjectivities, based on ‘co-learning’ and which tie education, and awareness about one’s own collective social condition to questions of collective liberation.

‘Fight for Fifteen’ in Oakland

Finally, and in the most classically leftist site of struggle, wage relations have become central to the organisation of affinity groups that sprung from Occupy Oakland. It was perhaps inevitable that this was going to be the case, given that as early as January 2012, three months after the first occupation of Oscar Grant Plaza, activists were already wondering how to relate the relatively autonomous spaces of occupation to concrete forms of social reproduction in Oakland via the wage. Although in some ways, it departs most clearly from the other social movements and their focus on social reproduction, there are also a number of similarities.

The campaign for a living wage has a long lineage in the U.S.A. As early as the railroad strike of 1877, in cities such as Baltimore and Pittsburgh, working class agitation was framed in terms of the ‘living wage’ and the socially regulated length of the working day.³⁷⁴ Indeed, it has been suggested that the significance of this action is such that it later led to the promulgation of minimum wage legislation first at state level and then at a national level as part of ‘the New Deal’.³⁷⁵ It is not immediately easy to work out what exactly a living wage is, but most people are adamant that it is not the same thing as existing levels of the minimum wage. There is a real sense in which national and state minimum wage levels have not moved in line with the increased cost of living in the United States, and once adjusted for inflation, current minimum wage levels are at a much lower level than their 1968 equivalents.³⁷⁶

Occupy Oakland’s ‘Labor Solidarity Committee’, alongside members of the Oakland Commune’s Tactical Action Committee have begun organising around the issue of the wage in Oakland, organising fast food and other low-paid workers around the

³⁷⁴ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 121.

³⁷⁵ Glickman, L., (1997), *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*, (Ithaca, New York).

³⁷⁶ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 121.

attempt to secure a \$15/hr ‘livable’ wage.³⁷⁷ At present, Oakland has an \$8/hr ‘minimum’ wage, established by the state of California. Nonetheless, the secular crisis, driving up rents, food prices, transport, and utilities bills, combined with rampant gentrification means that the minimum wage rate required to live a sustainable life is considerably higher than this. Research by Amy Glasmeier of the Department of Urban Studies & Planning at MIT suggests that the basic ‘living’ wage for a single adult in Oakland is \$11.51, a rate which increases to \$26.83 for a worker supporting a family of two adults and two children.³⁷⁸ People earning wages below this threshold reproduce themselves and their families in conditions of poverty. This problem is not specific to Oakland, and nor is this kind of political action aimed at ameliorating it: ‘Fight for Fifteen’ actually began in Chicago before subsequently being adopted in New York and Oakland.³⁷⁹

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored points of convergence between the theoretical and practical dimensions of Occupy Oakland and the autonomist framework established in chapter one. In addition, I also offer some kind of comparison between the cases of Oakland and Rome. There are many similarities between commons movements in Oakland and those in Rome, but there are also significant differences. The most notable similarity is that commons were central to the practice of both movements, and that autonomist theory offers useful theoretical tools through which to interpret both of these movements. Whilst I conclude that the autonomist conception of commons provides a useful analytical lens for interpreting the Occupy movement in Oakland as a commons movement, it is worth noting that the politicization of social reproduction as commoning was *central* to its practice. Indeed, for the most part, we can understand the actions of Occupy Oakland as an exodus from the social-reproductive trajectory of capitalism, and the attempt to establish new value practices against those of capital.

³⁷⁷ *Daily Kos*, ‘The Fight for \$15 Comes to Oakland’, 29.04.2013, (available online at: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/04/29/1205642/-The-Fight-for-15-Comes-to-Oakland>), (accessed on 14.05.2013).

³⁷⁸ Glasmeier, A., (2013), ‘Living Wage Calculation for Oakland city, Alameda County, California’, (Available at: <http://livingwage.mit.edu/places/0600153000>), (Accessed on: 14.05.2013).

³⁷⁹ See for example the ‘Fight for Fifteen’ website (Available at: <http://fightfor15.org/en/>), (Accessed on: 14.05.2013).

This focus on de-coupling social reproduction from capital suggests that, at least in the case of Oakland, De Angelis' theoretical framework is more applicable than Hardt & Negri's,³⁸⁰ and Occupy Oakland can be understood as an alternative strategy of exodus, through which life is 'de-linked' from the metropolis, the imperatives of capital, and its rationalities of government. The establishment of a camp in Oscar Grant Plaza, at the heart of the city, was an attempt to create an alternative system of social reproduction, where everyone was fed, clothed, and provided with resources adequate to their needs. Significantly, this is a departure from older ways of thinking about political transformation, in which organization at the point of production brought about alternative ways of producing the things and social relations that people need. These commons movements place social needs- what all citizens need to survive and flourish- at the heart of both their practical and intellectual efforts.

The establishment of this alternative mode of social organization did not necessarily bring Occupy Oakland into conflict with city authorities or capital. Their efforts are far better understood in terms of what Costas Douzinas calls *anomie*.³⁸¹ The occupation of Oscar Grant Plaza amounts to a suspension of the law, and a suspension of its capacity to regulate encounters at the heart of the city. The city authorities' response to the movement is not so much a response to the direct threat of the protesters so much as it is a response to the loss of control by these authorities. Indeed, this is evidenced by activists' adoption of Black Block tactics in the city only *after* the protesters were attacked and evicted by police. To the extent that it detracted from the movement's initial aims of creating a camp for political and reproductive autonomy, this period of direct confrontation with the police was a distraction for the movement.

This distraction was compounded by the fact that again, much like was the case in Rome, activists made no particular attempt to make sense of the role of the state, or local government. In highlighting this point, I do not want to suggest that these activists made a 'theoretical error', so much as I want to suggest that this orientation towards the state tells us something significant about the outlook and the theoretical presuppositions of the activists. Indeed, I want to suggest that there is perhaps an

³⁸⁰ See for example De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 50.

³⁸¹ Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*.

implicit theory of the state's function within their actions. It appears that, in the minds of the activists themselves at least, an equivalence has emerged between the apparatus of capital and that of the state. Attacks by the police on protesters within Oakland justify a war being waged on capital, in much the same way that the destitution and exploitation of the social metabolism in which capital is king justifies a withdrawal from the political rationalities of the state. Insofar as modernity is defined by the bifurcation between political structures which regulate the concentrated use of violence, and economic structures (backed up by the force of law) which ensure that the surplus produced by labour remains in the hands of capital,³⁸² the experience of facing capital in Oakland, California, is formless, withdrawing from view, becoming visible only as an abstract logic of governance, in which capital and the state are equal partners.

Whilst there has yet to be much thought about the role of the state and its repressive apparatus, this can certainly be effected with autonomist tools. Autonomism clearly makes the case for understanding the dialectical conflict between labour and capital in terms of the struggle between two different social forces. On the one hand, capital is seeking to constrain labour as something that can be controlled, regulated, and put to work for its valorization. On the other hand, labour is attempting to become free of those constraints that are put in place by capital. Although the battle in Oakland was one between the police and protesters, a similar logic of containment and attempts to escape this containment was in operation.

Although the political logic of Occupy Oakland was one of exodus, at least insofar as it relates to the practice of social movements in Oakland, the production of the 'outside of capitalism' is not so much about a singular rupture or rapid transition by which an outside is constructed, so much as it is about the long-term construction of a culture of resistance, and the establishment of institutions that provide a long-term alternative to capital's hegemony. This is manifest in the legacies of Occupy Oakland, including educational projects such as the Fruitvale Community Library, and projects

³⁸² This is, of course, a theoretical presupposition of the so-called 'Political Marxist school'. See for example:

Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*,
Gerstenberger, H., (2007), *Impersonal Power: History and Theory of the Bourgeois State*, (Leiden, Brill).

that are about the constitution of local cultures of subsistence, including the occupation of UC Berkeley's uncultivated farmland. These movements fashion alternative structures for forming and meeting human needs. These structures cannot be fashioned immediately or in the stark absence of capital. Rather, they are about long-term processes of subject formation by which an alternative political culture can exist alongside the existing structures of capital. This subjective construction of a culture of resistance to neoliberal capitalism is something that is vitiated, and given theoretical weight by autonomist discourses of class composition.³⁸³ Autonomist Marxism is not just something that gives these existing processes of class composition added weight: they also have the capacity to undergird a new process of workers' (or commoners') inquiry, through which commoners themselves understand their own class compositional landscape.

The aim of this chapter has been to highlight certain elements of social movement practice in Occupy Oakland using a number of concepts from autonomist theory and their writings about commons. It has demonstrated that although the Occupy movement has rarely been framed as a commons movement, analysing it from this perspective is profitable, not least because it uncovers the significance of commons for the way that this movement worked- and continues to work- in Oakland. Although the movement has not itself developed a particularly in-depth analysis of the way that its practice relates to the structures of the state and local government, there are rich resources within the movement for doing so. Where the autonomist approach is less instructive, however, is in putting together an analysis of the failures and limits of the movements in Oakland and its relation to the structure of capital on a broader scale. The autonomist discourse of subjective exodus from the infrastructure of the metropolis can only answer that failure has come about because the subjective moment of labour's exodus from capital was insufficiently able to break free from the orbit of capital's infrastructure. Perhaps only a more intense subjective feeling of revolt within the movements could create the conditions to break away from capital more successfully. This is something to which I will turn within the next chapter,

³⁸³ For examples of this kind of study, see: Alquati, R., (1961), 'Organic Composition of Capital and Labor-Power at Olivetti', (available online at: <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/organic-composition-of-capital-and-labor-power-at-olivetti-1961/>), (accessed on: 17.03.2014).

when I examine at greater length the limitations of the autonomist method for interpreting these commons movements through autonomist Marxism, and the more general limitations of the autonomist method as a means of theorising political action in the context of the social forces of capital.

Chapter Four: Autonomist Theory and Capitalist Social Form

The previous two chapters have demonstrated that it is possible to narrate the commoning practices of the post-2008 period using the autonomist method that I explored at the beginning of this thesis. In so doing, these accounts tie together acts of commoning with claims about the nature of capital, and the type of political action that is required to overcome them. In each case, an account which foregrounds commoning picks out particular aspects of the movements' practices, shedding light on the ways in which both movements attempted to make social reproduction autonomous from the dictates of capital. This method encourages a close and detailed mapping the way that these movements operate, particularly their subjective dimension. Analytically, these chapters have suggested that in both Oakland and Rome, commoning practices emerged for three main reasons: first, as a response to attempts by capital to enclose and appropriate the city in the interests of continued capital accumulation; second, in response to the anomie and social dislocation through which man comes to be alienated from his surroundings, and third; in relation to the production of a surplus population that is excluded from the capital relation. Whilst it is clear that these commoning practices were disproportionately carried out by people who were amongst the most politically active in the cities, they also managed to galvanise some of those who are most vulnerable and precarious-immigrants and students in the case of Rome, and ethnic minorities and the precariously employed in the case of Oakland- in a new social subjectivity that cuts a transversal line across existing forms of exclusion and establishes 'the commoner' as a radical political subjectivity around which political action has been organised. At the same time, in each context, the commons intersects a number of other discourses, about human mobility, class, race, and gender. In each case, the production of commons emerges alongside existing cultures of activism. In doing so, they build upon and extend the activist cultures that arose around the Genoa anti-globalization protests in Italy, to the racialised forms of 'class' consciousness that have been formed in anti-police struggles in Oakland today.

All of this demonstrates that autonomist theory can help us to understand why these movements have emerged, and the form that they take. It helps to conceptualise these

social movements as something that are more than just protesting against the state, or specific social ills, but are themselves creating alternative means of social subsistence, a means of subsistence exercised through commons. It explains the forms that these movements have taken, movements that framed demands about food, housing, and culture in terms of the way that we access these fundamental human needs. This gets to the heart of something fundamental about the nature of capital in the contemporary world. The drudgery of social reproduction under the auspices of capital is not just material penury. Autonomism suggests that commons emerge because life lived subject to capital's logic is as much an ideological and spiritual impoverishment as it is a material poverty, and one which de-values forms of human creativity, community, and the dignity of the individual. Any claim to material security must not simply be a demand for higher wages, lower rent, or improved public services; it must also be a call for reclaiming sovereignty, as only through reclaiming the capacity to control and direct one's own actions- not to be treated themselves as an object- can the alienation of capital be overcome. As a result, autonomist Marxist theory helps to demonstrate why the form movements take is of such significance. It is not simply, *pace* much of the academic response to the Occupy movement, that non-hierarchy and prefigurative politics are significant because they cultivate new non-hierarchical relations between people, but because they reflect particular desires about how activists would like society to be. This is a wider feature of the 'cycle of struggles' that have emerged in opposition to neoliberal capitalism since the late 1970s. The rush to establish Occupy as 'the new politics',³⁸⁴ has often occluded the ways in which social movements- although spurred from circumstances associated with the 2008 financial crisis- not only reflected specific tendencies within local and global economies, but they also built upon existing protest cultures and ways of framing political action. Autonomist theory, drawing attention to the way that commons appear in these movements, does a good job of contextualising commons in terms of the capital relation and social movement cultures.

³⁸⁴ See for example Azar, R., (2011), 'A New Form of Protest', *New Politics* 23.10.11, (available online at: <http://newpol.org/content/new-form-protest>), (accessed on: 26.04.2015),

Bennis, P., (2011), 'Occupy Wall Street: New politics and new milestones', *Paz y Seguridad* 01.11.2011, (available online at: <http://www.tni.org/es/node/70934>), (accessed on: 26.04.2015).

The significance of the movements discussed in chapters two and three is not simply the presence of commoning within social movement practices. Indeed, in the context of this thesis, their significance lies in the way that movements also demonstrate the potentials for political recomposition within their practices. In each case we see the beginnings of a process of political recomposition through which wider political transformations become articulated through the commons. At this juncture, it may be worthwhile articulating what we mean by class composition. The autonomist organisation *Zerowork* defined recomposition as “the overthrow of capitalist divisions, the creation of new unities between different sectors of the class, and an expansion of the boundaries of what the ‘working class’ comes to include.”³⁸⁵ Massimo De Angelis has suggested that the notion of solidarity is fundamental to what political recomposition entails.³⁸⁶ Political recomposition is about the ways in which local, perhaps spontaneous, initiatives inform wider political movements to offer a more coherent challenge to capital. At the same time, there is no one single notion of how political recomposition should take place. One of the beauties of the autonomist method is that movements themselves have ideas about how this recomposition should take place.

The movements examined in this thesis have different ideas about this. In the case of the Italian *bene comune* movement, ideas about political recomposition have centred on ideas of citizenship and participation in civic governance. In this context, commons should not simply be strategies for social reproduction beyond the value form; they should be the basis of a new form of political association, a republic of the commons, rather than a republic of property. By way of contrast, the political recomposition taking place in Oakland is a recomposition based on the rejection of proletarian identity, a recomposition best summed up in the form of ‘communisation theory’. Politics in this register is not simply political participation based on the social form of commons, but rather a wider rejection of the reproductive circuits that comprise the contemporary capital system.

³⁸⁵ Zerowork, (1975), ‘Introduction to Zerowork’, *Zerowork* 1, (available at: <http://www.prole.info/texts/zerointro.html>), (accessed on: 10.02.2016).

³⁸⁶ De Angelis, (2008), ‘Crisis: Neoliberal Impasse and Political Recomposition’, paper presented at *International Solidarity and Globalisation, counter G-8* conference (written version available online at: http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/deangelis_crises1.pdf), (accessed on: 11.02.2016).

The point of this chapter is to assess these proposals for recomposition and whether they meet the criteria set out at the end of chapter one. This assessment is twofold. In the first instance, it attempts to assess whether there are currents within post-2008 social movements that lend themselves toward recomposition. More particularly, it asks whether these movements contain within them adequate resources for the recomposition of political struggles against capital on a wider scale? Secondly, the chapter seeks to address whether the assumptions that autonomist Marxism makes about the relationship between commons, capitalism and social movements are useful for thinking about this recomposition. To this end, the second question that drives this chapter is whether autonomist Marxism remains a useful framework for thinking about this process of recomposition, or whether it is necessary to go beyond autonomist Marxism in order to think about political recomposition and transition?

The chapter concludes by arguing that some of the conceptual resources necessary for thinking about political composition and transition cannot be found within existing autonomist theories. In particular, the challenge of offering a systemic alternative to the capital system necessitates a deeper engagement with political reason and a conceptual re-casting of our understanding of capital. To the extent that this can be carried out *within* an autonomist Marxist understanding of *Capital*, this task is compatible with autonomist assumptions. At the moment, however, these aspects are missing from the existing autonomist literature, and addressing these shortcomings are fundamental to developing commons as a coherent and systematic challenge to the hegemony of capital. In order to open into this discussion, however, the chapter will commence by recapitulating the ideas about political recomposition found within the two movements that formed the basis of the previous two chapters.

[Political Recomposition in the Italian Commons](#)

The Italian commons movement has sought to establish commons as more than just resources for non-commodified social reproduction. It has suggested that commons can be a principle for the resuscitation of political life in Italy, re-invigorating local politics and creating a new culture of democratic engagement. It is not sufficient for

commons to simply operate as an ‘undercommons’, existing in the interstices between state spaces; if commons remain marginal, the social transformation they can afford is limited. *Bene Comune* has suggested that commons can be a basis for a political recomposition that places civic space at the heart of its political strategy.

This is a classical strategy insofar as the political, in its originary form, emerged with the city as the site of political engagement. As C.L.R. James suggested in ‘Every Cook Can Govern’, the city-state and the public assembly were the building blocks of political order in the ancient world.³⁸⁷ The idea of civic virtue is not something that was confined to the ancient world: it was also a feature of republican thought in the 16th and 17th Centuries.³⁸⁸ Although this aspect of classical civilisation has been lost to bureaucratisation and modernisation,³⁸⁹ as well as the rise of the nation state as the *sine qua non* of the political in the modern world, engagement in the civic sphere is a feature of contemporary anti-systemic movements, including Occupy and *Bene Comune*, where activists have identified the civic as a key level of engagement with the world. The centrality of the city for these movements, and the political recomposition they effect with the city as their point of reference, reflects the centrality of the city to the way that people experience the reality of capitalism in the global north in the 21st Century.

Within the *Bene Comune* movement, claims to commons are made on the basis of citizenship. These movements take the notion of constituent power (fundamental to Antonio Negri’s brand of autonomist Marxism) as fundamental to their practice, seeing the production and multiplication of commons as expanding the liberal constitutional form upon which political order is predicated upon. Commons are significant for the notion of political order that *Bene Comune* seeks to cultivate because they constitute a commonwealth that everyone has a right to participate in. Everyone is afforded a right to the commons on the basis of their citizenship. This creates some problems for thinking about the commons in the context of migrant labour: commons are a concept that we tend to think about without reference to

³⁸⁷ James, C.L.R., (1956), ‘Every Cook Can Govern’, *Correspondence* 2(12).

³⁸⁸ Skinner, Q., (2008), *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

³⁸⁹ Draper, H., (1978), *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Vol I: State and Bureaucracy*, (New York, Monthly Review Press).

borders, but when invoked in the context of citizenship, we see contradictions between claims to the universality of commons, and claims about their relationship to citizenship. Nowhere is this better represented than it is by the appropriation of the terminology and practices of commoning by *Casa Pound* and Rome's nationalist right. Of course, these are dangers of which the practitioners of *Bene Comune* are well aware,³⁹⁰ and their political recomposition is an attempt to establish a universalist discourse in which one can participate in commons without conditions in the face of the violent particularisms of Italy's right.

Political Recomposition and the Oakland Commune

The political recomposition that has taken place through the Oakland commune begins with a paradox. Drawing on the invocation of constituent power within contemporary Italian commons movements, it is a paradox that recognises that on the one hand social movements based in commons are demonstrations of self-exercised sovereignty, but on the other hand, they emerge precisely where people have been made victims of the rapidly restructuring neoliberal state. Whilst they are undoubtedly attempts to exercise sovereignty in the sphere of social reproduction, they do so on terrain that is ceded to the movements by a transformation of the state project, and attacks on existing social reproductive strategies. This is a curious analytical puzzle for an autonomist analysis: why have these movements- themselves a feature of people's power- emerged at precisely the points where state interventions have declined in recent years? What does it say about the ultimate autonomist aim to overcome capitalism if the social forms that may have purchase against it are emerging at a periphery that capitalism has itself produced?

In Oakland, political recomposition has taken place that attempts to take this dimension of the capital relation into account. This political recomposition is not unique to Oakland, having also taken place in France, Greece, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, but it is tied to particular movement dynamics that appear in these specific conjunctures. In part due to its appearance in a number of historical

³⁹⁰ This topic is discussed thoughtfully in Mezzadra, S. & Neilson, B., (2013), *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, (Durham, Duke University Press).

milieus, this way of thinking about emancipatory politics in post-2008 movements has been called many things and draws upon a somewhat disparate set of theoretical and political resources, but it is most commonly referred to as ‘communisation’. It offers an alternative interpretation of the emergence of commons and their significance to capital-transcending action, suggesting that the conditions of capital’s current subsumption of labour are such that the working class is increasingly unable to produce itself; in this context, reproductive struggles, far from being ‘voluntaristic’, or a project of autonomy, emerge at centre stage because of the changing contours of the class relation, and the trajectory of capital in general. It goes beyond existing Marxist interpretations of these in two main ways: first, because it makes an argument in the context of capital’s temporality; and second, it offers a new conception of a political project that succeeds ‘orthodox Marxism’. At the same time, communisation is syncretic; many of the elements that comprise it have been put forward elsewhere, and in value-form theory and systematic dialectics they have been explored by Marxists at great length.³⁹¹ However, in their current forms, there has been a tendency to study them as static projections of the systemic dimensions of capital. Communisation, by way of contrast, has attempted to understand the theoretical objects constructed by value-form theory and systematic dialectics historically, as Marxian hermeneutics that shed particular light on the way that the historical development of capital has opened up the possibilities for its supersession.³⁹² This section will go on to expand on the main contours of communisation, its origins, and its appearance in contemporary discourse, before going on to unpack what it suggests about political recomposition through commons movements.

In contemporary American anti-systemic politics, the first invocation of ‘communisation theory’ appeared in the ‘no-demands’ campus occupations on the

³⁹¹ There are many proponents of these perspectives, but among the most prominent are: Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Theory of Capital*, Postone, M., (1996), *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), Williams, M., (2000), ‘Why Marx Neither Has Nor Needs a Commodity Theory of Money’, *Review of Political Economy* 12(4).

³⁹² This argument is put forward by *Endnotes* in: Endnotes, (2010), ‘Communisation and Value-form Theory’, *Endnotes* 2, (available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-communisation-and-value-form-theory>), (accessed on: 20.06.2013).

There are some notable exceptions to this, however.

West Coast of the United States in the summer of 2009.³⁹³ Rejecting the University of California's proposal to increase student fees by 30% (fees had already gone up by 250% in the preceding decade), students occupied lecture halls and administration buildings,³⁹⁴ protesting both the fee hikes and the way that education had been made a part of the wider economy through financialisation. These students developed a critical perspective on education, and particularly the financialisation of Higher Education, through which students are encouraged to treat University as an investment leveraged against their future earnings;³⁹⁵ and the political horizon for these activists was the refusal of the conditions found within higher education. As a result, the political logic of these occupations proceeded through negation. Indeed, it amounted to an amendment of certain autonomist propositions, according to which the refusal of labour was the endpoint of workers' struggles: "the campus occupiers understood the stakes to have been reversed: the rebels are not the workers, but the jobless, the debtors, the precarious, and the socially and economically marginal."³⁹⁶ This has been identified by some as a horizon of negativity,³⁹⁷ or a new way of doing politics not as the outline of an emancipatory project, or the construction of a 'positive' project of exodus from the rule of capital, but a refusal that can only be established in the negative. For activists within the California struggles, this negativity was characterized by the refusal of the formal figures and propositions of emancipatory politics becoming the basis of their political activities, as they rejected the notion of education as a 'public good', for "the horizons of struggle were emphatically not those of ancestral socialism: there is no longer any possibility of

³⁹³ Practitioners within the movements themselves suggest that these tactics owe inspiration to the anti-CPE protests of 2006 at the Sorbonne.

Marcus, D., (2013), 'From Occupation to Communization', (available online at: http://www.e-flux.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Marcus_Communization.pdf?b8c429), (accessed on: 03.04.2015).

³⁹⁴ 'University of California Campuses Erupt Into Protest', *The Guardian* 24.09.2009, (available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/24/california-university-berkeley-budget-protest>), (accessed on: 01.03.2013).

³⁹⁵ For more on the financialisation of HE, in the Californian context and elsewhere, see McGettigan, A., (2013), *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, (London, Pluto Press).

³⁹⁶ Marcus, 'From Occupation to Communization'.

³⁹⁷ Noys, B., (2012), 'The Fabric of Struggles', in Noys, B., (Ed.), *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, (New York, Minor Compositions),

going back to the arcadia of the workers' state; now, revolution will be made by piecing together the apparatus of redistribution on the outside, in the cold of the commons, without wages or benefits."³⁹⁸ Commons become associated with the destruction of an existing apparatus of politico-economic control: the implication of this is that only by destroying the existing apparatus of social reproduction, through which man is tied to the wage and the commodity form, can the conditions of free life be generally established. In California, communization theory emerged as a way of thinking about how to theorise the spaces of freedom developed within communes and moments of insurrection, such as in California universities or Occupy Oakland, and expanding them into a more generalized subversion of the value form. As participants of the university struggles moved from campus into the occupations of San Francisco and Oakland, they took with them the theoretical reference points—among them communization— that they had developed in the University of California protests.

As suggested earlier, however, the analysis of political action as communization is not unique to California. Indeed, the theoretical basis of what Benjamin Noys has described as the 'communization problematic' is French 'Ultra-left' thought from the 1960s and 1970s.³⁹⁹ Although it found its most forceful articulation as a way of posing a possible politics in the student struggles of California, as well as anti-austerity struggles in Greece, Spain, and the United Kingdom,⁴⁰⁰ its ideas can be found in germ form in the French ultra-left's rejection of the existing forms of the

³⁹⁸ Marcus, 'From Occupation to Communization'.

³⁹⁹ Another strong contemporary current from which communization has emerged is the rise of 'insurrectionist thought', particularly in the French context, where the trial of the so-called 'Tarnac Nine' and the publication of writings by *Tiqqun* and *The Invisible Committee* popularises the idea of communization as an insurrectionary destruction of the conditions of capitalist life. Endnotes identify a divergence between this branch of French insurrectionary thought and a more Marxist-oriented use of the term. Such that this distinction needs to be enforced, the discussion of 'communization' in this thesis refers to the second, Marxist-inspired usage of the term. Endnotes, 'What are we to do?', in Noys, B., (Ed.), *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, (New York, Minor Compositions), pp. 23-24.

⁴⁰⁰ Noys, 'The Fabric of Struggles', p. 8.

workers' movement after May 1968.⁴⁰¹ In particular, the problematization of 1968 challenged the Marxist orthodoxies of the day, and particularly a rejection of the turn to workers councils' and other forms of self-organisation in French communist thought, on the basis that, rather than offering man free, fully-conscious control over his self-activity,⁴⁰² these might only put workers in charge of the own exploitation, rather than overcoming it.⁴⁰³ Operating as a whole, capital cannot be overcome in one factory: its systematic character means that individual acts of secession will inevitably be overcome by the structural totality. In the context of factory struggles, attempts at self-management met the same fate as 19th Century 'Proudhonism', with individual efforts to peg wages to labour time floundering in the face of the socially produced general law of value.⁴⁰⁴ As a result of these failures, it became important to reject the illusions of self-management afforded by councilism, and to think about emancipation in terms of the social totality.⁴⁰⁵ In recent years, these ideas have been developed in journals and writing collectives such as *Aufheben*, *Blaumachen*, *Riff-Raff*, *Endnotes*, *Theorie Communiste*, and various others, which have tried to use these ideas to shed light on the potential for political recomposition within anti-capitalist movements. Given the volume (and diversity) of this material, in order to demonstrate how communization theory sheds light on political action, it is perhaps easiest to demonstrate the approach it takes towards commons and the commoning movements discussed in this thesis.

⁴⁰¹ Endnotes suggest that this is a topic that has been discussed for at least 30 years within ultra-left literature.

Endnotes, 'What are we to do?'

⁴⁰² For a history of the workers' self-management communization theory sought to critique, see he edited volume Ness, & Azzellini, (Eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own*.

⁴⁰³ Varn, C.D., (2013), 'The Main Currents of Communization: Interview With Benjamin Noys', *The North Star*, (available online at: <http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=9042>), (accessed on: 07.05.2015).

For more on the political culture of the post-1968 French left and its influence on communization theory, see Brown, N., (2011), 'Red years: Althusser's Lesson, Rancière's error and the real movement of history', *Radical Philosophy* 170, pp. 16-24.

⁴⁰⁴ See for example Marx, K., (1847), *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the 'Philosophy of Poverty' by M. Proudhon*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Poverty-Philosophy.pdf>), (accessed on: 20.02.2016).

⁴⁰⁵ Brown, 'Red Years: Althusser's Lesson, Rancière's error and the real movement of history'.

From Commons to Communization in Oakland and Rome

Communization theory suggests that struggle can only be made intelligible in terms of its context within the trajectory of capitalism. Much like autonomist theory, this context is primarily understood in terms of the real subsumption of labour under capital. There are some similarities here, but there are also subtle and important differences in the way that autonomism and communization understand the significance of this context. Similarities include that- much like autonomism- the entire edifice of communization theory is predicated upon the idea that the transition from one form of production to another has completely transformed the conditions of possibility for politics, revealing the ideological ‘feet of clay’ of 20th Century Social Democratic and Marxist-Leninist thought, and necessitating the direct and immediate overcoming of capital. As such, we can identify an ‘era of communisation’ which stands apart from previous ways of framing anti-systemic struggles. As a result, contra the criticisms of many of the critics of communization theory,⁴⁰⁶ we cannot suggest that hitherto existing political strategies can be understood as mental error (‘if only Lenin and Trotsky had value theory’ for example). Rather, it suggests that the historical conditions of the present and the trajectory of late capitalist development means that the immediate overcoming of the value form has become a political necessity. The aim of communisation theory then, is not to suggest that previous struggles- be they Thomas Müntzer’s anabaptist commune during the German Peasants’ war, or the Bolshevik revolution that created the Soviet Union- failed to achieve emancipation because of theoretical errors, but to suggest that the way in which political problems are posed are intrinsically related to the circumstances of their posing.⁴⁰⁷ Indeed, for communisation theorists, it is only in this era, the era of capitalism’s real subsumption, that we are able to frame political struggles in terms of the direct and immediate production of use values as the direct and immediate satisfaction of needs. If we are able to see clear similarities between the communisation approach and autonomism in the idea of an epochal historical shift,

⁴⁰⁶ See for example Krul, M., (2014), ‘Endnotes: A Romantic Critique?’, *The North Star* 28.01.2014, (available online at: <http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=11909>), (accessed on: 08.05.2015).

⁴⁰⁷ Although this is generally true of communisation theory, there are some exceptions, such as Gilles Dauve & Karl Nesic’s *Troploin* project. Noys, ‘The Fabric of Struggles’, p. 12.

then more distance can be created between the two approaches, by exploring *why* this shift has come about.

Communization theorists talk about communisation as a political problematique that stands in contradistinction to the politics of ‘programmatism’, an older way of doing politics that has been superseded by the changing dynamics of the class relation. Communization is, at its heart, a reflection on *why* programmatic approaches to politics are no longer an adequate foundation for political action against capitalism. In order to make more sense of this, it is first necessary to explore what communization theorists mean by ‘programmatism’. Programmatism was a term first used by the French writing collective *Theorie Communiste* to describe the workers’ movements of the 20th Century, which in the form of parties and trades unions (be they social democratic, anarchist, syndicalist, or communist) represented the rising power of the proletariat and followed a program for the liberation of labour.⁴⁰⁸ For *Theorie Communiste*, there is a theoretical *lacuna* at the heart of anti-systemic thought, a lacuna that emerges because of the material conditions of its birth.⁴⁰⁹ The proletariat, as the rising sociological class within industrial modernity, became the *sine qua non* of progressive politics, and developed from its own experience, a “theory and practice of class struggle in which the proletariat finds, in its drive toward liberation, the fundamental elements of a future social organisation which become the *programme to be realised*.”⁴¹⁰ The most obvious examples of programmatic thinking are social democratic thought and revolutionary socialism, in which the establishment of transitional structures through the ballot box and the revolutionary seizure of the state respectively, are key stages in the movement towards a non-capitalist, classless society. At the same time, programmatism has impacted on anarchist thought, which is predicated upon fundamentally similar foundations. Political strategy, in its programmatic form, entails attempting to end capitalism through valorising one pole within the labour-capital relation.

⁴⁰⁸ Endnotes, ‘Afterword’.

⁴⁰⁹ Endnotes, (2010), ‘The History of Subsumption’, *Endnotes 2*, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-history-of-subsumption>), (accessed on: 07.05.2015).

⁴¹⁰ Theorie Communiste, (2008), ‘Much Ado About Nothing’, *Endnotes 1*, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/th-orie-communiste-much-ado-about-nothing>), (accessed on: 07.05.2015).

For theorists of communization, the idea that capitalism can be overcome by the valorisation of labour, a category that is itself constituted by capital, is contradictory but historically understandable given the history of the class relation,⁴¹¹ and as a result called into question only the ownership of the mode of production, rather than the more pervasive *form* that it takes. Communisation takes value seriously because it is only by attempting to supersede the *form* of capitalist exploitation, value, that we can found a revolutionary, emancipatory project. It is this that distinguishes it from hitherto existing revolutionary theory. As François Danel suggests, “[within programmatism], there was never a question or an attempt of abolishing the law of value- the compulsion towards accumulation and thus towards the reproduction of exploitation which materialises itself at the same time in machinery, in fixed capital as capital in itself, and in the necessary existence, facing the working class, of an exploiting class, bourgeois or bureaucratic, as the collective agent of that reproduction.”⁴¹² The only political conclusion that can be consistently deduced from these premises is that the working class must abolish itself within capitalism.

For communization, the ‘end of programmatism’ is deeper than just the rejection of the transitional or amelioratory structures associated with revolutionary and democratic socialism. It is an altogether more full-blown assault on the ontological and philosophical foundations of hitherto existing leftist theory. Whereas anarchist approaches to organisation, with a focus on prefiguration and the non-instrumentality of power, are often cited approvingly as being opposed to the ‘transitional’ character of socialism,⁴¹³ communization appears to demonstrate that these political strategies have emerged from the same 19th-20th Century ‘programmatist’ political problem-field.⁴¹⁴ Potentially this also has implications for the way that we understand autonomist thought. Indeed, while most observers, and autonomists themselves, suggest that the emphasis on struggle at all levels of the capital system distance it

⁴¹¹ Danel, F., (2003), ‘Introduction’, in *Rupture dans la Théorie de la Révolution: Textes 1965-1975*, (Paris, Senonevero).

⁴¹² Danel, ‘Introduction’.

⁴¹³ See particularly Day, *Gramsci is Dead*, and the edited collection Blumenfeld, J., Bottici, C. & Critchley, S., (Eds.) (2013), *The Anarchist Turn*, (London, Pluto Press).

⁴¹⁴ The role of anarchist thought within the foundational discussions of so-called ‘communization’ theory can be seen in the discussions reproduced in Endnotes, (2008), *Endnotes 1: Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the 20th Century*.

from mainstream readings of Marx's thought, communization theory suggests that this is what draws them back into theoretical orthodoxy.⁴¹⁵ Affirming the identity of the worker involves asserting an identity which, in order to "liberate itself from capitalist domination is to turn labour into the basis of social relations between all individuals, to liberate productive labour, take up the means of production, and abolish the anarchy of capitalism and private property."⁴¹⁶ In this way, they suggest that theories based on the affirmation of labour, such as the form of autonomism advocated by authors such as Hardt & Negri (and it is worth acknowledging that not all branches of autonomism do this- see for example the writings of John Holloway), share the same philosophical foundations as more classical forms of socialist thought in which labour becomes the architrave of a new social order. These foundations go beyond autonomist Marxism, and indeed Marxism *tout court*, demonstrated by the dominance of this way of thinking in other liberation struggles, where resistance to the exploitative and dehumanising structures of capitalism has usually been about affirming some sort of identity or way of life against and above the totality of capitalist social relations.

By way of contrast to the political frameworks through which political emancipation was conceived in the 19th and 20th Centuries, communization theory urges the radicalization of autonomist and council communist thought by establishing that emancipation cannot be rooted in the liberation *of* labour, but can only be achieved by man's liberation *from* it.⁴¹⁷ But rather than being a statement of the deficiencies of hitherto existing socialist theory, it is an historical proclamation: only in our current era can we understand political opposition to capitalism in terms of communization. It is important to re-iterate that for theorists of communisation, the posing of political transformation as the liberation *of* labour is not a theoretical error, and that the particular *problematique* of communisation can only have emerged as a direct result of the particular mode of subsumption that capitalism has produced.⁴¹⁸ Whilst autonomism is notable for its emphasis placed on the subjective dimensions of class struggle, and its belief that resistance to capital drives the key dynamics of the

⁴¹⁵ 'Theorie Communiste, 'Much Ado About Nothing'.

⁴¹⁶ 'Theorie Communiste, 'Much Ado About Nothing'.

⁴¹⁷ This is, of course, a central feature of the corpus of Moishe Postone. See for example: Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*.

⁴¹⁸ Noys, 'The Fabric of Struggles', p. 14.

capitalist economy, potentially pushing capitalism into its final, fatal crisis stage, communism theory has contrary predilections, developing an ‘objectivist’ reading of capital’s role in its own overcoming. The way in which capital has developed means that the social-metabolic system it has engendered (capitalism) creates the conditions of its own demise, in the form of communism.

The theoretical pillar that makes this reading possible is the concept of real subsumption. If the concept of ‘real subsumption’ is central to the corpus of the autonomists, then it has an equal, if slightly different significance in the communization literature. Whilst for Hardt, Negri, Lazzarato, and a number of other autonomists, real subsumption is the basis of the argument that labour has become immaterial and cognitive,⁴¹⁹ real subsumption is understood by communization theory in terms of mankind’s terminal self-estrangement.⁴²⁰ For early theorists of communization, this disjuncture is stark and absolute. Jacques Camatte, for example, suggested that there is an absolute opposition between ‘undomesticated humanity’ existing outside the capitalist totality and administered life.⁴²¹ Although most contemporary proponents reject this analysis, and his thesis of ‘exit’,⁴²² there is a wider recognition that the current era is subject to a metabolic rift between the community of capital and the human community, a rift that has shorn the human realm of ends from the financialised, commodified world in a way that renders it shorn of feedback mechanisms that could potentially alter humanity’s course.⁴²³

According to *Theorie Communiste*, real subsumption has taken place in ‘three waves’. In telling the story of real subsumption, they demonstrate the influence of the autonomist approach, as the abstract schema of real subsumption can be used to map the way in which the political *problematique* of subversive movements reflects shifts

⁴¹⁹ Brassier, R., (2014), ‘Wandering Abstraction’, *Mute Magazine* 13.02.2014, (available online at: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wandering-abstraction>), (accessed on: 19.03.2014).

⁴²⁰ Brassier, ‘Wandering Abstraction’.

⁴²¹ Camatte, J., (1975), *The Wandering Humanity*, (Detroit, Black & Red press),
Camatte, J., (1995), *The World We Must Leave and Other Essays*, (Brooklyn, Autonomedia).

⁴²² See for example Endnotes, ‘What are we to do?’, p. 33.

⁴²³ Wark, M., (2015), *Molecular Red*, (London, Verso).

in the character of the capitalist class relation.⁴²⁴ The first phase of real subsumption ran from roughly the First World War to the 1960s, during which the class relation underwent a qualitative transformation, insofar as the reproduction of the proletariat became increasingly integrated into the circuit of the reproduction of capital, via certain mediations through which the state and capital itself became directly involved in the reproduction of labour power.⁴²⁵ At the same time, the forms of representation and struggle associated by workers' movements were caught within these mediations.⁴²⁶ The second stage of real subsumption, begun with the capitalist restructuring of 1968-73, is characterized by the decomposition of these forms of mediation. The turn towards councilism, or workers' self-management in the European workers' movement of this period is, for groups such as Endnotes, the traumatic 'working through' of the last vestiges of the programmatist era of the workers' movement.⁴²⁷ A new stage of real subsumption emerged as capital increasingly becomes parasitic on these institutions it created for the reproduction of the working class, these institutions become something to be rejected, rather than vectors through which class struggle can be fought. Communization, and with it commons, emerges as an important political perspective with the breakdown of these systems of welfare and state intervention, but also in a situation in which this breakdown calls into question the totality of capital.

It is an oft-remarked-upon feature of the contemporary global economy that all labour that is subsumed under capital is productive.⁴²⁸ But the contradiction that we are facing in the global economy is that through the universal valorization of capital, and the intensification of the logic of capital accumulation, "capital both exploits tendentially fewer workers, expelling labour-power from production (both relatively and ultimately absolutely) and it attempts to raise the rate of exploitation among the

⁴²⁴ Endnotes, (2011), 'The History of Subsumption', *Endnotes II: Misery and the Value Form*, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-history-of-subsumption>), (accessed on: 13.05.2015).

⁴²⁵ Endnotes, 'The History of Subsumption'.

⁴²⁶ Endnotes, 'The History of Subsumption'.

⁴²⁷ Endnotes, 'What are we to do?', p. 26.

⁴²⁸ Rust Bunny Collective, (2014), 'Under the Riot Gear', *Sic 2*, (unpaginated version available online: <http://sicjournal.org/311-2/>), (accessed on: 13.05.2015).

relatively diminished work force.”⁴²⁹ Capital’s accumulation of ever-greater surplus value is accompanied by an ever-greater accumulation of ‘surplus population’, excluded from the process of production. Increasingly, the proletariat becomes that which is produced by capital, without producing capital.⁴³⁰ Commenting on the rise of the communisation perspective, Ray Brassier has suggested that this amounts to a disintegration of the proletariat’s self-identification as producers of capital,⁴³¹ which makes it impossible for the class to affirm itself ‘as such’ against capital.⁴³² However, this is not so much an imperative as something that can already be seen within contemporary movements. There are many social movements in the world today that proponents of communisation have suggested are *negative* rather than *positive* in their orientation, and concerned with abolishing the conditions of their own reproduction. This, argue groups such as *Theorie Communiste*, is the logical corollary of the crisis of programmatism: the 20th Century’s debates about the nature of a transition from capitalism to a more just social order are abandoned, in favour of the direct and immediate abolition of capital’s rule,⁴³³ and the destruction of capital as “self-valorizing value”, and the destruction of the reproduction of “workers as workers *for* capital.”⁴³⁴ At the same time, proponents of communisation do not regard negation as a ground-clearing exercise for future communist measures: the transition from capitalism to communism is not something that happens *after* the revolution.⁴³⁵ Movements must focus on the content of their action, and specifically on the supersession of the value form and overcoming the capital-labour relation. Political

⁴²⁹ Endnotes, (2011), ‘The Moving Contradiction’, *Endnotes II: Misery and the Value Form*, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-moving-contradiction>), (accessed on: 13.05.2015).

⁴³⁰ Endnotes, (2011), ‘Crisis in the Class Relation’, *Endnotes II: Misery and the Value Form*, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-crisis-in-the-class-relation>), (accessed on: 07.03.2015).

⁴³¹ Brassier, ‘Wandering Abstraction’.

⁴³² Elsewhere, Alberto Toscano has spoken about the problems that surplus population has caused for creating a unified agency in opposition to capital. Toscano, A., (2012), ‘The Uses of the Useless: Political Philosophies of Unemployment’, presented at *Historical Materialism 2012* conference, (10.11.2012).

⁴³³ Theorie Communiste, ‘The Glass Floor’, *Riff-raff*, (available online at: http://www.riff-raff.se/wiki/en/theorie_communiste/the_glass_floor), (accessed on: 21.03.2014).

⁴³⁴ Endnotes, ‘Crisis in the Class Relation’.

⁴³⁵ Endnotes, (2008), ‘Afterword’, *Endnotes 1: Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the 20th Century*, (unpaginated version available online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-afterword>), (accessed on: 20.03.2014).

struggle must grapple with the *form* that capitalism takes as a matter of its first priority.

Communisation brings together its theoretical mapping of the capitalist socius with its attempt to theorise political action in response to the following question:

“How will the overcoming of the class relation take place given that it is impossible for the proletariat to affirm itself as a class yet we are still faced with the problem of this relation?”⁴³⁶

This necessitates a particular orientation towards the historical corpus of Marxist thought, and the way that emancipatory politics are derived from this. First, against the autonomist tendency to place explanatory weight on *The Grundrisse*, it necessitates foregrounding the concerns of the first part of *Capital, Vol. I*, and the significance of the value form, as described by the writings of recent commentators on Marx such as Michael Heinrich and Robert Kurz.⁴³⁷ The commodity that Marx examines in *Capital, Vol. I* is the architrave of the capitalist totality, the foundation of Marx’s attempts to grasp it theoretically, and the point at which the supersession of capital must take place. This reading necessitates breaking with a number of shibboleths of left politics, as commonly constructed. In particular, it necessitates realizing that the labour movement, as it has traditionally been conceived is primarily a feature of the modern, commodity-fetishistic system, given that it attempts to valorize one pole of the fetish form that must be abandoned if capitalist exploitation is to be eradicated.⁴³⁸ Emancipating labour as labour does not mean emancipation from the capital system, but the reproduction of some of its central elements in a new social form. The corollary of this is that the fetishized form of value must be eradicated if emancipation of the worker from value is to be effective and meaningful. More than

⁴³⁶ Endnotes, ‘What are we to do?’, p. 29.

⁴³⁷ Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*.

Kurz, R., (1999), *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus: ein Abgesang auf die Marktwirtschaft*, (Frankfurt am Main, Eichborn Verlag).

⁴³⁸ Kurz, R., (1999), ‘Marx 2000’, *Weg und Ziel* 2/99, (available online at: <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnpbXndndWNiZXJrZWxleXxneDoxOGZhMjUyMmM0MjQwZTNI>), (accessed on: 05.05.2015).

this, however, this reading of Marx suggests that political action is intrinsically connected to crisis.

Communitarianism re-frames our perspective on commons by placing commons in relation to crisis. It focuses our analysis not on questions of primitive accumulation, or the way that commons oppose the violence of capitalist accumulation, but rather on the creation of surplus populations, and the way in which capital- which attempts to sustain its returns- is rendering more and more people external to its processes of its own valorisation. It suggests that commons emerge at the point where capital's social metabolism- and by extension the way that it reproduces life in a fashion that is mediated by value and the expanded reproduction of capital- breaks down. The breakdown of capital's social metabolism shows the power that social movements have, not simply to become autonomous from capital, but power to abolish capital and the wealth that is bound up by it. Taking this relationality into account is key to understanding the contemporary conjuncture. Philosopher Nathan Brown has suggested that if the autonomist focus on the working class marks a Copernican turn in the study of political resistance, the turn to the class relation as a relation of reproduction between capital and the working class is its theory of relativity.⁴³⁹ Rather than dividing the study of the capitalist economy into two- the structural conditions of process (usually the preserve of political economy, and takes the form of the study of capital's self-valorising value) and the study of the subject of activism (usually the preserve of political theories)- the value-theoretical emphasis on the class relation suggests a way of looking at the relationship between structural determinants and action which might displace the bourgeois antinomies of spontaneity and organisation, process and subject, freedom and determination, which have placed irresolvable that have so-often lain at the heart of Marxist and Critical Theory. The key to escaping these apparently antinomic dualisms is through mapping the co-determination of the reproduction of capital, with the re-production of labour, and understanding commons as interventions into this relationship.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ Brown, N., (2012), 'Rational Kernel, Real Movement: Badiou and Theorie Communiste in the Age of Riots', *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion*, (available at: <http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/content/nathan-brown-badiou-and-theorie-communiste>), (accessed on: 01.07.2013).

⁴⁴⁰ Endnotes, 'Crisis in the Class Relation'.

This co-determination dictates that the law of capitalist accumulation, far from being parasitic upon labour's self-organisation, absolutely constitutes the forms of self-organisation taken by labour. There is a paradox at work here: while it is only by rejecting one pole of the capital relation as constitutive of resistance that emancipation can be achieved, at the same time, the breakdown of its existing reproductive strategies challenge capitalism at its very heart,⁴⁴¹ and create space for political projects that threaten the hegemony of the capital system. In this, communisation theorists draw on particular elements of Marx's thought in proclaiming that at its heart, the logic of capital undermines the reproduction of the conditions of its own reproduction through the pauperization of ever-greater swathes of the working population.⁴⁴² Capital's social metabolism, Marx suggested in *Capital, Vol. I*, rests upon a paradox, a paradox which means that the greater the social wealth produced, the greater the masses excluded from that social wealth: in Marx's words, "[t]he greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the lazarus-layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*"⁴⁴³

The surplus population of those thrown outside of the circuits of valorization of capital, are thrown outside society's dominant circuits of reproduction also. Labour is an external requirement of the valorization of capital that is brought into the circuits of capitalist reproduction, and then cast aside by it. Remarking on this, *Endnotes* suggest that "capitalist production itself appears increasingly superfluous to the proletariat: it is that which makes us proletarians, and then abandons us here."⁴⁴⁴ The

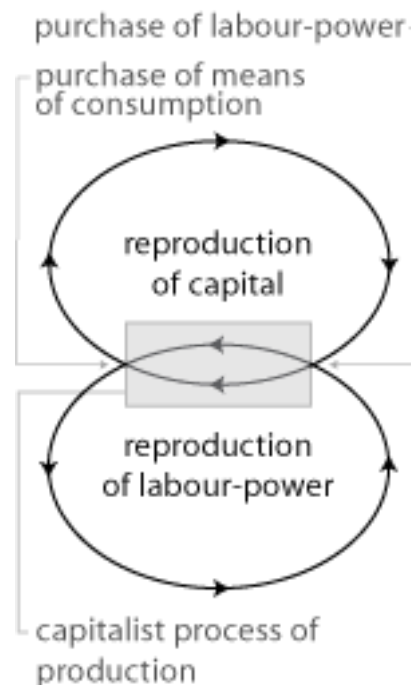
⁴⁴¹ Endnotes, 'Crisis in the Class Relation'.

⁴⁴² See for example: Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, chapter 25.

⁴⁴³ Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, p. 638.

⁴⁴⁴ Endnotes, 'Crisis in the Class Relation'.

relationship between production and reproduction is fundamental to the way in which the valorization of capital becomes about more than simply the reproduction of capital, encompassing the reproduction of a totality of capitalist social relations: “[t]he self-founding of the capitalist class relation is also that of the *totality* of capitalist social relations. With this process of self-reproduction, it is not only workers and capital that are reproduced, but also the state and all its organs, the family structure and the system of gender relations, the constitution of the individual as a subject with a specific *internality* opposed to the world of production and so on. It is only through the repetition of their reproduction — pivoting upon that of the capitalist class relation — that these many moments come to bear any systematicity, and thus to constitute a totality.”⁴⁴⁵ As such, our analysis of phenomena such as commoning should focus on the way that pressures on employment and real wages force ever more of social reproduction outside the spheres of life that are mediated by the wage. *Endnotes* use a diagram to demonstrate that the reproduction of the proletariat is mutually imbricated with the reproduction of capital:



⁴⁴⁵ Endnotes, ‘Crisis in the Class Relation’.

As a result, the hermeneutic of communisation encourages us to see the emergence of commons not in terms of the strength of a collective class subject, able to impose its will on capital, but precisely because the reproduction of capital is producing weaknesses within existing class subjects. This analysis suggests that the emergence of commons within Oakland and Rome demonstrate the weakness of the reproduction of the proletariat, as much as they demonstrate the strength of a collective class subject. The wage no longer supports the kind of reproduction that it once did, and with the state's mediating role transformed (its withdrawal of social security, and subsidies in areas such as education and housing), the externalities of social reproduction are increasingly being taken up by individuals and communities outside the wage relation. This turns the analysis provided through the autonomist theoretical lens on its head, suggesting that it is precisely the weakness of social subjects, rather than their strength that makes possible the types of political action rooted in commons that have emerged since the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

Rather than celebrating the weakness of organized labour (in the fashion of neoliberalism), communisation theory understands this weakness as the unbinding of the social relations that have tied anti-systemic movements into capital's system of social-metabolic reproduction. It is a combination of a sociological transformation and approaches to political composition that allows for the emergence of a new agency that can do away with capital. As such, communisation theory encourages us to understand the crisis against which political action is taking place in Oakland as a crisis of the working class and its class unity, but a crisis that brings with it new potentials for political action. In particular, it allows for a departure from existing forms of resistance as mediated and maintained through existing city institutions, the politics of place through which cities such as Oakland come to be divided according to class, race & gender, and the political-economic identity created by existing mass working class institutions. Speaking about the crisis of the class relation in Greece, *Theorie Communiste* suggest that:

⁴⁴⁶ Endnotes, (2010), 'Crisis in the Class Relation', *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value Form*, p. 17.

“The capitalist mode of production has itself run out of future... It is the crisis of reproduction as such that annihilates the future and constructs the youth as the subject of social protest in this instance. The future, in the capitalist mode of production, is the constantly renewed reproduction of the fundamental capitalist social relation between labor-power and means of the production as the principal result of capitalist production itself. The crisis of financialized capital is not simply the setting, the canvas, the circumstance underlying the riots in Greece: it is the specific form of the capitalist mode of production running out of future, and by definition it immediately places the crisis at the level of reproduction.”⁴⁴⁷

The ‘double paradox’ of this particular cycle of struggle, and the challenges facing the activism in cities such as Oakland, is that the proletariat is fighting as a class against a set of economic circumstances that themselves unbind it as a class. The struggle facing contemporary anti-capitalist movements is a struggle with and against these conditions in order not to be integrated into the capitalist economy as a class. This is not necessarily a particularly new suggestion: as Marx and Engels themselves suggested in 1844, the task of the proletariat is:

“to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat. ... When the proletariat is victorious, it by no means becomes the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it, private property.”⁴⁴⁸

Interpreted in these terms, the production of commons in Rome and Oakland are dependent upon the rejection of the conditions of life in Rome and Oakland, and the ways in which they are conditioned by structural exclusions based on race and class, and the stuttering systems of exploitation upon which their economies is based. The production of commons is a negative action, based in a shared experience of abstracting oneself and the social relations that constitute the self from structures of

⁴⁴⁷ Théorie Communiste, (2009), ‘The Glass Floor’, (available online at: http://www.riff-raff.se/wiki/en/theorie_communiste/the_glass_floor), (accessed on: 20.07.2015).

⁴⁴⁸ Marx, K. & Engels, F., (1844), ‘The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism’, *Marx and Engels Collected Works* 4, (London, Lawrence & Wishart), p. 36.

alienation and domination. As such, the types of solidarity and unity found within the movement are not a result of the valorisation of class, but its opposite, solidarity found in acting out of the conditions of class (albeit on the basis of potentials that lie within the class relation). In part, this is what set the movement in Oakland and Rome at odds with the official institutions of the left, which are threatened by the self-abolishing tendencies of the Occupiers, and their refusal to play according to the established 'rules' of politics.

At times, these actions become more than simply the disavowal of their position within the class relation, attempting to extend the antagonism beyond secession and towards a more active disruption of the capital relation. This could be the basis of a more radical, and a more ambitious project of political recomposition. Indeed, as one commentator within the Oakland movement suggested at the time of the port action: “[w]ith today’s port action, we invoke the specter of a more subversive kind of occupation: the communisation of spaces and things actively functioning as capital.”⁴⁴⁹ In this regard, communisation, and the praxis of the movement points to something very significant that is sometimes missed within the autonomist account of commoning. The world the commoner has to win is not one that they can completely produce anew. Rather, this world is already constituted as capital; it is capital itself that must be commoned. Without the commoning of dead labour that is already alienated as capital, a society predicated on commons will be impossible.⁴⁵⁰ It is worth noting, of course, that this is something that commons movements from Rome to Oakland have, for the most part, been unable to achieve thus far.

Whereas autonomism understands commons as something that are emerging as something that is external to capitalism- we could say that it is the only ‘truly human perspective’⁴⁵¹ - communisation attempts to more fully establish the social determinations of commoning, as something that is made possible by the mutual determination of the class relation, or the simultaneous development of human

⁴⁴⁹ Anonymous, (2011), ‘Blockade-Strike-Communize?’, *globaloccupation.wordpress.com*, (available at: <http://globaloccupation.wordpress.com/2011/12/13/blockade-strike-communize/>), (accessed on: 10.07.2013).

⁴⁵⁰ Marx, K. & Engels, F., (1975), *The German Ideology*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart), p. 49.

⁴⁵¹ De Angelis, ‘Beyond the technological and social paradigms’, p. 118.

subjectivity and capital. In understanding acts of commoning as something that takes place within a structural totality of capital, brings us closer to the perspective articulated by Marx and Engels in *Capital*, and the *1844 Manuscripts*. The reason why this is so significant is that grasping Marx and Engels' understanding of fetishism properly means developing an appreciation of the significance of capital as alienated labour. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' thought underwent a profound transformation, with Marx's identification of the centrality of labour to human existence, and the significance of alienation as a sclerosis on man's current productive activities.⁴⁵² Their earlier, left-Hegelian attempt to understand political activity in terms of self-determination, autonomy, and the exercise of collective sovereignty, encountered the very real roadblock of capital. The way in which social control is appropriated by the apparently non-political social forces of capital forces a detour through capital and its various mediations in order understand why emancipation cannot be brought about simply through exercising autonomy.

Communitisation, Autonomy and the Importance of Mediations

So, what can we learn from this experience? The experiences that produced communitisation theory suggests that a theory of commons and political recomposition through commons must take these various forms of mediation seriously. Mediation was fundamental to Marx's approach to understanding the influence of capital on the modern world. István Mészáros has argued that mediation is deeply imbricated with Marx's philosophy, and his conceptions of alienation and freedom. Marx's philosophy, Mészáros claims, begins with the recognition that human freedom is dependent upon finding resolution to the problem of man's relationship to nature. This 'social-metabolic' relation to nature is the human condition, and the reason why production is the fundamental characteristic of man. This relationship to nature is an ineluctable feature of the human condition, but in class society, it is distorted through mediations that force man to relate to nature in a distorted and alienated fashion.

⁴⁵² Arthur, C.J., (1986), *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his Relation to Hegel*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell).

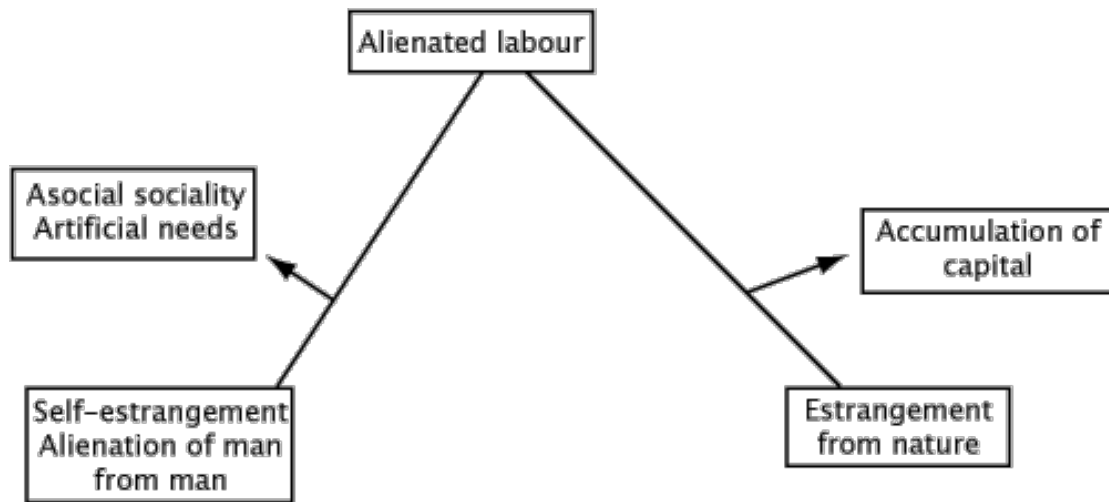


Figure 2

First and second order mediations in Marx's philosophy

As a result of the distinctions between these different types of mediation, Mészáros suggests that Marx's philosophy is careful not to reject all mediations *tout court*.⁴⁵³ The supersession of capital is not the rejection of all mediations, but the supersession of the particular mediations of private property, the exchange economy, and the division of labour.⁴⁵⁴ Man's 'first order mediation', that is to say the way in which humans are required to produce the means of subsistence is an ineluctable historical horizon, but the *form* taken by this productive activity in the contemporary world is contingent upon a number social mediations. The alienation of labour is not fundamental to the human condition, but is produced by the historically specific 'second-order-mediations' of capital and the state. At the same time that the particular alienations of the capitalist mode of production are contingent, productive activity is caught up within a dialectic of freedom and necessity, which cannot be abrogated by opposing free activity to the necessity of production under capitalism.

In conceptualising capitalism as a totality, that is to say as a social system, communisation theory points beyond the analysis that is usually given by autonomist critique because it takes mediations seriously. Taking these mediations seriously is important, because they help us to see why, if they are to be successful, commons movements must become more than just the production of local commons. 'Commons in one city' are destined to fail, because commons are inimical to the social

⁴⁵³ Mészáros, I., (2005), *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, (London, The Merlin Press).

⁴⁵⁴ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*.

mediations of capital at the level of totality, and by extension, the social mediations of capital at the level of totality are inimical to commons. The generalised abstraction of the value form, and its mediators, such as the organised violence of the state, serve to extinguish attempts to constitute social systems organised according to alternative values. Capital has a wider social logic of totalisation that cannot be reduced simply to the valorisation of value. This has a number of significant implications, not least giving new significance to primitive accumulation (a dynamic that is often associated with struggles over commons): within this understanding, primitive accumulation should not so much be understood as individual acts of appropriation, so much it should be as understood in terms of a general violence that mediates social activity in a way that directs it towards the capital form. Capitalism is not a series of individual acts by which labour comes to be forcibly subsumed beneath the individual command of the capitalist, but a more generalised- and consequently a more pervasive- social relationship. In this way, capital is not simply an extractive logic of self-valorising value, but a wider principle of sociality rooted in universalisation. This corollary of this is that as a social force, capital can only be eradicated at the level of totality, and political action must at least attempt to oppose it at the level of totality in response.

Marx himself, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and elsewhere, demonstrated the necessity of an anti-capitalist politics that operates at the level of totality.⁴⁵⁵ One of Marx's key objections to the ideas of his philosophical contemporary, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, was that Proudhon's claim that in a new, post-capitalist society, one form of labour (the value of an activity) could be directly exchanged for another (the value of the product of the activity) was based on a misconception of what capital is.⁴⁵⁶ Marx argued that so long as value production persisted, labour time could not be *directly* exchanged for other labour time, because the productive process is, by very necessity, only an *indirectly* social activity. Attempts to transform production and escape the universalizing dimension of capital on a local level will inevitably fail, because of the general character of capitalist production. Any future social formations that place commons at their heart will have to take capital's universalizing dynamic

⁴⁵⁵ Marx, K., (1847), *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the 'Philosophy of Poverty' by M. Proudhon*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/>), (accessed on: 20.05.2015).

⁴⁵⁶ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to 'the Philosophy of Poverty' by M. Proudhon*.

seriously. From the beginning, Marx was a deeply *social* thinker. As he argued in *The Grundrisse*: “if this assumption is made, the general character of labor would not be given to it only by exchange; its assumed communal character would determine participation in the products. The communal character of production would from the outset make the product into a communal, general one. The exchange initially occurring in production, which would not be an exchange of exchange values but of activities determined by communal needs and communal purposes, would include from the beginning the individual’s participation in the communal world of products [...] labor would be *posited* as general labor prior to exchange, i.e., the exchange of products would not in any way be the *medium* mediating the participation of the individual in general production. Mediation of course has to take place.”⁴⁵⁷ In talking in this way, Marx was clearly asserting the impossibility of communal life in one *locale*, or even one country. Rather, as Peter Hudis has suggested in his recent book, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, Marx’s thought points towards the institution of a communal network of associations within which value production has been superseded on a systemic level.⁴⁵⁸ Irrespective of post-capitalist political organisation, Marx’s analysis indicates that if we want to think about its supersession, we must think about capital from the perspective of totality, and any postcapitalist social organization must take the systemic level seriously.

Whereas autonomist theory starts with living labour as the driver of capitalist social forms (their alienation under capitalism can be overcome by turning this labour to other ends), communisation theory starts with labour as a substance that is constrained by the form of capital itself. Whichever way it turns, it encounters the relationship between labour and capital as the constitutive limit not only of the possibilities of political intervention, but also of its very existence as a class subject. Political action must thus seek not just to exercise freedom in new and imaginative ways, but also to overcome the very real obstacles to that freedom. How capital is to be overcome is perhaps crucial to the differences between the way that each approach understands acts of commoning, and the sufficiency of these actions. For autonomism, because it understands political movements from the perspective of the actors themselves, the sufficiency of commoning is self-evident. By way of contrast, within the theoretical

⁴⁵⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 108.

⁴⁵⁸ Hudis, P., (2013), *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, (Leiden, Brill).

constructions of communisation theory, acts of commoning, rather than being sufficient interventions, or indeed even being political in and of themselves, can only be understood as the terrain upon which political action takes place. When communisation theory suggests that exercises in commoning such as Occupy Oakland “pose[s] the question of communism in the contemporary era,” then it is not the same as saying that they are adequate forms of political action in order to supersede the capital relation. Indeed, in asking the question of what it means to do politics in late capitalism, it might well be that communisation theory asks the correct question, and indicates the necessary limits of a viable answer to that question but does not provide a viable answer.

Indeed, despite asking this question in this way, it appears that as a theory of political action, the limitations of the communisation perspective are exposed. In posing the question of politics in terms of the supersession of the value form, it *both* neatly encapsulates the horizon within which contemporary anti-capitalist social movements are formed, *and* falls short of articulating a clear political programme for how the supersession of the value form is to be achieved. Adopting a structurally determinist theory of the supersession of capitalism, it forecloses the perspective of political action from the perspective of the totality. In being unable to move beyond the forms of commoning embodied by the actions in Oakland and Rome, communisation remains unable to articulate a wider political movement that might be effective in establishing commons as a more fundamental part of peoples’ lives. In part, this is because communisation depends on a theory of crisis, the secular crisis of capitalism’s social-metabolic system of reproduction. Only if this holds true, and capital *is* undergoing a secular, *terminal* crisis, does communisation go from being descriptive of certain dynamics within mature capitalist economies, to a genuinely *political* theory of capital’s supersession.

As a result, while communisation gives us a number of tools to think about transition and political recomposition that are not afforded to us by autonomism, it fails to articulate a truly political perspective in contradistinction to that of autonomism. Indeed, and perhaps surprisingly given the wildly different theoretical presuppositions of the two perspectives, the type of political action explored by communisation theory is very similar to that dealt with by autonomist theories. Indeed, it would be accurate

to suggest that the analysis carried out by groups such as *Endnotes* and *Theorie Communiste* implies a return to the themes of classical anarchism, or at least a politics closer to autonomist strategies than it is to the party form associated with orthodox Marxism-Leninism or Trotskyism.⁴⁵⁹ Given that communization theory focuses on local instances where the continuity of social reproduction is called into question, and needs are immediately satisfied through direct access to use values, it is often assumed that communization theory is giving these normative weight by placing them front and centre of movement practice. If this is the case, then communization is, indeed, either committed to insurrectionary political action, or deeply deterministic in its account of social change, which is driven by changes that are internal to the value form rather than brought about by political interventions. The task for a political theory of commons is to draw on the insights of communisation, to attempt to develop an analysis of commons in relation to the totality of capitalist social relations, and to attempt to develop a political theory on this basis.

Indeed, to this end there are two key theoretical dimensions of communisation that I would like to particularly emphasise at the end of this discussion, which lead to two key political corollaries, in turn paving the way for an alternative reading of the political recomposition that happens through post-2008 social movements. Communisation foregrounds the two categories that have particular significance: the totality of capital; and the centrality of overcoming the value form to transition beyond the capital system. These two categories have a number of significant corollaries. First, because the value form is something that constrains and determines life at the level of the whole, this means that *emancipation from capital* can only be overcome through political action at the level of this totality. This means that-practically as well as philosophically- the potential for the supersession of the capital system is derived from the *historical dimensions of capital* itself. This theoretical proposition is manifest in the identification of capitalist crisis itself as a motive force of political and emancipatory dynamics, and the importance of the self-negation of the proletariat for the translation of the abolition of capital into political action. In the final section of this chapter, I will attempt to tease out the implications of this analysis

⁴⁵⁹ Flatschart, E., Milchman, A. & Merchant, J., (2013), 'Marx and *Wertkritik*', *Platypus Review* 56, (available online at: <http://platypus1917.org/2013/05/01/marx-and-wertkritik/>), (accessed on: 14.08.2015).

for the commons movements analysed in this thesis, and the implications of its analysis for our understanding of commons as a challenge to the totality of capital and autonomist Marxist theory as a political theory of the supersession of the capitalist mode of production..

Communisation, Recomposition and the Reading of Capital

The challenge offered by communisation suggests a number of things that must be taken into account by any theory of recomposition. These factors can be summarised as follows:

- The significance of the contradictions of capital. Whilst within autonomist theory, following Tronti's 'Copernican turn', there is a tendency to focus on the subjective aspect of class recomposition, we cannot focus on this alone. Rather, there is a necessity to understand the capital relation in terms of the historical dimension of capital itself. This means giving more attention to the way that the capital relation is determined by the historical characteristics of accumulation strategies, and their role in producing weaknesses within capital's totalising project. One such dimension that communisation theory encourages us to explore is the role of capital in producing surplus populations expelled from the capital relation, but nonetheless wholly conditioned by it. A strategic perspective that takes this into account is the logical corollary of this recognition.
- The significance of capitalist totality. Communisation theory's interpretation of events in Oakland and beyond suggests that commons emerge in a context that can only be understood in terms of the totality of capitalist social relations. This suggests an understanding of the ontological ground of capitalism that takes totality seriously.⁴⁶⁰ In other words, it demands that we understand value as something that can only be realised in light of the totality of the social system of capital.

⁴⁶⁰ Arthur, C.J., (2004), *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital*, (Leiden, Brill), p. 8.

The next section of this chapter outlines the implications of these recognitions for a theory of political recomposition around commons, and for questions of transition. Before unpacking these in greater detail, I would like to draw attention to the implications that this has for our reading of *Capital*, and particularly the reading of *Capital* carried out through Mario Tronti's 'Copernican turn' in chapter one of this thesis. These challenges to the autonomist reading of capital put forward by Tronti and reinterpreted in different ways by Hardt & Negri and De Angelis, suggest that a re-appraisal of the significance and internal conceptual structure of *Capital* is in order. The ground laid out by proponents of 'communisation theory' has fundamental implications for the interrelationship of value and totality. Indeed, they suggest that what Marx provided in *Capital Volume One*, and particularly in its first chapter, is not a self-contained 'theory of value', but the first step in a broader process of making sense of the social being of alienated life. In this sense, communisation theory or value-form theory "is actually but the first step in the broader process of dialectical cognition through which...[the social subject of resistance]...comes to discover the alienated character of its social being and, consequently, of its consciousness and will."⁴⁶¹ Indeed, Marx's own focus on the value form in chapter one of *Capital, Vol. I*, was not a fully-formed theory of capital, but rather an attempt to identify the simplest expression of alienated social life. If we are to accurately understand the way in which capital affects contemporary life, we must grasp the contradictory historical development of the ways in which alienation is manifest in the world. This suggests that a re-conceptualisation of *Capital* is necessary that deals with the problems of capitalist alienation at a higher level.

Questions remain about whether this reformulation of capital at a higher level can be conducted in a way that is consistent with an autonomist conceptual framework. This is not because autonomism is not interested in questions of globality: on the contrary, autonomism recognises that capital operates on a global scale.⁴⁶² Rather, the difference lies in the respective ways that autonomist theory and communisation

⁴⁶¹ Kiciloff, A. & Starosta, G., (2007), 'On Materiality and Social Form: A Political Critique of Rubin's Value-Form Theory', *Historical Materialism* 15, p. 41.

⁴⁶² De Angelis, M., (1993), 'An Interview with Harry Cleaver', *vis-à-vis* 1, (available online at: <https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/InterviewwithHarryCleaver.html>), (accessed on: 20.02.2016),

See also De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, pp. 115-130.

theory deal with the globality of capital. For autonomists such as De Angelis and Cleaver, the global dimension of capital tends towards a view of global class struggle.⁴⁶³ The autonomist preoccupation with class struggle is a challenge to the idea that capital is the self-moving subject of modernity. This is an ideological artifice of capital itself: capital is, after all, nothing more than labour.⁴⁶⁴ Communisation theory tends towards an interpretation of capital rooted in the idea that its totality has some agency. This is not to say that capital is anything other than the inversion and alienation of human activity, but it is to say that the totality has its own causal effects. As Christopher Arthur argues, “[b]ecause capital as a totality given to us cannot be known by a linear logic, only a systematic development of categories can demonstrate the grounding of its abstract moments in the whole.”⁴⁶⁵ The significance of capital for communisation, and theories of systematic dialectic that have influenced it, is not simply that it is a relation of force (an interpretation that is particularly strong in the account of Hardt & Negri, but I would argue is residual in all accounts developed from the work of Mario Tronti): capital has a certain *conceptuality*.⁴⁶⁶ This is something that must be rejected (communisation reveals its debt to Adorno’s critical theory here⁴⁶⁷), but the same time, we must understand the conceptuality of capital- and the role it plays- in order to be able to leverage social power against it. This reading of *Capital* is rooted in the recognition of capital, as self-valorising value, becoming the dominant, or overarching subject, of commodity exchange, and through it, sociality itself. As Marx put it in *Capital, Vol. I*: “value is here the *subject of a process* in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization [*Selbstverwertung*].”⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶³ See for example: De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 53.

⁴⁶⁴ See for example, Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*,

Another proponent of this view is Enrique Dussel.

See for example: Dussel, E., (2001), *Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861-63*, Y. Angulo (trans.), (London, Routledge).

⁴⁶⁵ Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital*, p. 223.

⁴⁶⁶ Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital*, p. 243.

⁴⁶⁷ Adorno, T.W., (1978), *Minima Moralia*, E.F.N. Jephcott (trans.), (London, Verso).

⁴⁶⁸ Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, p. 255.

Prima facie, this conceptualisation of capital may seem like a radical departure from the autonomist method outlined at the beginning of this thesis, but the *conceptuality* of capital does not need to negate all of the assumptions of autonomist theory: it is compatible with the idea that society is conflictual and antagonistic from the outset;⁴⁶⁹ and it is also compatible with the idea that critical agency can be leveraged from outside the agencies that valorise capital (ie. by agents that are not the proletariat).⁴⁷⁰ What it cannot be reconciled with, however, is certain interpretations of Mario Tronti's 'Copernican turn'. If, as systematic dialectic suggests, capital has a *conceptuality*, then the totality of capital cannot be ignored. Recognising capital's conceptuality, however, does not foreclose the idea that resistant subjects might be created. Indeed, Moishe Postone suggests that "[the] determination of capital as the historical Subject may seem to deny the history-making practices of humans," but in reality this is far from the case.⁴⁷¹ Rather, all this move does is to imply that whatever transformative powers the political action of workers might have- *both* capital-reproducing *and* capital-transcending action-, bears some relationship to capital's conceptual structure.

This has a number of implications for the way that we locate commons *vis-à-vis* capital. Indeed, the main practical difference between theories of communisation and the type of commons thinking developed within autonomism, is the location of critical resistance against capital. In the opening chapter, two alternative perspectives within the autonomist tradition were outlined. Drawing on Mario Tronti's 'Copernican turn' in different ways, Hardt & Negri see commons emerging from within the capitalist social form, as an outgrowth of forms of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism,

⁴⁶⁹ Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*.

⁴⁷⁰ There are, of course, wide swathes of the literature on *communisation* that suggest that it is wrong to "postulate that there is an irreducible element of (abstractly free?) human subjectivity which remains external to the alienated forms of social mediation through which human beings reproduce social life, and that it is there that the ground for revolutionary practice is to be found. Emancipatory political subjectivity is thus conceived as ontologically transcendently rooted."

Starosta, G., (2004), 'Rethinking Marx's Mature Social Theory. Introduction to the symposium on Moishe Postone's Time, Labor and Social Domination', *Historical Materialism* 12(3), p.46.

⁴⁷¹ Postone, M., (1996), *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), p. 80.

whereas Massimo De Angelis sees commons emerging through value-struggles at the edge of the capitalist socius. The perspective put forward by communisation theory challenges both of these interpretations. While De Angelis suggests that commons are the invocation of value practices *outside* the self-valorising system of capital,⁴⁷² most proponents of systematic dialectic and communisation theory believe that capital-transcending agencies will come from *within* the ‘capital relation’.⁴⁷³ At the same time, their identification of critique as something that emerges from *within* the capital-relation does not put them on the same terrain as Hardt & Negri. Indeed, rather than immaterial labour or cognitive capitalism, communisation theory suggests that commons emerge from surplus populations and the breakdown of forms of reproduction that were formerly mediated by capital. Some autonomists have attempted to deal with these social forms, such as De Angelis, who addresses forms of social reproduction fostered by the withdrawal of capital within his work, referring to them as *detritus*,⁴⁷⁴ but I think that *detritus* plays a fundamentally different role in his theories than it does in the work of communisation theorists or the proponents of systematic dialectic. Whereas for De Angelis, the *detritus* that is cast off by capital is something that is put to use by a social subject outside of capital, for theorists of communisation, even emancipatory commons are created by social subjects that originate within this relation.

In any case, based on the evidence of Rome and Oakland, it appears important that any theory of the political recomposition of anti-capitalist political action through commons takes into consideration the way in which the drive towards commons are mediated by the capital relation. This is both an empirical and an ontological observation. In the first instance, commons have emerged in ways that are mediated by the historical development of the capital relation: the withdrawal of the state’s care from education and housing; the breakdown of forms of social reproduction previously based on the sufficiency of the wage; and the mediation of social relationships by new forms of technology are all significant drivers of commoning practices within contemporary social movements. Recognising this relationship- and the potential of commons to transform social relationships more broadly- might be of

⁴⁷² De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*.

⁴⁷³ Starosta, ‘Rethinking Marx’s Mature Social Theory’.

⁴⁷⁴ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*.

fundamental importance to the political recomposition of these movements. In this regard, this is an ontological claim about the nature of capitalism and the relation of political action to it. The nature of capital in the contemporary world is such that- until the global supersession of the capital-relation has been achieved- we cannot think of commons as wholly outside the capital relation.

This empirical and ontological observation has important political and theoretical implications. In the first instance, it suggests that which is to be turned into commons is not wholly external to capital: indeed, much of it is presently bound up within the capital relation itself. The idea that commons must be external to capital makes sense if capital's system of self-valorising value is just the parasitic extraction of value from human activities. If, however, capital is constitutive of something wider- something that we might call modernity- then moments of critical resistance, embodied in commons, are very much bound up within the historical trajectory of the capital relation. Understanding this historical trajectory is fundamental to what we might understand as a Marxist analysis: "[i]f one does not concern oneself with the issue of the historical dynamic of capital- which ultimately underlies the changing configuration of state and civil society in the modern world- one misses...[the] central [dynamic of] Marx's analysis."⁴⁷⁵ The category of capital in Marx's analysis is not just self-valorising value. It is a dialectical interrelationship between the commodity as value and use-value: unlike what might appear from chapter 1 of *Capital*, within capitalist production, use-value is neither outside capitalist forms, nor an ontological substratum that underlies capitalist social forms.⁴⁷⁶ Capital has both value and use-value dimensions, dimensions that are generative of its historical dynamic, a dynamic that points toward a future beyond itself, while preventing that future being realised.⁴⁷⁷ In this context, critical resistance to capital's rule is neither consubstantial with the social force that that it relies upon for the valorisation of its value- labour- nor wholly external to the developmental logic of capital.

⁴⁷⁵ Postone, M., with Brennan, T., (2009), 'Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: An Interview', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108(2), p. 314.

⁴⁷⁶ Postone, with Brennan, 'Labor and the Logic of Abstraction', p. 315.

⁴⁷⁷ Postone, with Brennan, 'Labor and the Logic of Abstraction', p. 316.

If this is the case, and capital is constitutive of a wider sociality, then commons must be understood as an attempt to articulate resistance to capital in such a way that the whole of this capitalist sociality is transformed. Understood in this context, acts of commoning are moments of opposition to capitalism rooted in the growing gap between the possibilities generated by capitalism and its actuality.⁴⁷⁸ This form of critique is grounded immanently.⁴⁷⁹ If we are to turn commons into an analytic- or a hermeneutic of transformation- a theory of transition must be developed that takes seriously the way that commons are implicated within the capital relation. The way that autonomism conceptualises capital- in terms only of the valorisation of value- means that it is necessary to look beyond autonomism for these theoretical resources. Indeed, fulfilling the promise of commons as a political theoretical perspective that potentially augurs the supersession of the capitalist mode of production means departing from the Copernican assumptions embodied in the writings of Mario Tronti.

Commons Beyond the Copernican Turn

Tronti's assertion that the political struggle of workers is the 'driving force' that underlies the development of the capital relation has political implications. In different contexts these implications have been laid out by Sara Farris and Gianfranco Pala.⁴⁸⁰ As Farris argues, this leads to the representation of politics in terms of a battlefield of moves and counter-moves, or in terms that bear resemblance to Weber and Schmitt's image of politics as a clash between subjectivities or values.⁴⁸¹ Pala suggests that there is a 'mythological tendency within 'workerism', a tendency to base its understanding of class struggle in terms of an antagonism rooted in proletarian values posed as alternative rather than *posed* by material and social contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.⁴⁸² For Farris and Pala, Tronti's journey towards a theory of 'the autonomy of the political'- according to which capital and labour clash around the

⁴⁷⁸ A similar argument is put forward in Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, p. 392.

⁴⁷⁹ Postone, with Brennan, 'Labor and the Logic of Abstraction', pp. 324-325.

⁴⁸⁰ Farris, S.R., (2011), 'Workerism's Inimical Incursions: On Mario Tronti's Weberianism', *Historical Materialism* 19(3), pp. 34-35,

Pala, G., (1995), 'Panzieri, Marx e la critica dell'economia politica', *Ripensando Panzieri trent'anni dopo*.

⁴⁸¹ Farris, 'Workerism's Inimical Incursions', p. 35.

⁴⁸² Farris, 'Workerism's Inimical Incursions', p. 35.

mediating terrain of the state- is an inevitable consequence of Tronti's 'Copernican turn'. However, this tendency within Tronti's thought, and the various forms of social thought inspired by it, also has implications for the way that we understand commons and their relationship to the capitalist mode of production.

Commons are about much more- and also much less- than values. They are about social formations that reproduce non-commodified forms of life. Commons have emerged in various different forms in the contemporary world: in the mutual aid of solidarity shown between protestors and the homeless in Oakland's Oscar Grant Plaza; in the repurposing of failed speculative house building in Rome's Tufello district; and in the attempts to produce technological commons in the 'open source' movement and beyond. The significance that these commons have is determined by their respective position in relation to other social forms. It can be that commons remain peripheral to capital, existing alongside it, such as in Oakland, where community gardens, libraries, and educational projects have proliferated, at the same time as the wage economy continues to dominate social relations in the city. The significance of commons is the position that commons hold within the wider social forms of the day. In other words, commons are significant to the extent to which life is structured around them.

By following Tronti and identifying commons as the frontline of a struggle between two social forces- the commoner and capital- this can occlude the extent to which the potential for commons lies already within capitalist social relations. This is something to which Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri allude, although they too tend to talk about commons in terms of values, most notably in the recent publication *Declaration!*⁴⁸³ By talking in these terms, they suggest that commons are something that emerges already- as values- within the practices of proletarians. Commons will only emerge as the dominant social principle of the future through some kind of rupture with the present state of things. This is something to which De Angelis alludes,⁴⁸⁴ but at the same time, his thought seems to downplay the extent to which establishing commons as the predominant ordering principle of human social relations requires a political logic of transition. Indeed, although he shies away from the terminology of authors such as

⁴⁸³ Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*

⁴⁸⁴ De Angelis, 'Commons and Social Revolution', *South Atlantic Quarterly*.

David Graeber and Richard J.F. Day,⁴⁸⁵ his thinking of the problem in terms of ‘values’ lends a certain ‘prefigurative’ quality to the type of transition that he envisages. Indeed, if Hardt & Negri see commons as something that emerges from within capitalism and will eventually come to supersede it, De Angelis sees commons as the *outside* of capitalism.⁴⁸⁶ Commons are embodied in value struggles, at the point of contestation between capital’s value system- dominated by the pursuit of surplus value- and the commoner’s value system, which is predicated upon principles of mutuality, reciprocity and common property.

The deficiencies of these logics- and the vastly different deficiencies of the ideas of Hardt & Negri and De Angelis should not be understated- stem from their common origin in Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’. In days gone by, Marxist scholars might have described Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’ as a ‘rejection of dialectics’. Given that dialectics are altogether less common reference point within the intellectual environment of the 21st Century, we might identify two deficiencies where we might once have used ‘dialectics’ as shorthand. In the first instance, theories of commons developed through Tronti’s framework are not very good at conceptualizing the ways in which the contradictions of the capitalist social form are fundamental to the potential of commons. These contradictions are of fundamental importance to the analysis of commons as an empirical phenomenon, and as a means of constructing an emancipatory politics. Indeed, from the latter perspective, the significance of commons lies in the disjuncture between the potential for commons to free the world’s population from labour, and the reality of late capitalism.

The second element that distinguishes a dialectical approach from a Trontian one is the concept of totality. The idea of totality is central to Hegel’s invocation of the dialectic as well as the Marxian appropriation of the Hegelian methodology. Indeed, the idea of totality has been central to dialectical interpretations of Marx’s thought, including the influential work of Georg Lukács, who suggests, “[the] leitmotif [of the dialectic] is the revolutionary concept of society *as a continuously developing totality*.”⁴⁸⁷ It is

⁴⁸⁵ See for example Day, *Gramsci is Dead*.

⁴⁸⁶ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*.

⁴⁸⁷ Lukács, G., (2009), *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, (London, Verso), p. 82.

important to differentiate between different invocations of totality, however, as totality is a contested concept that has been used in a number of different ways. Indeed, even within the Marxist tradition, totality has been used in multiple ways. Despite this multiplicity, Bertell Ollman has offered perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of totality within the Marxist tradition. According to Ollman, Marx takes as the object of his study, the totality of human relationships. This is something that distinguishes him philosophically from the vast majority of thinkers in the history of Western philosophy. Indeed, philosophers have dealt with totality in three main ways:

1. “The atomistic conception, which goes from Descartes to Wittgenstein, that views the whole as the sum of simple parts, whether things or facts.
2. The formalist conception, apparent in Schelling, *probably* Hegel and most modern structuralists, that attributes an identity to the whole independent of its parts and asserts the absolute predominance of this whole over the parts. The real historical subject in this case are the preexisting, autonomous tendencies and structures of the whole. Research here is undertaken mainly to provide illustrations, and facts which don't "fit" are either ignored or treated as unimportant residue.
3. The dialectical and materialist conception of Marx (often confused with the formalist notion) that views the whole as the structured interdependence of its parts—the interacting events, processes, and conditions of the real world—as observed from any major part.”⁴⁸⁸

Ollman’s assessment indicates that what Marx refers to with the term totality cannot either be reduced to the individual components that comprise a social system, or reduced to the totality itself. By way of contrast, Marx’s theoretical object-capitalism- is a structured interdependence, the significance of which is determined by relations. Ollman suggests that the relations within this whole are of four sorts:

“1) the whole shapes the parts to make them more functional within this particular

⁴⁸⁸ Ollman, B., (1979), *Social and Sexual Revolution*, (London, Pluto Press), ‘chapter four’.

whole (so it is that capitalism, for example, generally and over time gets the laws it requires); 2) the whole gives meaning and relative importance to each part in terms of this function (laws in capitalism are only comprehensible as elements in a structure that maintains capitalist society, and are as important as the contribution they make to this structure); 3) the whole expresses itself through the part, so that the part can also be taken as a form of the whole. Given internal relations, we get a view of the whole, albeit a one sided view, when examining any of its parts. It is like looking out at a courtyard from one of the many windows that surround it (study of any major capitalist law which includes its necessary conditions and results, therefore, will be a study of capitalism); and 4) the relations of the parts with each other, as suggested above, forge the contours and meaning of the whole, transform it into an ongoing system with a history, a goal, and an impact. It is the presence of these last two relations that set the first two apart from the formalist conception of the totality to which they also apply.”⁴⁸⁹

Although in *Capital, Vol. I*, Marx established that a firm understanding of the commodity and the relation between labour and capital as a necessary condition of understanding capitalism, it is not- in and of itself- sufficient to understand it. Indeed, on the contrary, Marx’s theoretical exposition of these categories presupposes the existence of a structural whole. As Louis Althusser suggested in *Reading Capital*, within Marx’s philosophical system, a simple category such as labour is not an origin, but a product of a social whole.⁴⁹⁰ It is only by recognizing the origins of simple categories in totality, Marx suggests, that we can understand the way that capitalism functions.

As a result, tracing the relations between parts of a totality and the whole is the *sine qua non* of Marx’s method, and fundamental to understanding the way that social forms beyond capitalism may lie within capitalism itself.⁴⁹¹ Ollman suggests that this is key to what Marx meant when he talked about the dialectic.⁴⁹² Ollman breaks this down into six moments: the ontological one (the fact that the world is comprised of an

⁴⁸⁹ Ollman, *Social and Sexual Revolution*, ‘chapter four’.

⁴⁹⁰ Althusser, *Reading Capital*, p. 195.

⁴⁹¹ Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method*, p. 72.

⁴⁹² Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method*, pp. 156-157.

infinite number of mutually dependent processes that coalesce to form a structured whole); an epistemological moment (that deals with how to organize our thinking in order to deal with such a world); the moment of inquiry (through which we investigate these patterns of interconnectedness); the moment of intellectual reconstruction (through which we reconstruct this totality analytically); a moment of exposition (where this gets communicated); and a moment of praxis (where, based on the clarifications provided by the proceeding steps, one acts consciously on the world).⁴⁹³ It is my contention that the significance of commons for the contemporary world can only be properly assessed through some kind of dialectical method, that is to say a method that takes the ontological complexity of the world as the starting point for thinking about commons.

For Hardt & Negri, commons emerge as something formed at the vanguard of contemporary class struggles, in immaterial labour and cognitive capital. By way of contrast, for De Angelis, commons emerge as struggles between capital and alternative value systems. The dialectical method suggests that neither perspective is strictly correct, and indeed that neither may be the best way of thinking about commons. Rather, a better world lives within the social forces of the contemporary world, concealed within them, “in the form of a vast and untapped potential.”⁴⁹⁴ As a consequence, it is necessary to find the new world through critique of the old.⁴⁹⁵ Indeed, C.L.R. James suggested that this was the *sine qua non* of Marxist politics,⁴⁹⁶ and Maximilien Rubel & Herbert Marcuse have independently suggested that the relationship between future and present is the historical and philosophical efficacy upon which Marxist theory is constructed.⁴⁹⁷ Ollman is more specific than this, and suggests that the way in which future is related to present within Marx’s method is

⁴⁹³ Ollman, B., (2008), ‘Why Dialectics? Why Now?’, in Ollman, B. & Smith, T., (Eds.), *Dialectics for the New Century*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁹⁴ Ollman, ‘Why Dialectics? Why Now?’, p. 12.

⁴⁹⁵ Marx, K., (1967), *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* K.D. Easton & K.H. Guddat (trans.), (Garden City, Anchor Press), p. 212.

⁴⁹⁶ James, C.L.R., (1992), *The C.L.R. James Reader*, Grimshaw, A. (Ed.), (Oxford, Basil Blackwell), p. 129.

⁴⁹⁷ Marcuse, H., (1964), *Reason and Revolution*, (Boston, Beacon), pp.295-296.

Rubel, M., (1987), ‘Non-Market Socialism in the 20th Century’, in Rubel, M. & Crump, J., (Eds.), *Non-Market Socialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (London, MacMillan), p. 25.

through the mediating category of totality.⁴⁹⁸ This has implications for the way that we understand the emergence of social forms. In other words, the potential of a social form, such as the potential of the emergence of commons, is its potential to shape the totality. The dialectic is Marx's method of systematizing and historicizing all the conditions of capitalism, such that they become internally related elements of an organic whole,⁴⁹⁹ but does so from the perspective of how the organic whole might be re-shaped by changing relations between its component parts.

To apply this method to an analysis of commons, we should be attentive to the ways in which commons interact with the structures of the world that reproduce the hegemony of capital. This means taking the totality of the structural manifestation of commons as the referent object of inquiry, rather than the way in which commons are manifest as the subjective property of practices of resistance. In taking the structural interaction of commons seriously, this amounts to a reversal of the Copernican turn heralded by Tronti and his autonomist colleagues. De Angelis suggests that commoning practices are the 'beginning of history', but commons can only be properly appreciated if they are understood in the wider historical context of the capitalist mode of production, the imperialist 'superexploitation' of the globe's peripheral national economies, and the historical trajectory of the political communities within which commons emerge.

None of this is to deny that history contains within it an element of contingency. Nor is it to suggest that capital is a preformed, external totality, but rather comes into existence through the accumulation of contradictions within the old order. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to recognize that the capital form posits a totalizing set of relations from the moment of its inception. The corollary of this is twofold, necessitating both a methodological and a political conclusion: in order to comprehend commons as a social form, we need to understand it relationally, in terms of how it intersects with, deforms, challenges, and reinforces other social relations; in order to establish commons as a regulative principle of social life, we need an approach to the political dimension of commons that takes this totality as its point of reference.

⁴⁹⁸ Ollman, 'Why Dialectics? Why Now?', p. 14.

⁴⁹⁹ Ollman, 'Why Dialectics? Why Now?', p. 14.

The final chapter of this thesis attempts to address some questions about what such a dialectical method might look like, and the implications that this has for our understanding of commons. To recapitulate the material covered in this chapter, there are three elements that have not yet been sufficiently developed within existing theories of commons:

- First, a way of dealing with commons in terms of the wider social metabolism of capital. Both Hardt & Negri- in the form of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism- and Massimo De Angelis- in terms of *detritus*- have written about the relationship between commons and the wider social-metabolism of the capital system. Neither, however, has offered a comprehensive theory of transition that takes into account the social metabolism of capital.
- Second, a way of understanding the how the mediations of the capital system affect the emergence of commons as means of class struggle. The capital-relation is not a simple, antagonistic relationship, but a relationship that is structured by a number of mediating factors. These mediations not only affect where and how commons emerge as a result of social struggle, but also where we should be looking for strategic weaknesses within capital's social metabolism.
- Third and finally, a theory of the political that draws on these two interpretations, and as such is capable of responding to the emergence of commons as critical resistance to the totality of capital's social metabolism.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored the processes of political recomposition that are- at times explicitly and at others implicitly- present within the social movements that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In each case, the idea of recomposition as held by practitioners within the movement went hand-in-hand. The chapter began with the way in which in Italy, political recomposition has taken up commons as something that informs new discourses of citizenship and participation. In Rome, recomposition has taken place through commons that are linked to citizenship and the

idea of ‘the common good’. This suggests a return to themes of classical republicanism and a politics of virtue.⁵⁰⁰ In Oakland, by way of contrast, political recomposition took place differently, where commons were identified as something that emerged where existing forms of social metabolism have broken down. By way of contrast, recomposition in Oakland has taken place through identification of social subjects that act ‘out of class’.

Class recomposition in Oakland encouraged- as it was encouraged by- analysis carried out through a set of theoretical resources often called ‘communisation theory’. This theoretical intervention tells us a lot about the nature of commons in contemporary social movements. It suggests that rather than being the creation of an outside of capitalism, commons emerge because of particular dynamics that are internal to the class-relation, most notably the production of a surplus population that is simultaneously *included* within the social order of capitalism, and *excluded* from the wage relation. What is more, it suggests that resistance to capital emerges from the disjuncture between the promise of capitalism and its reality: the logic of anti-capitalist social movements in the contemporary world is at least in part a response to the failed promise of capitalist social order. Consequently, we need to be sensitive to the ways that movements respond not just to the problem of capital (defined in terms of the capital relation), but the wider problem of modernity, to which capitalism is just one possible answer. It is important to recognise that there is a divergence between the theories put forward by communisation theorists and the autonomist theoretical framework with which this thesis began. The differences are primarily ontological; there is a significant disparity between the ontological claims about capital made by theorists of communisation and some branches of autonomist theory. In particular, whereas the autonomist accounts of Cleaver and De Angelis see capital primarily in terms of a system of self-valorising value from which other social practices can be detached, communisation sees the capital-relation as part of a wider social form, and thus fundamental to a social totality.

⁵⁰⁰ Whether or not this is actually the classical Republican tradition or not is an argument better left to debates within Cambridge School, such as that between Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock.

Communisation, as put forward by groups such as *Endnotes*, is not without its problems for understanding commons. Chief among them is that it tries to yoke together an analytics of the capital-form, the origins of which can be found in the German *Neue-Marx Lektüre*, with a left-communist conceptualisation of political power, the origins of which can be found in the writings of Amadeo Bordiga and Anton Pennekoek. As a consequence, communisation conflates two different discourses of a radically different order: the discourse of critique, which establishes the precise relationship of value to capitalism, and with it the necessity of abolishing value for a post-capitalist future; and the second discourse, which describes the social revolution required in order to abolish value and usher in a post-capitalist social form. Separating these two discourses tells us a few things. The first of these is that the critique of political economy carried out within *Capital* does not in and of itself contain a theory of political transition. Politics is something that must be added to this critique, and it is for this reason that I think it is necessary to revise some of the Trontian assumptions within which I began this thesis. The contestation of capital is not, *pace* Tronti's 'Copernican turn', sufficient for grasping either the way that capital operates as a totality, or as a wider theory of capitalist modernity. Rather, there are two intellectual projects of work: the critique of capital and the critique of politics. These are integrated only insofar as Marxist politics are predicated upon an understanding of the Marxist critique of political economy.

In the next chapter of this thesis, I want to explore the latter of these two projects. In other words, I want to explore theoretical tools that are necessary for thinking about political recomposition around commons. In this chapter, based on the recomposition provoked by communisation theory, I have argued that theories of the commons as a social form are not, in and of themselves, sufficient for thinking about the supersession of the capital-relation. This mirrors the challenge presented by political reality. If capital is to be overcome, the re-articulation of social struggles at a 'higher', political level is a necessary step on the road to overcoming the value form at the level of totality. This means that if we are to be able to theorise commons as in some way transcending the value form, we need to place commons in the context of the political. This does not mean that existing social critique being carried out in the name of the commons should necessarily fall at the wayside, to be replaced by more penetrating critique. Rather, it is to suggest that commons have a different function to

the one that autonomist theory has often given it. This provokes two questions, questions which drive the final chapter of this thesis: how do we understand commons in the context of the wider social-metabolism of capital?; and secondly, how might we develop an understanding of the way that commons might articulated politically?

Chapter Five: Capital, Social-Metabolic Reproduction and the Hegemony of the Commons

The previous chapter concluded by establishing that a form of critique is required that takes us beyond the *aporias* of autonomism and communisation theory, particularly with regard to how it conceives of capital-transcending political action. In this chapter, I suggest that one of the most significant problems with dealing with commons is adequately relating commons to the wider social forms with which they interact. Doing this necessitates moving beyond the perspective of autonomist theory. Autonomist theories of the commons do not attribute significance to the whole because of the ‘Copernican turn’ to which they adhere. This is a problem for the way that autonomist theory understands commons. More specifically, it has two problematic corollaries: in the first instance, autonomists do not give sufficient attention to the way that the local dimensions of capital are dependent upon on the globality or conceptuality of capital; and the second, autonomists often do not analyse the ways in which the capital-relation is sustained through its mediations (eg. the state form, the international, cultures of civic engagement).

This is not just an analytical problem; the conceptualisation of capital has political implications. This conceptualisation of the way that the parts of the capitalist totality hold together colours the way that autonomists think about the subversive productive of commons can be used to challenge the hegemony of capital. It is the contention of this thesis that in the face of the globality of capital, we need a better understanding of the way that the component parts of the capitalist mode of production hold together with wider society in order that we can conceptualise commons as a counter-hegemonic force. In other words, we need a theory of commons that is sympathetic towards ‘totality’ or ‘the whole’. Some suggestions for this have been given by the way that movements such as in Oakland have sought to deal with commons and capital’s ‘totality’. These suggestions are not perfect, however. The way that ‘communisation theory’- as put forward by groups such as *Endnotes- deals with*

capitalism's totality leads to conceptions of the political that are not necessarily more helpful than those proposed by the autonomist approach. In particular, it conceptualises the social relations shaped by capital as an emanation of the central social relation of modernity: the capital relation. This is problematic for two main reasons: first, the capital-relation is only intelligible as it is manifest, and that is to say as a social relationship that is itself mediated by other social relations; and secondly, the type of politics it produces. In order to avoid flattening the human world into an undifferentiated unity, I argue that a more detailed mapping of how the capital relation is mediated by the global structure of capital and the political institutions that sustain it can help to relate the practice of social movements to the totality of capitalist social relations demonstrates that capital is an uneven and combined totality. Only by examining the interaction between the capital relation and institutions can we understand its weak points, and the possibilities of commoning that which is already bound up within capital.

Although directly political concerns necessitate this reconceptualisation, these political questions originate within the particular conceptualisations of capitalism we hold. Autonomism, in downplaying the way that capitalism operates as a structured whole, and communization theory- which understands it as something that emanates from the central unity of the value-form- produce accounts that understate the extent to which capitalism is a relational phenomena. As a result, both autonomism and communisation tend to overstate the capacity for local action to transform a value system that is inherently universal and global in its scope, and understate- although not completely ignore⁵⁰¹- the necessity of longer term projects of institution building, and the development of a political philosophy of commons. As a result, in this chapter I argue that we have to transform our expectations for what 'the commons' can offer to a radical theory of political transformation. Although commons point towards what life organised according to non-capitalist principles might look like, it does not hold that existing efforts of commoning herald the emergence of 'post-capitalism'. This recognition demands that we become more modest about what acts of commoning alone can achieve- in and of themselves, acts of commoning are not an effective challenge to the totality of capital- but it does not follow from this that commons

⁵⁰¹ See for example Antonio Negri's recent writings on the necessity of constructing institutions of the commons.

should not be a significant part of the radical challenge to the social-metabolic totality of capital. In this context, I argue that there are two tasks facing theorists of the commons today: the first of which is the analysis of commons in relation to the structures of the world- in particular, the structures of capital, and the state- against which commons have emerged; and the second is the construction of a political project through which commons become a hegemonic force for social reproduction. This critical assessment of commons in relation to totality can be used to strategically engage with the disassembly of the capitalist totality.

If *prima facie* these two tasks seem intellectually if not politically divergent, they are brought together in this chapter through the way that both necessitate understanding the totality of capital's social metabolism, and developing a universalistic response to the problem posed by capital. It is important to recognise, however, that the critique of capitalist totality is not consubstantial with the political attempt to overcome it, and these two discourses- the analytical and the political- necessitate different forms of inquiry, and hold a different epistemological status. One of the problems that the previous chapter identified within communisation theory is that the agency that can overcome the totality is only the spontaneous overcoming of totality at the level of totality, a proposition that is in and of itself a limiting horizon for thinking political action. This is an error that is derived theoretically, from the identification of the trajectory of global capitalism with its overcoming. I argue that only through modifying this proposition, and with it our understanding of capitalist totality and the way it functions (particularly in the way that we understand the political in conjunction with the global development of capital and the political structures of the world), can we devise adequate political strategies to counter capital. To this end, this chapter suggests a different concept of the totality of capitalist social relations than that which communisation theory has employed is necessary in order to better think a) the uneven and yet combined dynamics of global capitalism, and b) how this totality makes possible political interventions through commons. This notion of totality is a central organising concept of this chapter, but there are a number of theoretical resources that I wish to draw upon in order to pursue these two parallel courses of inquiry.

Indeed, in writing about this, I want to draw on two particular resources: the first of which is the framework for mapping capital's social-metabolic reproduction produced by István Mészáros and the second of which is the notion of structure and conjuncture within capitalist totality developed by Louis Althusser. These two theorists provide the resources for developing a conception of capitalist totality that is both structurally produced and understood in such a way that renders it intelligible for the purpose of thinking about political interventions. These are much needed theoretical resources insofar as both autonomism and communisation theory have problems articulating the political dimension of capital's social-metabolic system in relation to its structural determination. My interest in introducing these theorists in this chapter is not because I believe that either Althusser or Mészáros held all of the answers to the problems of contemporary Marxist theory, that they have well developed theories of commons, or indeed that I wish to effect a return to the research agenda carried out in the name of structuralism in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁰² Rather, my interest in these thinkers stems from a belief that their thought demonstrates what is at stake in Marxist attempts to think about capitalism structurally, and more particularly how we might understand capital-transcending practice in relation to the structural whole comprised by capital and its relation to other social structures. In light of this, of the many writings of Mészáros and Althusser, this chapter concerns itself only with those that specifically address capitalism as a structural totality, and his writings about how the political can be used to make interventions into the structural whole of the capital-system.

While its theoretical aim is to pursue the study of the commons through two currently unfashionable notions in Marxist theory- the Althusserian notion of structure in dominance; and Mészáros' pursuit of a social-metabolic alternative to the capital-system- this chapter also has a more modest objective, which it is worth recapitulating here. In this regard, the chapter can be seen as offering the political-philosophical statement of this thesis. It suggests that this thesis demonstrates that commons- and commoning practices- cannot be seen as the direct overcoming of capitalist social relations. As a relational phenomenon, capital can only be eradicated by the supersession of the emergent totality of capitalism. Commons- as they have appeared as independent and uncoordinated attempts to make the social-metabolic reproduction

⁵⁰² For more on the history and fate of Althusserian social theory, see Elliott, G., (1987), *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, (London, Verso).

of the conditions of life autonomous, can inspire a political movement that attempts to overcome capital as a social force, but cannot be a substitute for this movement. As a result, if we seek to promote commons as the architrave of a sociality beyond capital, we must look beyond acts of commoning, for the ways in which acts of commoning and the romantic imaginary of the commons might lead to the emergence of a political movement in which the commons are ends but not in and of themselves means to effect revolutionary political transformation.

István Mészáros Commons, Crises of Capitalism & the Question of Transition

The previous chapters, and with them the cases of Oakland and Rome, have demonstrated that the emergence of commons at the heart of social movement practice cannot be wholly separated from crisis within the capitalist mode of production. What is not so clear, however, is the nature of this crisis and its precise relationship between crisis and commoning practices. For autonomist theory, this crisis is one induced by the actors themselves, where the actions of protesters can throw the system into crisis.⁵⁰³ By way of contrast, for theorists of communisation, the crisis that we witness is a secular crisis of capital, throwing capital's reproduction into question, and with it the social relationship between capital and the proletariat.⁵⁰⁴ Although this literature approaches the question of crisis from a completely different direction than Cleaver and the autonomists, its conclusions are remarkably similar: that crisis produces the conditions for an insurrection against capital, or a project of autonomy, whereby an alternative system of values and priorities is constructed. Neither of these accounts really do justice to the relationship between the internal dynamics of capital and political possibility, either making these internal dynamics secondary to resistance (identifying resistance as the source of crisis dynamics within the capitalist economy), or establishing capital as a crisis-ridden backdrop to an insurrectionary politics. In the face of this, I argue that a more nuanced conception of global capital, its interaction with other social structures, and its role in cultivating and disempowering resistance movements is required if we are to understand the relationship between the laws of motion of capital and these social movements.

⁵⁰³ Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*.

⁵⁰⁴ Astarian, 'Crisis activity and communisation'.

In so doing, it is important to recognise the diversity of the appearance of commons within political practice. Commons have emerged in specific places around the world, where specific structural dynamics have prompted movements that have produced commons as means of contesting social relationships. For example, in Rome, commons emerged as a means of contesting the political appropriation of water provision in the interests of capital. At other points, however, commons emerge for other reasons, such as where the social-metabolic system of capital has already broken down and, as populations become surplus to the production of capital, and as a result existing social-reproductive strategies mediated by the wage become less viable. In Oakland, for example, capital's production of a precarious, racialised surplus population makes necessary alternative forms of social reproduction. Elsewhere, commons have emerged from a somewhat more direct confrontation between capital and life processes, often in response to the ways in which the relationship between capital and life processes have been mediated by the state. In Italy, for example, commons have emerged where the state has withdrawn its presence from the social-reproductive metabolism. Each of these contexts has given rise to different forms of commoning, and commoning can be understood specifically in terms of this context. The previous chapter has demonstrated, however, that pursuing each of the individual seams that open up within the capitalist totality can only take the critical theorist and the political activist so far. Understanding commons only in these contexts is insufficient for thinking commons as the supersession of capital, because the capital-system takes on a particular character at the level of totality that is of the utmost analytical and political importance. The corollary of this is that only by overcoming capital at the level of totality can individual commons be more than temporary shelters from the logic of the capital relation, and the basis of a new social humanity. This being the case, there is cause to study the social-metabolic system of capital's totality in some depth.

Indeed, this necessitates re-engaging with the critique of capital, rather than the critique of the specific manifestations of the social-system that finds its roots in capital. This critique is being carried out in a number of academic disciplines, from

Critical Political Economy to Marxist Geography,⁵⁰⁵ and the works of authors such as David Harvey, in the context of the current crisis, is invaluable for understanding the world that capitalism has created, and the opportunities for political action that open up within this.⁵⁰⁶ In order to grasp the significance of this analysis, it is instructive to examine why exactly Marx becomes interested in analysing capital. We can gain a sense of this from Marx's own political-philosophical trajectory, beginning with his early 'humanist' writings, which appear to prioritise the democratisation of society. The early humanism of these writings gives way after the revolutions of 1844, however, with the recognition that capital is the constitutive limit of human development. Marx became interested in the ways in which the dead-ends of philosophy demanded sociological investigation.⁵⁰⁷ Discourses of self-foundation encounter similar structural limits: limits that are imposed by capital itself. As a result, according to Marx's critique of political economy, the referent object of political action that is to overcome capital is not the democratisation (however radical) of society, but "the abolition of the determination of the human life-process as the material bearer of the self-expansion of capital through the conscious association of the fully developed social individuals."⁵⁰⁸ As Paul Blackledge has suggested, Marx's political theory is best understood in terms of social self-determination,⁵⁰⁹ or as Marx put it in *Capital, Vol. III*:

"Freedom...can consist only in this, that socialised man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their common control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy for their human nature."⁵¹⁰

The corollary of this is that only through the abrogation of capital as a social force, can we approach a state of affairs in which commons might be a founding principle of

⁵⁰⁵ Harvey, D., (2011), *The Enigma of Capital & the Crises of Capitalism*, (London, Profile Books).

⁵⁰⁶ Harvey, D., (2014), *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capital*, (London, Verso).

⁵⁰⁷ Perkins, S., (1993), *Marxism and the Proletariat: A Lukácsian Perspective*, (London, Verso).

⁵⁰⁸ Kicillof & Starosta, 'Value-form and Class Struggle', p. 20.

⁵⁰⁹ Blackledge, P., (2012), *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution*, (New York, SUNY Press), pp. 57-58.

⁵¹⁰ Marx, K., (1981), *Capital, Vol. III*, (London, Penguin), p. 959.

collective self-determination. This task of grasping how freedom could be re-claimed from the social forces of capital is what gives Marx's analysis of the capitalist socius its urgency. It is also that which should orient an analysis of the capitalist socius for the purposes of analysing its relationship with commons.

Bearing this in mind, perhaps nowhere has the contemporary global capitalist system been more usefully or more systematically mapped as the limit of emancipatory self-determination than in the writings of István Mészáros, whose project since the late 1970s has been to theorise transformation within the totality of capitalist social relations, as the basis for a philosophical interrogation of the transition from capitalism to socialism.⁵¹¹ In order to think more adequately about what capitalist totality is, and what strategies are required to overcome it, Mészáros' thought develops a conception of political "creating the necessary mediations towards [the abolition of capital]."⁵¹² In a series of books published since the 1960s, Mészáros has sought to critically think through the transition from a 'social-metabolic system' in which capital is the hegemonic force to one in which the imperative of human freedom predominates. The core of Mészáros' project is "[the establishment of] a new system of social metabolism, a new mode of production based on *self-determined activity*."⁵¹³ This is of more than just of analytical importance. Drawing on the Lukacsian philosophical synthesis of Hegelian philosophy and Marxist theory, Mészáros outlines an alternative, hegemonic system of social reproduction. Unlike autonomist theory's Trontian perspective, Mészáros theorises from a strategic perspective that tries to make sense of the totality of capital. Correcting the assumptions of 20th Century Marxist-Leninism, including those of his teacher, Georg Lukács, that the external imposition of order by 'the Party' is sufficient to impose the

⁵¹¹ Mészáros' *oeuvre* is both extensive and complex, but the works in which he most directly engages with the issue of structure and capital are:

Mészáros, I., (2010), *Social Structures and Forms of Consciousness, Volume I: The Social Determination of Method*, (New York, Monthly Review Press),

Mészáros, I., (2012), *Social Structures and Forms of Consciousness, Volume II: Dialectic of Structure and History*, (New York, Monthly Review Press),

Mészáros, I., (1995), *Beyond Capital*, (New York, Monthly Review Press).

⁵¹² Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition*, p. 729.

⁵¹³ Foster, J.B., (2010), 'Introduction', in Mészáros, I., *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, (New York, Monthly Review Press), p. 21.

standpoint of totality on social reality,⁵¹⁴ Mészáros became interested in the material mediations that are needed to surmount the alienation of class society. In this regard, Mészáros' thought is a return to the classic question of Marxist and revolutionary politics, which is that of “what to do after the revolution”, a task which involves understanding how immanent tendencies within the social-metabolic system of capital make revolutionary political transformation possible; how these mediations can be created to challenge the social-metabolic system of capital; all the while remaining conscious of the relationship between humanity and nature at the heart of all human activity.

Mészáros' project has its origins in the contradictions faced by socialist and ecological politics in the neoliberal era. Significantly, Mészáros begins with the question of social reproduction dealt with by autonomist and communism theorists, an idea that he discusses not in terms of the worker-centred problem of reproduction dealt with by Negri and *Endnotes*, but a perspective that begins with social-metabolic reproduction framed in terms of the capital system.⁵¹⁵ This notion was first developed in Mészáros's book, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, where he employed Marx's theory of alienation to understand capital's social-metabolic system of control.⁵¹⁶ Drawing on Marx's investigations, he suggests that capital is unique in the history of human society because it takes relations between people and turns them into an abstract system of relations between things, where people are no longer *primarily* affected by the direct relations of domination whereby one person exercises power over another, but by a system in which one class exercises power over another class, indirectly and abstractly.⁵¹⁷ It perfects a tendency that has only been partially present in hitherto existing human society, in which human society alienates humanity's distinctive role as the “self-mediating being of nature.”⁵¹⁸ As humanity cannot pursue its relationship with nature directly, it must do so through a system of mediations, and in capitalist society, these have been dominated by capital.⁵¹⁹ This is the fundamental

⁵¹⁴ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition*, p. 326.

⁵¹⁵ Foster, J.B., (2015), ‘Introduction’ in Mészáros, I., *The Necessity of Social Control*, (New York, Monthly Review Press), p. 15.

⁵¹⁶ Mészáros, I., (1970), *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, (New York, Merlin Press).

⁵¹⁷ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p.

⁵¹⁸ Foster, ‘Introduction’ in Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*.

⁵¹⁹ Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, p. 68.

contradiction of capitalism, but it ends up pervading the entirety of the social field, and on this basis, capital creates a self-governing, self-creating social force unlike any that have preceded it.⁵²⁰ As a result, the logic of capital is extended across the entirety of society.

The cohesion of the capital system is not unproblematic. As it is not created *ex nihilo*, we must understand the way in which it is produced and sustained through a series of (co-ercive and ideological) institutions. Mészáros calls these institutions ‘second order mediations’, a term that can be used to describe phenomena as varied as primitive accumulation, the state, and the nuclear family. Each of these mediations is in some way related to the capital-labour dialectic, as a way of mediating between the relation “between human beings and the vital conditions of their reproduction, nature”,⁵²¹ but retain a degree of autonomy from each other & capital *tout court*. At the same time that these mediations retain autonomy, second-order mediations are mutually imbricated with one another, which means that we have to think about the way capital is mediated by other social relationships. To this end, Mészáros argues, “what must be confronted and overcome by the adversaries of the established, incorrigibly discriminatory, order of social metabolic reproduction is not only capital’s positively self-sustaining force of surplus-labour extraction but also the devastating negative power- the apparently forbidding inertia- of its circular linkages.”⁵²² In this way, capital confronts attempts to break free of its social metabolic control with its second-order mediations: classically, the ‘bloody legislation’ described by Marx in the final chapters of *Capital, Vol. I*, or in contemporary context, the legal and police attempts to evict occupied spaces in Italy and Oakland. Mészáros appears to argue that the impersonal structure of capital as an abstract system of mediation becomes re-inscribed on the direct relations of force between *some* individuals within the capital system. As a result, where relations of force do emerge, they do not reveal the core of the capital-system, but are rather a particular manifestation of a particular way that the basic contradictions of the capital-system are diffused through the social totality.

⁵²⁰ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, pp. 162-165.

⁵²¹ Mészáros, I., (2015), *The Necessity of Social Control*, (New York, Monthly Review Press), p. 68.

⁵²² Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, p. 68.

At the same time, ‘second order mediations’ are not just responsible for imposing the violent rule of capital. They are also the conduits through which capital’s social metabolic system is reproduced at the level of life. The second order mediations of the capital system include the supply chains of food, resources, and other necessities through which humans sustain themselves. They also refer to the cultural practices and associations through which these practices of social reproduction take place. One of the stumbling blocks for commoning at a more general level is the cultural associations that people have with existing practices of social reproduction, most obviously an attachment to reproduction within the family unit, but also the broader cultural vectors through which society is sustained.⁵²³ Perhaps in theorising the attraction of commons as non-commodified forms of social reproduction, theorists of the commons have paid too little attention to the ‘attractors’ that draw people back from commons into the world of the commodity, preferring to study commons themselves rather than the ideological conditions that have excluded or marginalised them in modernity. Indeed, more attention needs to be given to the way that the capitalist habitus is produced and maintained if we are to understand why commoning is not more widely practiced than it is.

The capital-system is intrinsically crisis-ridden, and its second order contradictions inevitably bear the weight of its crisis tendencies. If the *cultural horizon* of late capitalism, driven as it is by the experience of capitalism in its metropolitan core, is one of stasis and stability,⁵²⁴ its reality altogether more fissiparous. Here, Mészáros identifies a structural crisis of global capital, brought about because “no global system can be other than explosive and ultimately self-destructive if it is antagonistically structured all the way to its inner core.”⁵²⁵ The nature of these antagonisms is such that while they can be displaced, they cannot be eradicated so long as the extraction of surplus value remains the central organising principle of the global economy. As David Harvey suggests, capital is capable of moving its contradictions around, but it

⁵²³ Engels, F., (1884), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/>), (accessed on: 20.05.2015).

⁵²⁴ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, p. 106.

⁵²⁵ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, p. 55.

is ultimately incapable of resolving them.⁵²⁶ These contradictions ultimately end up being manifest within the social-reproductive sphere of capital, as the impasse within the social-metabolic reproduction of the capital system “sets in when the established order of socioeconomic reproduction collides with the obstacles made by its own dualistic articulation, so that the threefold contradiction between production and control, production and consumption, and production and circulation cannot any more be reconciled, let alone used as powerful engines in the vital expansion and accumulation process.”⁵²⁷ As the system runs into its own limits, it faces crises of accumulation, crises of unemployment and surplus populations, and crises of ecological limitation. Mészáros shares the perspective of communisation insofar as he understands the social-metabolic system produced by capital to be ineradicably crisis ridden, but he differs insofar as he establishes capital’s mediations as central to the way that this crisis is playing out. Whilst for communisation theory, the secular crisis of capitalism is a crisis in which its mediations become less and less relevant, as for the first time global labour is able to confront capital directly, Mészáros understands any response as going directly through these mediations.

In Mészáros’ conception of the capital system, the state is the most significant of the second order mediations. Although there are differences between the functions and characters of states across time and space, the role of the modern state has generally been as the ‘command centre’ of capital’s accumulative regime.⁵²⁸ As he argues in *Beyond Capital*, Mészáros sees the state as absolutely fundamental to the capital system: “[w]ithout the emergence of the modern state, capital’s spontaneous mode of metabolic control cannot turn itself into a system with clearly identifiable...socioeconomic microcosms. The particular socioeconomic reproductive units of capital taken separately are not only *not capable* of spontaneous coordination and totalization but *diametrically opposed* to it if allowed to follow their disruptive course.”⁵²⁹ As a result, while the capital system is rooted in the fundamental separation between use value and exchange value as the basis of alienated labour, a hierarchical class system, and competition between capitals, it relies on the state

⁵²⁶ Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*.

⁵²⁷ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, pp. 62-63.

⁵²⁸ Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, p. 284.

⁵²⁹ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, p. 63.

apparatus for its internal consistency. Although the capital system can be seen as a ‘self-reinforcing reciprocity’, this ‘self-reinforcing reciprocity’ is dependent on the capacity of second-order mediations (particularly the state) to hold it together. For Mészáros, the state is at once something that is of the social-reproductive order of capital, and something that intervenes within it in order to reproduce the social-metabolic order of capital. At times in history, the state has intervened in order to maintain social order and in order to ensure the continued reproduction of the capital relation. The state intervened historically in order to break up pre-capitalist forms of social reproduction, such as those where social reproduction was predicated on commons. It continues to do so in order to ensure that the conditions for the reproduction of capital continue to exist. This is a classical Marxist definition of the capitalist state, regarding it as “a specialized organization of force to guarantee the conditions of capitalist production.”⁵³⁰ The modern, representative state is the culmination of the bourgeois class project.⁵³¹ The absence of physical coercion in the production process requires a concentrated presence patrolling the perimeter of the social formation and guaranteeing its basic institutions.⁵³² The state holds a paradoxical relationship to the capitalist mode of production because it is both the *sine qua non* of capitalist production and not wholly consubstantial to it.

The relationship between the state and the capitalist mode of production, however, is not limited to the places in which it intervenes: its significance can also be extended to those in which it does not, as the state’s absence can be as productive as its presence. As a result, no less important than the existence of the sovereign state is ‘the international’, that is to say the division of sovereign power into competing blocks, which compete against one another for power and resources, and prevent the emergence of an effective system of global governance.⁵³³ The gaps between the legislative and executive actors in world politics are gaps that are productive for the capital system and allow for the primitive accumulation of non-capitalist social forms.

⁵³⁰ Blackburn, R., (1976), ‘Marxism: Theory of Proletarian Revolution’, *New Left Review* I(97).

⁵³¹ Marx, K. & Engels, F., (2010), *Political Writings, Vol. I: The Revolutions of 1848*, (London, Verso).

⁵³² Blackburn, ‘Marxism: Theory of Proletarian Revolution’.

⁵³³ Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre*, p. 212.

The theoretical consequences of Mészáros' concept of 'social metabolic reproduction' are not insignificant. In the broadest possible terms, Mészáros subscribes to the universalistic conclusions implied by communism theory's employment of value-theory in the previous chapter. The corollary of this is that political transformations that seek to alter the capital system in part are, at best very limited in their chances of success, and at worst doomed to failure. This is because the development of capital's system of social metabolic control within which needs and their fulfilment have been created is deep and pervasive. Undoing it and replacing it with another means of fulfilling these needs, is a long-term project requiring the development of new systems of mediation. It is for this reason that despite the similarities between Mészáros and communism theory about the universality of capital, and the co-development of capital and labour, there are significant and notable differences, particularly in Mészáros' attempt to break free of the paralysing notion of totality adopted by value theory. Consequently, the way in which politics proceeds for Mészáros is both positive and negative. The social-metabolic grip of the capital-system needs to be loosened, but the desired socialist transformation cannot be achieved only through negation, and a positive project must also be established, which presents another, radically different metabolism against the metabolism that serves the interests of capital.

This is where commons can be reimagined through Mészáros' theoretical prism. The task of establishing new institutions of social metabolic control is as important as that of negating the old. For Mészáros, the process by which these mediations can be transformed is neither immediate, nor clear-cut, and as such, the two must co-exist side-by side for some time. These institutions will necessarily be prefigurative; which is to say that they will embody the change that they wish to produce, with the values of freedom and equality embodied at every level of their operation. Mészáros suggests that these institutions will have to co-exist alongside the institutions of capital, but at no point does it become a direct struggle between the two social-metabolic systems. The capital system, by its very nature, possesses a hegemonic power that alternative social-metabolisms cannot, at least in the first instance, aspire to. Rather, the significance of bottom-up associations (of which I would classify commons movements as one) is that they provide a social base from which to build a prolonged and sustained offensive against capital. Such activity offers the possibility of

transforming the political terrain, “turning *fleeting time* into *enduring space*” and fusing “the power of political decision-making with the social base from which it has been alienated for so long.”⁵³⁴ Rather than taking the line of least resistance and operating on the superstructural terrain laid out by capital, a radical global offensive rooted in the creation of institutions built from the ground up changes the terrain upon which a potential political struggle takes place.

If Mészáros is correct about the ontology of the capital-system, his account suggests that commons are both within and outside capitalism, and must exist as a hidden, contested, sub-system, which does not- of its own accord- achieve hegemony. Rather, its role in the first instance is to provoke and nourish struggles which create a wider consciousness about the nature of capital, as well as providing a blueprint for social relations that will come to replace those that are currently mediated by capital. Gone is the direct struggle between two systems of mediating between social subjects; rather, the struggle is altogether more subterranean, in Gramsci’s terms serving as a war of position rather than a war of movement.⁵³⁵ This being the case, a political moment is required over and above the production of commons on a local scale, which negates the value form at the level of totality (competing conceptions of value are, in and of themselves, unable to overcome the totality of the value form), and is to find a means of establishing security and co-ordination between the various local commons which are primarily the result of decentralised, spontaneous action. This mediative role is not insignificant, and the task ahead for thinking about the supersession of the value form *and* the co-ordination of a post-value society are immense in scale and complexity. However, there are also more immediate implications of this for the approach we take to social movements.

In this regard, applying Mészáros’ idea of capital as a social-metabolic system has two important conclusions. The first is that, as autonomist thinker Massimo De Angelis has suggested, commons are important for the establishment of alternative values, and alternative sources of social reproduction. Unlike De Angelis’ account, however, Mészáros’ notion of the social-metabolic totality of capitalism suggests that

⁵³⁴ Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, pp. 114-116, Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, pp. 580-586.

⁵³⁵ Gramsci, A., (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart).

the political cannot be located within acts of commoning themselves, as the struggle between two social systems. Indeed, because of the way that capital operates as a totality, the capacity of commons to offer an immediate alternative to the social-metabolism of capital can be greatly overstated, and social movements that emerge as fragmented and partial, around such issues as the privatisation of water infrastructure in Rome, or racialised police killings in Oakland, are insufficient in and of themselves to make an intervention at the level of totality. This is the classical terrain of Marxist political theory, upon which Lenin established his theory of the party,⁵³⁶ but also the terrain on which other movements such as organised anarcho-syndicalism⁵³⁷ and the council communist movement originated.⁵³⁸ In suggesting that a more detailed political investigation of the movements is required, this should *neither* take us inevitably down the route of Leninism, nor should it be an insurmountable departure from the autonomist themes with which this thesis began.

There are many forms that a political project rooted in the commons can take, but it is vital that the movement around commons should be articulated not just socially, but also politically. The self-sufficiency of the social (the idea that the social relations established through acts of commoning are sufficient to overcome those produced by capital) is an idea that is all-too-compatible with the ruling ideas of the current era. Resilience and localism have become the watchwords of neoliberal globalisation, as local solutions have been sought to crises of agriculture, sustainability and development.⁵³⁹ As scholars such as Jonathan Joseph have demonstrated, discourses of the local in development and elsewhere have included within them the ineluctable ideological content of the neoliberal globalisation that has produced them.⁵⁴⁰ It is only through the establishment of a political moment; over and above the social relations that are formed within commons struggles that it is possible to fully distinguish a

⁵³⁶ Lenin, V.I., (1902), *What is to be Done?*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/download/what-itd.pdf>), (accessed on: 04.06.2015),

Lih, L.T., (2008), *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What is to be Done?' in Context*, (Leiden, Brill).

⁵³⁷ Rocker, R., (1989), *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, (London, Pluto Press).

⁵³⁸ Bologna, S., (1972), 'Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin of the Workers' Councils Movement', B. Ramirez (trans.), *Telos* 13.

⁵³⁹ Chandler, D., (2014), *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, (London, Routledge).

⁵⁴⁰ Joseph, J., (2013), 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: a governmentality approach', *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 1(1), pp. 38-52.

world created by social movements and rooted in common property from the ideological *Weltanschauung* of neoliberalism. Indeed, in saying this, what I am trying to articulate is the belief that commons movements must become, at least in small part, modernist in its orientation.

A number of further tasks are in order here. First, it is incumbent upon me to explain what I mean by modernism. A discussion of modernism might help to elucidate the conditions under which it is possible to think the political within these social-metabolic struggles. If acts of commoning are vitally important for establishing a social-metabolic system that gravitates around principles of mutuality and reciprocity rather than capital, yet these acts of commoning are not consubstantial with the political, where exactly does the political lie? Mészáros' account of the totality of the capital system suggests that ultimately the political aspirations of movements for commons needs to lie at the level of totality, but his account is altogether less specific about what form this political movement needs to take. More thinking is required as to what exactly a political intervention of this sort actually is. Secondly, work is required to assess what the relationship could be between commons and a global political intervention that takes the characteristics of modernism.

Modernism is, in many ways a problematic term, describing phenomena as diverse as the literature of James Joyce, Saussurian linguistics, the architecture of Le Corbusier, ideas about relativity in Physics, the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, the cubist art of Pablo Picasso, and the films of Sergei Eisenstein, and encompasses orientations towards knowledge, experience, and representation.⁵⁴¹ Associated with the artistic and cultural movements of the early 20th Century,⁵⁴² modernism has been described by John Berger as “a new awareness of the structured complexity of the object, a complexity that rendered the object world more abstract and disturbingly less familiar than it had been to the nineteenth-century mind.”⁵⁴³ At the same time, the modernist thinker is increasingly aware of the formal structures that shaped his or her perceptions, and

⁵⁴¹ Resch, R.P., (1989), ‘Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory: A Comparison of Althusser and Foucault’, *Poetics Today* 10(3), p. 513.

⁵⁴² As with any cultural movement, the origins of Modernism can, of course, be traced back to beyond the early 20th Century, as far back as Kant's philosophy in the late 18th Century.

⁵⁴³ Resch, ‘Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory’, p. 513.

representations of objects, as well as the limitations and potentials of such self-awareness.⁵⁴⁴ Modernism, as a cultural phenomenon arose from the contradictions and irrationality of the modern, as life in Europe came into tension with its colonies, and modernity encountered its constitutive limits. At the same time that modernism was a product of contradictions, it was also a remarkably self-confident movement, asserting not only that the world exists, but also- although indubitably increasing in its complexity- that knowledge of it is possible. Consequently, modernism was a movement that was confident in its ability to use this knowledge of the world to change it for the better. Although to all intents and purposes, modernism as an artistic movement appears to be a thing of the past, there is much that can be drawn from it by way of a political project. Indeed, in the next section I contend that it is a political project that can give coherence to a global political project oriented around the commons.

Neither communication theory nor autonomism has the capacity to give voice to a *political* project in these terms. Their focus on the local and the spontaneous irruption of commons, driven either by crisis, or the capacity of those constrained by capital to make themselves free of it, leads them to eschew questions of political strategy altogether. If we are to achieve a political movement that is effective in establishing commons as the substrate upon which life can be lived, a more strategic approach to the global supersession of the value form is required. In turn, we need to think of the relationship between these interventions and the cultures and subjectivities of resistance that have been built through struggles over commons and other popular causes. On their own, both social and political struggles are insufficient, because individually they fail to achieve the universality required to overcome the value form or the social basis for such a movement. Only by supplementing existing struggles with a political logic, or with the application of political reason, can an adequate strategy for linking together the universal negation of the value form with the cultures of resistance that have already been cultivated through struggles over commons be formulated. Although this is not a condition by which this thesis aims for its claims to be judged, this is consistent with Marx's own thought on political interventions.

⁵⁴⁴ Resch, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory', p. 513.

Capital is not a book about politics,⁵⁴⁵ describing instead the way that capital functions, and the structural crisis of capital. If this structural crisis is to be used to produce another world (such as one in which commons are underlie social reproduction) it must have a politics added to it. Throughout his career, Marx adapted the political tactics he advocated depending on circumstances. It is for this reason that Marx is often said to be an anarchist political thinker.⁵⁴⁶ Indeed, Marx's own political interventions tended to be conjunctural, that is to say in terms of the unfolding contradictions of capital, and the 'present moment' as that which is the object of political practice.⁵⁴⁷ This notion of conjuncture, and the political logic proper to a Marxist treatment of commons is something that is developed further in the writings of Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. The next section of this chapter will explore this logic in Althusser's thought, and attempt to tease out what this conception of modernist political reason can do for theories of commons.

Structure in Dominance and Repurposing Capitalist Totality

The turn to Althusser here may strike the reader as odd, not least because academics usually associate Althusser's work with something called 'structural Marxism', a product of institutional French Marxism in the period of its great post-1968 defeat, rather than the *fin de siècle* optimism that is usually associated with philosophical and artistic modernism. Nonetheless, as Robert Resch argued in his book *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, there are a number of reasons what reading Althusser in this way is both instructive and productive.⁵⁴⁸ Resch identifies a logic of modernism operative within Althusser's thought in three main areas: first, his ideas about structural causation; second, the distinctions among science, ideology, and

⁵⁴⁵ This idea is espoused by Frederic Jameson in his recent book, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One*, and directly contradicts Harry Cleaver's foundational text *Reading Capital Politically*. This is one of the central claims of this thesis, that whereas autonomism identifies certain political forms with the struggle over space (the dialectic of commoning and enclosure), I argue that the political cannot be directly conflated with these struggles, but must rather be recomposed at a higher level, where they can negate the value form.

⁵⁴⁶ Tucker, R.C., (1969), *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, (London, George Allen & Unwin), pp. 85-91.

⁵⁴⁷ Poulantzas, N., (1973), *State, Power, Socialism*, (London, Verso), p. 93.

⁵⁴⁸ Resch, R.P., (1993), *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, (Berkeley, University of California Press).

philosophy in his work and that of his followers; and third, the concepts of ideological interpellation and ideological apparatuses.⁵⁴⁹ For the purposes of this chapter, and imagining a modernist politics of the commons, it is sufficient to address the first of these claims, and as a result, I am interested in unpacking the conjuncture between structural causation and the political.

It is briefly worth clarifying at this point that in turning to Althusser, I am not interested in returning to the contested political-philosophical phenomenon of Althusserianism, but taking from ‘the Althusserian moment’ a particular notion of structure and political conjuncture upon which his writings were predicated.⁵⁵⁰ By the early 21st Century, the often vitriolic polemics for and against the Althusserian project have largely been superseded by its eulogies, and the general consensus appears to be that Althusserianism is an intellectual moment that has passed, offering little more than a snapshot of a moment in time.⁵⁵¹ I do not particularly wish to contest this reading,⁵⁵² except to say that Althusser’s *problematique* does have contemporary relevance to the issues of structure and struggle that I have detailed in this thesis. Consequently, I argue that exploring commons through the conception of structure that Althusser develops reveals new ways of thinking about the commons as structural features of the capitalist totality, and viewing commons as subject to a modernist conception of political reason. Before discussing how commons can be understood within this theoretical framework, I will briefly outline the dimensions of the structural totality developed by Althusser. Given the relatively limited nature of the claims I wish to make in this chapter, my discussion of Althusserian Marxism is similarly limited, covering only those elements that I wish to draw from it, particularly Althusser’s approach to structure, and the way in which his conception of political reason can be derived from this. Comprehensive explications of the

⁵⁴⁹ Resch, ‘Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory’, p. 522.

⁵⁵⁰ And with these notions, it is particularly the relations between them in which I am interested.

⁵⁵¹ See for example Kaplan, E.A. & Sprinker, M., (Eds), *The Althusserian Legacy*, (London, Verso).

⁵⁵² This has been contested elsewhere, particularly in Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*

Althusserian project, and critical balance sheets of its successes and failures can be found elsewhere, notably in Gregory Elliott's *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*.⁵⁵³

Most of Althusser's ideas about structure are commentaries on the Marxist project. More specifically, Althusser makes the argument that at its heart, Marx's conception of the structure of capital and the social-metabolic system it produces is dependent upon more than just Hegelian dialectics. Indeed, Althusser's reading of Marx's thought originates in his assessment that Marx's thought sought to break with neo-Ricardian theories of value.⁵⁵⁴ In perhaps his most famous work, *Reading Capital*, Althusser pursues the following question:

“Is *Capital* merely a continuation or even culmination of Classical Political Economy, from which Marx inherited both object and concepts? And is *Capital* distinguished from classical economics not by its object, but only by its method, the dialectic he borrowed from Hegel? Or, on the contrary, does *Capital* constitute a real epistemological mutation of its object, theory and method?”⁵⁵⁵

As notable Althusser scholar John Milios has suggested, the answer that we give to this question has important political ramifications, as well as significant implications for the way that we understand the structure of capitalism, with the two questions

⁵⁵³ This philosophical and political conjuncture is described sympathetically but critically in Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*.

However, this is perhaps only the best of a rich secondary literature on Althusserian Marxism, employing various combinations of polemical energy and analytical rigour: Thompson, E.P., (1978), *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, (London, Penguin); Anderson, P., (1980), *Arguments Within English Marxism*, (London, Verso); Clarke, S. (et al), (1980), *One-Dimensional-Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture*, (London, Allison & Busby); Hirsh, A., (1981), *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz*, (Boston, South End Press); Schmidt, A., (1981), *History and Structure*, J. Herf (trans.), (Cambridge, MIT Press); Ranciere, J., (2011), *Althusser's Lesson*, E. Battista (trans.), (London, Continuum); Jameson, F., (1981), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press); Descombes, V., (1980), *Modern French Philosophy*, L. Scott-Fox & J.M. Harding (trans.), (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

⁵⁵⁴ Milios, J., (2009), 'Rethinking Marx's Value-Form Analysis from an Althusserian Perspective', *Rethinking Marxism* 21(2), pp. 260-261.

Bidet, J., (2009), *Exploring Marx's Capital*, (Leiden, Brill).

⁵⁵⁵ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 15.

being mutually imbricated, but not in and of themselves consubstantial.⁵⁵⁶ The idea that Marx's method is unique, and primarily to be understood as an epistemological departure from the method inherited from both Hegel and Ricardo, is not in itself new,⁵⁵⁷ and as the previous chapter suggests, was articulated as early as the 1920s and 1930s by I.I. Rubin,⁵⁵⁸ and then later in the tendency within German Marxism called *Wertkritik*.⁵⁵⁹ Nonetheless, it remains a relatively marginal interpretation of Marx's texts, with many of the major political tendencies within Marxist theory- notably those inspired by Antonio Gramsci⁵⁶⁰ and V.I. Lenin⁵⁶¹- accepting Ricardo's premise the labour theory of value, that "[t]he value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other commodity for which it will exchange, depends on the relative quantity of labor which is necessary for its production,"⁵⁶² and Hegel's philosophy as the philosophical plinth upon which Marx's dialectics of revolution are constructed.⁵⁶³

The concept of structure in Althusser's work is then intimately related to his critique of readings of Marx that uncritically reproduce the Hegelian dialectic and the labour theory of value, as well as the political theory that is predicated on these readings. Despite the anti-Hegelian orientation of Althusser's reading of Marx, Althusser hostility to Hegel can be greatly overstated.⁵⁶⁴ Much like proponents of Hegelian Marxism, Althusser insisted on the signal importance of a holistic perspective that takes totality as the central, signal characteristic of a world formed in the image of

⁵⁵⁶ Milios, 'Rethinking Marx's Value-Form Analysis from an Althusserian Perspective, *Rethinking Marxism*.

⁵⁵⁷ Perhaps the most eloquent recent defender of this position is Alex Callinicos, who outlines this perspective in his book Callinicos, *Deciphering Capital: Marx's Capital and its Destiny*.

⁵⁵⁸ Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*.

⁵⁵⁹ Bidet, J., (2008), 'New Interpretations of *Capital*', in Bidet, J. & Kouvelakis, S., (Eds.), *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, (Leiden, Brill), pp. 369-384.

⁵⁶⁰ Gramsci, A., (2005), *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart).

⁵⁶¹ Lenin, V.I., (1984), *Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, (Moscow, Progress Publishing).

⁵⁶² Ricardo, D., (1992), *Notes on Malthus's Measure of Value*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), p. 5.

⁵⁶³ Gogol, E., (2014), *Towards a Dialectics of Philosophy and Organisation*, (Leiden, Brill).

⁵⁶⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I will place most emphasis on Althusser's critique of Hegel here, but the reader of Althusser should be aware that implicit reproductions of Ricardo in Marx's thought are at least as significant a target.

capital.⁵⁶⁵ However, the type of totality Althusser was interested in is fundamentally different from the Hegelian model, contrasting what Althusser described as ‘simple contradiction’ within the Hegelian system to a more ‘truly Marxist’ approach that foregrounds the complex structure of social totality.⁵⁶⁶ Bearing the marks of an encounter with the writings of anthropological thinkers Emile Durkheim and Claude Levi-Strauss,⁵⁶⁷ Althusser suggested that a whole- and in Althusser’s case specifically a mode of production- cannot be understood through its component parts, and must be understood in terms of its relational structures at the level of totality.⁵⁶⁸ This was far from Althusser’s only encounter with the discussions that surrounded French Marxism, however, and although Althusser is usually thought of first and foremost as a Marxist *philosopher*,⁵⁶⁹ his writings are also deeply political, and conditioned by the political issues facing Marxists in his time, which means that his writings should be considered “political interventions in the field of theory”⁵⁷⁰ as much as they can be considered philosophical interventions in the field of politics. However ‘theoretical’ his writings appear to the contemporary reader, Althusser’s philosophy remained intimately connected to the political struggles of his age.

As a result, Althusser’s conception of structure is a theoretical innovation that bears the scars of the very specific historical *conjuncture* that bore it. In broad terms, the *problematique* in which he found himself emerged from the decline of Marxism as *the* heuristic device through which anti-systemic politics is imagined. More specifically, Althusser’s philosophical project was a response to the crisis of revisionism in the Soviet Union, the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s, and the way that anti-systemic thinking turned on Marxism-Leninism as the strain of thought that had given the world totalitarianism in the name of universal emancipation. In a speech given in Venice in November 1977, Althusser outlined what he perceived to be a ‘crisis of Marxism.’ Speaking of the workers’ struggles at

⁵⁶⁵ Jay, *Marxism & Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, p. 389.

⁵⁶⁶ Callinicos, A., (1976), *Althusser’s Marxism*, (London, Pluto Press), pp. 40-41.

⁵⁶⁷ Pfeifer, G., (2015), *The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek*, (Abingdon, Routledge), p. 41.

⁵⁶⁸ Althusser, *Marxism & Totality*, p. 389.

⁵⁶⁹ Levine, A., (2003), *A Future for Marxism? Althusser, the Analytical Turn and the Revival of Socialist Theory*, (London, Pluto Press), p. 74.

⁵⁷⁰ Levine, *A Future for Marxism?*, p. 76.

Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*.

the Mirafiore factory, Turin (an event also significant in the canonical accounts of autonomist theory), he suggested that Mirafiore was symptomatic of a labour movement that had lost its sense of historical providence. The origins of this loss of historical perspective lay, he believed in the horrors of actually existing socialism: “For *it is a fact* that it is no longer possible today, as it was, to "integrate" the past and present, to "integrate" on the one hand October 1917, the enormous world role of the Soviet Revolution, as well as Stalingrad, with on the other hand the horrors of the Stalin regime and the oppressive Brezhnev system. These same comrades said that if it is no longer possible, as it used to be, to hold the past and present together, it is because there no longer exists in the minds of the masses any "achieved ideal", any really living reference for socialism.”⁵⁷¹ The crisis of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was rightly being met with a reaction, but Althusser perceived this reaction as a process of de-Stalinization ‘from the right’. What was required, he insisted, was a reaction to Stalinism that pushed Marxist orthodoxies leftwards, towards a freedom that was to be found through the dismantling of the oppressive apparatus of Stalinised industry, which had re-inscribed the value form within the bureaucratic organisation of the economy that characterised Stalinism. As a result, Althusser’s project should be understood as a radicalisation of the project of Western Marxism: a critique not only of Stalinist Communism, but also of the humanist reaction to it by Western Marxism. In short, Althusser sought to do to Western Marxism what Western Marxism had done to bourgeois thought in the early 20th Century, by demonstrating its foundations in bourgeois idealism.

In terms of Marxist theory, Althusser had two primary targets: first, the deterministic economism of Second International Marxism; and second, the humanistic reaction to Stalinism in Western Europe. Paradoxically, he identified similar deficiencies within each, namely a reliance on the bourgeois idealism of Hegelian philosophy. If criticism of the intellectual backbone of Marxism-Leninism was familiar, the standpoint from which Althusser did this was not. He argued that in labouring to overcome the ‘economism’ of the Second International, which reduced the dynamics of the processes of politics and ideology mechanistically to the destiny determining contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production, Western

⁵⁷¹ Althusser, L., (1978), ‘The Crisis of Marxism’, *Marxism Today* July 1978, G. Lock (trans.), p. 215.

Marxism had inherited this determinism, but instead of identifying it in the trajectory of the totality of economic relations, had rearticulated it in ‘humanist’ terms, attempting to identify in proletarian consciousness an alienated origin and unified core of human nature.⁵⁷² As a result, Althusser felt capable of arguing that the ‘Western Marxism’ that opposed itself to orthodox Marxism was not as distinct from its economistic ‘other’ as it liked to imagine. Indeed, Althusser identified each as being beholden to a certain anthropological essentialism that prevented them from understanding the specific nature of Marx’s method, particularly as it related to understanding of a mode of production as a complex unity.⁵⁷³ For Althusser, these errors creep into Marxism because Marxists have placed too much emphasis on the Hegelian aspects of Marx’s thought. Despite offering radically different accounts of capitalism, and how its various components hang together, both Soviet Marxism and Western Marxist accounts posit an origin, in the form of pre-given economic laws, human nature, or the ‘subject’ of history, an error arising from their taking seriously the claim that Marx’s system was simply Hegel’s stood on its feet. As a result of this Hegelianism, Althusser’s central theoretical claim was that *both* Soviet economism *and* the humanism of Western Marxism are reductionist, with the former reducing all other instances of the social formation to epiphenomena of the economy, and consequently a politics that relies on an economic *deus ex machina* to produce political change, and the latter interpreting history as the drama of a Subject, and the history of man’s alienation and reconciliation with his essence.⁵⁷⁴ Both humanism and economism are dependent upon a Hegelian problematic that reduces its instances to expressions of an inner essence, and in turn means that any history must necessarily be a teleological one.⁵⁷⁵

As suggested earlier, Althusser’s gambit- and perhaps his signature contribution to the reading of Marx- was to suggest that Marx developed a method that is distinct from Hegel’s. By way of contrast to the Hegelian expressive totality, Althusser and his collaborators defined a social formation as a “totality of instances articulated on the

⁵⁷² Althusser, L., (2003), *The Humanist Controversy and Other Texts*, (London, Verso).

⁵⁷³ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 162.

⁵⁷⁴ Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism*, p. 92.

⁵⁷⁵ Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism*, p. 92.

basis of a determinate mode of production.”⁵⁷⁶ Social formations are a complex hierarchy of functionally organized institutions or instances whose unity can be neither ignored altogether nor reduced to a single closed system,⁵⁷⁷ but can only be understood in terms of its general unity. In the essay, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, printed in the collection *For Marx*, Althusser outlines how his conception of totality differs from that of G.W.F. Hegel: “[t]he whole of the Hegelian dialectic is...completely dependent on the radical presupposition of a simple original unity which develops within itself by virtue of its negativity, and throughout its development only ever restores the original simplicity and unity in an ever more ‘concrete’ totality.”⁵⁷⁸ Hegel’s ideas about totality emerge from his understanding of *expressivity*, presupposing in principle that the whole structure be reducible to an *inner essence*.⁵⁷⁹ The rest of the model is nothing more than the phenomenal form of expression of an inner principle. In Hegel’s thought, “*such and such an element* (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc., in Hegel) = *the inner essence of the whole*.”⁵⁸⁰ If in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the original unity to which Hegel refers is consciousness, it is possible to observe a similar original unity in the commodity form as it is employed by communitarian theory’s approach to form-analysis. For theories such as communitarianism, which operate in this tradition, the structures of human society must necessarily stem from the original unity of the commodity form. Speaking in 2011, Anselm Jappe explained that “[t]he commodity possesses a peculiar structure, and if we thoroughly analyze the most diverse phenomena, contemporary wars or the collapse of financial markets, the hydro-geological disasters of our time or the crisis of the nation-state, world hunger or changing gender relations, we will always find the structure of the commodity at the bottom of it all. I maintain that this is the consequence of the fact that society itself has reduced everything to a commodity; theory only takes account of this fact.”⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁶ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 207.

⁵⁷⁷ Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, p. 36.

⁵⁷⁸ Althusser, L., (2005), ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, in *For Marx*, B. Brewster (trans.), (London, Verso), p. 197.

⁵⁷⁹ Althusser, L., (1970), ‘The Object of *Capital*’, in Althusser, L. & Balibar, E., *Reading Capital*, (London, New Left Books), pp. 186.

⁵⁸⁰ Althusser, ‘The Object of *Capital*’, p. 187.

⁵⁸¹ Jappe, A., (2011), ‘The Metaphysical Subtleties of the Commodity’, www.libcom.org, (available online at: <http://libcom.org/library/metaphysical-subtleties-commodity-anselm-jappe>), (accessed on: 18.03.2015).

According to Althusser, this reading of the commodity as the origin of capitalist alienation is neither true to Marx's method, a method which goes beyond the idea of an organic totality of the type advocated by Hegel, and begins to examine human society not in terms of an expressive totality, but as a structured whole.⁵⁸² Nor is it useful for assessing the ways in which phenomena such as commons emerge within and against late capitalism. Manifestly, other social forms co-exist with the commodity. This whole can only be understood in terms of the relations between its parts, and cannot be reduced to an expressive totality, or a particular essence from which the remainder of the structure emanates. At the same time, Althusser's thought about structure and capitalist totality do not reduce totality to the subjective void of contingency. As he suggests in his essay 'On The Materialist Dialectic', "the fact that the Hegelian type of necessity and the Hegelian essence of development should be rejected does not mean at all that we are in the theoretical void of subjectivity, of 'pluralism' or of contingency. Quite the contrary, only on condition that we free ourselves from these Hegelian presuppositions can we really be sure of escaping this void. Indeed, it is because the process is complex and possesses a structure in dominance that its development, and all the typical aspects of this development, can really be explained."⁵⁸³ In so doing, Althusser suggests that Marx's method is subtly different to that of Hegel, and thus any kind of discussion of essence or expressive totality is to misrecognise the nature of capital (not to mention *Capital*), as well as the challenge facing any emancipatory political project. This is not to say that Marx's method does not bear the mark of Hegel: indeed, his unique approach to understanding capitalism begins with his departure from Ricardo manufactured through Hegelian dialectics, and that at its heart, capital is a social relation, and the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production assumes analytical and ontological priority over individual activities within this system.⁵⁸⁴ In order to do this, Marx's turn to Hegel was necessary but not sufficient, and as such Marx resorted to

⁵⁸² Althusser, 'On the Materialist Dialectic', p. 193.

This reading has been strongly contested in recent years, not least by the followers of Marxist-Humanist philosopher, Raya Dunayevskaya. For a detailed outline of these charges, see for example: Gogol, *Towards a Dialectics of Philosophy and Organisation*.

⁵⁸³ Althusser, 'On the Materialist Dialectic', p. 215.

⁵⁸⁴ This is the central argument of Bidet, *Exploring Marx's Capital*.

developing a distinctive conceptual system of his own.⁵⁸⁵ As Althusser and Balibar suggest in *Reading Capital*, the point of Marx's conceptual innovation is "[t]o think the unity of [the] conditions [of the mode of production].... To think the mode of production is to think not only the material conditions but also the social conditions of production."⁵⁸⁶ It is not sufficient to understand the capitalist mode of production in terms of isolated acts, and as such can only be understood capitalist production can only be understood in the context of its continued reproduction of the unity of its conditions.⁵⁸⁷ Understanding capitalism as a unity of its elements is, as suggested in the previous section, the specific character of the Marxist methodology, and key to the way that Marx's thought bears the mark of Hegel's philosophy, but cannot be understood simply to have 'stood Hegel's dialectic it on its feet'.

There have been various attempts to make sense of the way that the commodity form is formed and sustained within capital's social metabolism. Prominent among these ideas are Political Marxist discussions of the political dimension of capital's origins.⁵⁸⁸ Althusser, however, turns to the concept of 'overdetermination' to understand this systemic dimension of capital. Through overdetermination, Althusser suggests that capitalism is a complex social totality, and one that bears no relation to historic or economic necessity, but is instituted through the overdetermined effects of various historical processes, which are in and of themselves also overdetermined.⁵⁸⁹ This concept of structure emanates from the 'break' within Marx's work, and the emergence of what Althusser identifies as Marx's novel methodological move:

"The specific difference of Marxist contradiction is its 'unevenness', or 'overdetermination', which reflects in it its conditions of existence, that is, the specific structure of unevenness (in dominance) of the ever-pre-given complex whole which is its existence. Thus understood, contradiction is the motor of all development. Displacement and condensation, with their basis in its overdetermination, explain by

⁵⁸⁵ Callinicos, *Deciphering Capital: Marx's Capital and its Destiny*, p. 158.

⁵⁸⁶ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 180.

⁵⁸⁷ Althusser, L., (2014), *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, (London, Verso).

⁵⁸⁸ See for example Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*.

⁵⁸⁹ Althusser, L., (2005), 'On Contradiction & Overdetermination', *For Marx*, (London, Verso).

*their dominance the phases (non-antagonistic, antagonistic and explosive) which constitute the existence of the complex process, that is, 'of the development of things'.*⁵⁹⁰

A mode of production cannot be identified with a particular essence, existing only in the commodity form, or this or that practice of production. Rather, the mode of production is defined by its elements- capital, technology, and labour- and the way that they relate to one another. This is a recurrent theme within Althusser's work, from *Reading Capital* onwards, although finding its clearest articulation in his later essay 'On Marxist Thought', when he asks:

"What is a mode of production? We provided an answer to this question, following Marx: *it is a particular 'combination' of elements.* These elements are an accumulation of money (by the 'owners of money'), an accumulation of the technical means of production (tools, machines, an experience of production on the part of the workers), an accumulation of the raw materials of production (nature) and an accumulation of producers (proletarians divested of all means of production). The elements do not exist in history *so that* a mode of production may exist, they exist in history *in a 'floating state'* prior to their 'accumulation' and 'combination', each being the product of its own history, and none being the teleological product of the others or their history...in the theory of *primitive accumulation*...we witness the emergence of a historical phenomenon whose result we know—the expropriation of the means of production from an entire rural population in Great Britain—but whose causes bear no relation to the result and its effects. Was the aim to create extensive domains for the hunt? Or endless fields for sheep-raising? We do not know *just what* the main reason for this process of violent dispossession was (it was most likely the sheep), and, especially, the main reason for the violence of it; moreover, it doesn't much matter. The fact is that this process took place, culminating in a *result* that was promptly *diverted* from its possible, presumed end by 'owners of money' looking for impoverished manpower. *This mark is the mark of the non-teleology of the process* and of the incorporation of its result into a process that both made it possible and was

⁵⁹⁰ Althusser, 'On the Materialist Dialectic', p. 217.

wholly foreign to it.”⁵⁹¹

Althusser gets to this when he is talking about the significance of contradictions in a structured, complex whole: “to say that contradiction is a motive force is to say that it implies a real struggle, real confrontations, precisely located within the structure of the complex whole; it is to say that the locus of confrontation may vary according to the relation of the contradictions in the structure in dominance in any given situation; it is to say that the *condensation* of the struggle in a strategic locus is inseparable from the *displacement* of the dominant among these contradictions; that the organic phenomena of *condensation* and *displacement* are the very existence of the ‘identity of opposites’ until they produce the globally visible form of the *mutation* or qualitative leap that sanctions the revolutionary situation when the whole is recrystallised.”⁵⁹² From this recognition- that the capitalist mode of production comprises a complex whole of competing social forces- Althusser proclaims that politics can only be oriented towards the transformation of this totality by locating points of strategic weakness within the whole. For the modernist, however abstract and complex the structural determinations of the world have become, they remain objectively real.⁵⁹³ This is the beginning of Althusser’s political reason, a reason that I will attempt to articulate by briefly adumbrating the implications of this theoretical orientation for the way that we understand commons as a political relation.

Understanding this necessitates taking into account Althusser’s conception of the structure of global capitalism. Whilst the commodity is central to the explanatory logic of Marx’s project in *Capital, Vol. I*, its position at the heart of the social integument *is only a result* of the particular structural totality of capitalist social relations. Unlike in Hegelian-Marxist accounts of capital, in which the commodity form contains within it the alienation of the capitalist mode of production, which emanates outwards until society is nothing but reified spectacle, the Marxism developed from a structured-totality outlined in this thesis suggests that the whole- understood as the relationships between parts (ie. The state, the law, accumulation practices, primitive accumulation)- is necessary for the emergence of the commodity

⁵⁹¹ Althusser, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, p. 216.

⁵⁹² Althusser, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, p. 216.

⁵⁹³ Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, p. 20.

form. Its social form cannot be overcome simply by attacking its base- by opposing work directly- but by challenging the way in which the totality operates to place work at the forefront of social reproduction.⁵⁹⁴ Transformations in the mode of production do not take place within one component part of the social totality, but through the relation that the parts hold to one another.⁵⁹⁵ This is made clear in what Althusser terms ‘structure in dominance’,⁵⁹⁶ by which he means that capital can be defined in terms of its *locus of effectivity*: that which defines the interaction between parts of the totality.⁵⁹⁷ As a result, the defining feature of the capitalist mode of production is that it determines ‘in the last instance’- it is the ‘glue’ that ultimately holds the capitalist social structure together⁵⁹⁸- but at the same time, each other dimension of social practice have their own, local histories.⁵⁹⁹ Indeed, many local structures possess antagonistic tendencies against one another.⁶⁰⁰ Structure, for Althusser, is not immediately given, like “the *deus absconditus* of the scholastics and mystics, present only in its absence.”⁶⁰¹ This is why movements such as those founded around the commons, and theoretical perspectives such as autonomism, which do not attempt to grasp capital as a specific theoretical object, but through its symptoms, but it is also why a political movement that confronts capital directly is more necessary than ever.

As was established in the previous chapter, the ultimate challenge facing those who wish to make commons fundamental to social reproduction is one of negating capital,

⁵⁹⁴ Readers will recall that this is a feature of the ‘double moulinet’ put forward by *Theorie Communiste*, and discussed in the previous chapter. However, the Althusserian approach emphasizes the contingency of these interlocking cycles of reproduction: they are only related under the particular conditions of capitalism, which are enforced/reproduced through a variety of superstructural elements.

⁵⁹⁵ This of course recalls the story told by Brenner and Wood, who refute the so-called ‘commercialization’ hypothesis.

Aston, T.H. & Philbin, C.H.E. (Eds.), (1985), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

⁵⁹⁶ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, pp. 200-202.

⁵⁹⁷ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 100.

⁵⁹⁸ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 99.

⁵⁹⁹ Althusser, L., (1971), ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in Althusser, L., *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, B. Brewster (trans.), (New York, Monthly Review Press), pp. 121-176.

⁶⁰⁰ Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 102.

⁶⁰¹ Callinicos, A., (1989), *Against Postmodernism*, (Oxford, Polity Press), p. 131.

Although in this passage, Callinicos is talking about the notion of structure employed by Frederic Jameson, he is attempting to tease out what notion of structure Jameson has inherited from Althusser.

and the social form that mitigates towards its reproduction, as well as producing an alternative system of social-metabolic reproduction. As it depends upon negating the social forces that eradicate commons as soon as they appear, the production of commons is not an act of exodus, or the production of an ‘outside’ of capitalism. The production of commons themselves is insufficient to overcome the totality as the production of isolated commons, such as *Communia*, *Lab Puzzle*, or the *Oakland Commune* are only a limited challenge to the totality of the capitalist mode of production. The limits that commons movements encounter- from the police repression of Occupy Oakland, to the legal and financial expropriation of commons within the Italian *bene comune* movement- display the structure in dominance, and the capacity of the dominant mode of production to close down alternatives. On one hand, this is a disappointing rejection of workerist orthodoxies: the production of commons cannot be an attempt to produce a new world within the interstices of the old. On the other hand, this suggests that their significance might be greater than the partial and fragmentary creation of autonomous space; the production of such commons has the potential to transform the relations between the other elements in the whole.

This notion of structure also helps us to realise what is at stake in struggles over commons. If commons can only be made safe by negating capital and overcoming *capitalism*, it seems more adequate to understand commons as the *product* of political struggle or the social-metabolic form that post-capitalist society takes, rather than the *form* through which political struggle takes. Political action must be inherently universal if it is to overcome a social form that is itself universal. At least *prima facie* this appears limiting, and feeds into the popular perception of Althusserian scholarship, and the commentaries of his critics,⁶⁰² that Althusser is not interested in people, or what they do, but only in transhistorical structures that have real people as their ciphers. I’m not convinced that Althusser’s thought is deficient in this regard, however. Rather, he introduces a particular political logic, a political logic that can

⁶⁰² See for example Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, Hamilton, S., (2011), *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press). There is a good discussion of this tendency- and why it is mistaken- in Montag, W., (2013), ‘Conjuncture, conflict, war: Machiavelli between Althusser and Foucault (1975-6), in Diefenbach, K., Farris, S.R., Kirn, G. & Thomas, P.D., (Eds.), *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, (London, Bloomsbury), pp. 127-135.

help us to conceptualise political interventions into structured totalities, and capital-transcending political action.

Structure and Conjuncture: Althusser & the Political

Indeed, to understand how Althusser's thought about 'structure in dominance' might speak to political action, it is necessary to recall the relationship between structure and conjuncture within his thought. It is a generally accepted feature of Althusser scholarship that Althusser speaks of two distinct types of theoretical object: *structural totalities* and *conjunctures*.⁶⁰³ Whereas structural totalities are the interlinked structural forces of 'structure in dominance',⁶⁰⁴ such as capital *tout court*, *conjunctures* refer to more specific manifestations of 'structure in dominance', demonstrating "how social structures and relations of force (such as political, ideological, and theoretical forces outlined earlier) form, crystallise, and then endure."⁶⁰⁵ Conjunctures are not simply manifestations of structures, because they themselves can be fundamental in the emergence or destruction of structures, or as Nick Hardy has suggested, Althusser's conception of the relationship between structure and conjuncture is characterised by the capacity of "conjunctures [to] (dis)allow other structures to form around them."⁶⁰⁶ The research of Gray and others has demonstrated that Althusser's understanding of the relation between structure and conjuncture cannot be dismissed as that between local and general, or the dualism between surface appearances and deep structures,⁶⁰⁷ but it nonetheless remains a complex and often ill-understood feature of Althusser's political and sociological

⁶⁰³ Balibar, E., (1994), 'Althusser's Object', *Social Text* 39, pp. 157-188,

Hardy, N., (2013), 'Theory From the Conjuncture: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Machiavelli's dispositif', *Décalages* 1(3).

Althusser himself speaks about *conjunctures* in:

Althusser, L., (2012), *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, (London, Verso),

Althusser, L., (2011), *Machiavelli and Us*, (London, Verso).

⁶⁰⁴ Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 102.

⁶⁰⁵ Hardy, 'Theory From the Conjuncture', p. 4.

⁶⁰⁶ Hardy, 'Theory From the Conjuncture', p. 4.

⁶⁰⁷ Hardy, 'Theory From the Conjuncture',

Sotiris, P., (2014), 'Rethinking Structure and Conjuncture', *Historical Materialism* 22(3-4), pp. 5-51.

thought. I raise it here, because it is fundamental to understand Althusser's discourse on the political, and how commons might be politicised against capitalist totality.

The relationship between structure and conjuncture in Althusser is not, *pace* many of his critics,⁶⁰⁸ the abrogation of history, but a particular form of historical experience associated with the onset of European modernity. The relationship between structure and conjuncture is an attempt to express temporality politically, and as a site of intervention. If structure is the underlying, *deus absconditus* of the ultimately determining social force of capital, conjuncture is the dialectical unfolding of overdetermination and underdetermination, where structure is manifest in local forms.⁶⁰⁹ Conjunctures are the way that structural forces are manifest in, and acted back on by, local relations. The struggle over commons in Oakland and Rome, are examples of conjunctures, where the structural determination of the capitalist mode of production is made manifest, but at the same time, is made open to the play of contingency. This concession to contingency in its treatment of structure is why Althusser's *oeuvre* has become popular within poststructuralist theories (links to the writings of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze are commonplace), but it is important not to overlay the contingency within the notion of conjuncture employed by Althusser. Rather than speaking to absolute contingency, Althusser advocates conjunctural analysis because it expands the capacity to act politically, through examining the conditions of political intervention in their complexity, and increasing the capacity for the analysis to utilize the displacements and condensations of different contradictions.⁶¹⁰ It is not that a conjuncture makes everything contingent, but that conjunctural analysis creates the present, limited as it is by structural constraints, as a site of political intervention.⁶¹¹ In this regard, my reading of Althusser's approach to the question of structure leaves him somewhere between the sense of complete indeterminacy emphasized by advocates of his late, 'aleatory

⁶⁰⁸ See for example Schmidt, *History and Structure*.

⁶⁰⁹ Lahtinen, M., (2011), *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*, (Leiden, Brill), p. 61.

⁶¹⁰ Kovisto, J. & Lahtinen, M., (2012), 'Conjuncture, politico-historical', P. Thomas (trans.) *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism, Historical Materialism* 20(1), pp. 267-277.

⁶¹¹ Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy*, p. 141.

materialism’,⁶¹² and the complete determinism that critics of his ‘economistic structuralism’ identify as his constraining weakness.⁶¹³ As Etienne Balibar has demonstrated, Althusser’s interpretation of the concept of historical time was something other than the ‘structuralist’ teleology of the transition between one mode of production and another.⁶¹⁴ Rather, because history doesn’t have any *telos*, “it can really be the object of a *practice*.”⁶¹⁵ In placing practice at the forefront of his thought of the conjuncture, Althusser was returning to the question of structure and struggle, and the way that it is possible for agents to act within a totality that is dominated by capital.

Althusser, the Conjuncture and Political Interventions

In Althusser’s writings, the analysis of capital as a theoretical object produces a particular political way of understanding the political as an intervention into capital. If capitalist totality tends towards the repetition of the *status quo*, political action must be sought which breaks the reproduction of this totality. At the same time, I do not think that- in the fashion of the new philosophers⁶¹⁶ - Althusser opposes the free play of the aleatory against the determination of the structural.⁶¹⁷ Rather, the political is dialectically related to the structural. Secondary commentators who suggest that Althusser has little to say about agency tend to neglect Althusser’s treatment of the dialectic in *For Marx*,⁶¹⁸ where Althusser follows Mao in identifying careful analysis of contradictions as the basis for action. In Althusser’s analysis of the Russian

⁶¹² See for example Read, J., (2005), ‘The Althusser Effect: Philosophy, History, and Temporality’, *Borderlands* 4(2), (unpaginated version available online at: http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no2_2005/read_effect.htm), (accessed on: 11.08.2015).

⁶¹³ Schmidt, *History and Structure*.

⁶¹⁴ Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*.

⁶¹⁵ Althusser, *For Marx*; p. 204.

⁶¹⁶ See for example Brown, ‘Red Years: Althusser’s Lesson: Rancière’s Error and the Real Movement of History’, pp. 16-24.

⁶¹⁷ Callinicos, A., (2014), ‘Appendix: Althusser’s Detour via Relations’, in *Deciphering Capital: Marx’s Capital and its Destiny*, (London, Bookmarks).

⁶¹⁸ Bob Jessop discusses this at some length in an interview with Joo Hyung Ji & Sandra Kytir.

Jessop, B., Joo Hyung, J., Kytir, S., (2009), ‘The Strategic-Relational Approach: An Interview with Bob Jessop’, (available online at: <http://bojessop.org/2014/12/02/the-strategic-relational-approach-an-interview-with-bob-jessop/>), (accessed on: 20.04.2015).

revolution in *For Marx*, for example, he suggests that the revolution occurred when it did because a set of contradictions came together that could only be resolved by radical transformation. However, more than a set of structural contradictions are required: as in the Soviet case, a revolutionary agency is needed that can do away with the contradiction- as the Soviet agency was crystallized around the slogan ‘bread and peace’- and condense and crystallise the contradiction into what Marx described in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as a ‘poetry of the future’.⁶¹⁹ If structure is to be understood as the unity of a variety of form-determining social processes, then politics is the attempt to transform these form-determining processes with attention to the weak links within its make-up. Whilst Althusserian thought is often accused of developing ‘regional ontologies’, Althusser’s *political* thought does not aim to demonstrate where politics necessarily resides- a theory of the political *qua* the political- but where politics might be applied in order to transform the structured whole of capitalist social relations.⁶²⁰ The political is a strategy of intervention within the totality, rather than a region of the totality.

As a result, the conjuncture is more than just an attempt to link local practice to global structures: Althusser’s interest in the conjuncture is derived from his understanding of the structure of capitalist totality, and his attempt to conceptualise history as a non-teleological process into which political interventions can be made. As Althusser suggests in *For Marx*, there can be no Hegelian politics, so thinking these types of interventions in *political* terms necessitates a departure from the expressive totality of

⁶¹⁹ Marx, K., (1852), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, S.K. Padover & F. Engels (trans.), (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>), (accessed on: 21.04.2015).

⁶²⁰ Althusser’s notion of the ‘relative autonomy’ of the political is often thought to similar to Mario Tronti’s. Sara Farris’ recent article on the topic is a useful corrective to such ideas. Farris argues that, contra the Trontian trajectory, in which the state becomes identified as the only sphere in which political struggle can be articulated, Althusser’s point in articulating his point about the relative autonomy of the state is that- given the social totality of which it is a part- it is removed from direct productive relations and class struggle in order that it might better regulate the capitalist totality. In putting this perspective forward, Althusser sought to overcome the illusion that the state is a class-neutral, or neutralisable, machine.

Farris, S.R., (2013), ‘Althusser and Tronti: the primacy of politics versus the autonomy of the political’, in Diefenbach, K., Farris, S.R., Kirn, G. & Thomas, P.D., (Eds.), *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, (London, Bloomsbury), pp. 185-203.

the Hegelian whole. What is more, against those who have sought to foreground the free play of the aleatory ‘encounter’ within Althusser’s thought as a road into indeterminacy and post-structuralist thought,⁶²¹ ‘the conjuncture’ is Althusser’s way of trying to systematically interrogate the relationship between the freedom of political action of the excluded and the dispossessed to transform their horizon within a structural context that is dominated by capital and the state.⁶²²

Again, the origins of the conjuncture in Althusser’s thought lie in his conception of the way that capitalist structure holds together. It is not a telos that is inscribed in the various elements of a mode of production, but is produced and sustained by the encounter between a number of components, which include the legal and political structures of national and international regulation of the productive and reproductive spheres. For this reason, the concentration of legitimate political violence in the sovereign state, and the regulation of violence by the international are absolutely fundamental to (re)producing the continued encounter between labour and capital. Recognising that the capital-system is not a simple totality, but one that is comprised of heterogenous elements brought into simultaneity is central to Althusser’s use of the term ‘conjuncture’, and the departure from the teleology within overly Hegelian readings of structure within Marx. A similar perspective has been adopted by the school of Uneven & Combined Development within IR, where Justin Rosenberg and others have attempted to articulate what a *conjunctural* analysis can do for understanding and locating the way in which specific historical conjunctures emerge and are solidified.⁶²³ There have, however, been caveats applied to this approach, notably the criticism from Alex Callinicos that this type of analysis has difficulties dealing with the distinction between epochs of capitalist accumulation and particular

⁶²¹ Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 204.

⁶²² Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 99, pp. 178-179, and pp. 205-206.

⁶²³ Rosenberg, J., (2005), ‘Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem’, *International Politics* 42(1), pp. 2-74.

See also:

Anievas, A., (Ed.) (2010), *Marxism and World Politics: Contesting Global Capitalism*, (London, Routledge).

Anievas, A. & Nisancioglu, K., (2015), *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*, (London, Pluto Press).

Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*.

conjunctures.⁶²⁴ Of course, there is the converse danger that in understanding this problem as one of the relation between structure and conjuncture, Callinicos and others like him miss the way in which epochs themselves are formed conjuncturally.⁶²⁵ Nonetheless, despite the internal differentiation between its proponents about what a conjunctural analysis entails,⁶²⁶ what is truly significant here, is the difference between conjunctural analysis and the analysis presented by Hegelian conceptions of totality.

Althusser's use of the term emphasizes the way that conjunctures can be used to construct the world as a site of intervention. The strategic reading that comes from the relation of conjuncture to structure is, in Althusser's estimation, both what allows for the application of political reason to the problem of the supersession of capital, and as a materialist alternative to the idealist theory of history as an expressive totality as presented by Hegel. The question of politics for the materialist philosopher, or indeed for the social movement, is not grasping at some internal essence, but rather navigating an ever-changing totality of capitalist social relations. Although structural forces continue to determine the social totality, political interventions can only be made sense of through the application of political reason *through* the conjuncture. This suggests that at times, parts of social reality gain a degree of independence from the structural determinations of the capital-system's totality, and has the capacity to transform them. Within a conjuncture, particular contradictions come to the fore within an individual situation, which makes this situation fertile territory for radical change. Although these contradictions originate in the structural conditions of the capitalist totality, they must be brought together politically. All of these conditions combine to create a situation in which temporality accelerates and greater possibilities appear to emerge.

Daniel Bensaïd has suggested that the question of temporality has always been crucial to the construction of a Marxist politics. In particular, the present is a central category for thinking politically about social transition because it “[t]he present [that] is the

⁶²⁴ Callinicos, A., (2005), ‘Epoch and Conjuncture in Marxist Political Economy’, *International Politics* 42(3), pp. 353-363.

⁶²⁵ Kovisto & Lahtinen, ‘Conjuncture, politico-historical’, p. 274.

⁶²⁶ The best discussion of this is Kovisto & Lahtinen, ‘Conjuncture, politico-historical’.

central temporal category of an open-ended history.”⁶²⁷ Analysis conducted in these terms does not just produce knowledge of what produces a conjuncture, it also establishes the present conjuncture as an object political intervention. Indeed, Georg Lukács suggested in his writings on Lenin: “[t]he concrete analysis of the concrete situation is not an opposite of ‘pure’ theory, but- on the contrary- it is the culmination of genuine theory, its consummation- the point where it breaks into practice.”⁶²⁸ As Daniel Bensaïd has argued, “[t]he present is no longer a mere link in the chain of time but a moment for selecting among possibilities. The acceleration of history is not that of a time intoxicated by speed, but the effect of the furious turnover of capital. Revolutionary action is not the imperative of a proven capacity to make history, but engagement in a conflict whose outcome is uncertain. Hypothetical and conditional, bristling with discontinuities, the impossible totalisation of historical development opens out into a multiplicity of pasts and futures. For every epoch the historic present represents the result of a history that has been made and the inaugural force of an advent that is beginning anew. At issue is a specifically political present, strategically identified with the notion of the “given and inherited *circumstances*” by which “men make their own history”.”⁶²⁹ Only by grasping the historical moment, and the practical application of political reason to this moment, can the forcible conjuncture of discordant temporalities be achieved.

These conjunctures need not operate at the same spatial scale, although they are related. World system theorists have argued that the singular economic, social, political, and ecological crisis of our time results from the systemic crisis of our times. Immanuel Wallerstein has argued for example, that what is at stake in this systemic crisis is nothing less than the terms of the global order likely to emerge at the end of this period of structural instability.⁶³⁰ It does not follow from this, however, that the sphere of action should *only* be global. Whilst the global supersession of the

⁶²⁷ Bensaïd, D., (1995), *A Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, (London, Verso).

⁶²⁸ Lukács, G., (2009), *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, (London, Verso), pp. 41-42.

⁶²⁹ Bensaïd, *A Marx for Our Times*, pp. 70-71.

⁶³⁰ Wallerstein, I., (2009), ‘Crisis of the Capitalist System: Where Do We Go from Here?’, *The Harold Wolpe Lecture, University of KwaZulu-Natal* 05.11.2009, (available online at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/wallerstein121109.html>), (accessed on: 23.03.2015).

value form necessitates the global as an object of political practice, the civic (which has the strongest valence for existing theoretico-practical discourses of commons), and the scale of the apparently weakened nation state. Conjunctural analysis tells us that none of these scales have ontological priority over the others. Depending on the weaknesses of capital's social-metabolic reproduction, weaknesses can emerge at any or all of the various scales discussed. Strategic reason applied to the contemporary conjuncture can demonstrate points at which capital is weakest, and the way to attack it.

The best way to explain the significance of conjunctural analysis, is to articulate what this means for an analysis of the commons, and their significance as a strategic-relational weakness within capital's current social-metabolic system. Commons movements have the potential to be more than just the production of commons; they can also become the social basis for a political movement that seeks to end the hegemony of capital over social metabolic reproduction. The gains that have already been made in Rome, Oakland, and across the world, can be seized upon as the kernel of a wider political transformation. To stretch this vision from local to global political transformations requires institutions and planning, something to which both autonomism and communisation seem indisposed. Political power must be shaped, mobilized and wielded in order to transform society such that commons become a hegemonic force within society.

The relationship between commons and the political are of significance to more than just the transitional logic of commoning. The relationship between the two is of fundamental importance to the establishment of a future political order in which commons are hegemonic. Indeed, even if commons were to be a hegemonic force, there would remain the tricky issue of how commons and their infrastructure will be managed and operated, and the wider question of how politics can mediate between competing social interests. Simon Bromley defines the necessity of politics as "a distinct kind or moment of social activity concerned with reaching and giving effect to collectively-binding decisions and rules in circumstances where there is (potential)

disagreement over alternative courses of action.”⁶³¹ By most accounts, the political is an ineradicable feature of human society, and for significant parts of the canon of Western Political Philosophy, the political is the architrave of human freedom.⁶³² There is no reason why this should be any different in a social formation in which commons are a hegemonic social relation. As a consequence, there is reason to think through the relationship between commons and the political both as a pressing philosophical task and as an urgent practical investigation. Contemporary IR research into the method of ‘Uneven and Combined Development’ suggests that multiplicity is a foundational social feature of human life.⁶³³ If multiplicity is the *sine qua non* of human society, there is a pressing problem for political theory to answer, which is what forms this multiplicity takes in a social formation in which commons are hegemonic.

Simon Bromley has argued convincingly that capitalism in the contemporary world is something that is proliferated through the ways in which “capitalist social relations [are] in part mediated and effected through a states system reinforces the mobility of capital *vis-à-vis* any particular state.”⁶³⁴ In other words, the institutions of modernity have been globalized rather than globalization superseding the institutions of modernity.⁶³⁵ The corollary of this is that any theory of commons has to take ‘the international’ into account, and engage with the territorial associations that are the foundation of political order.⁶³⁶ Radical political thought about commons has not always engaged with the state: the capitalist state is seen as the guarantor of the legal and political order in which capital is hegemonic. Given that multiplicity is a prominent feature of the contemporary human condition, a political theory of commons must take this multiplicity seriously.

Practically, this necessitates engaging seriously with the state as the local

⁶³¹ Bromley, S., (2010), ‘Politics and the international’, in Anievas, A., (Ed.), *Marxism and World Politics: Contesting Global Capitalism*, (London, Routledge), p. 231.

⁶³² James, C.L.R., (2013), *Modern Politics*, (Oakland, PM Press).

⁶³³ See for example:

Callinicos, A. & Rosener, J., (2010), ‘Uneven and combined development: the social-relational substratum of ‘the international’?: An exchange of letters’, in Anievas, A., (Ed.), *Marxism and World Politics: Contesting Global Capitalism*, (London, Routledge), pp. 149-181.

⁶³⁴ Bromley, S., (1999), ‘Marxism and Globalisation’, in Gamble, A., Marsh, D. & Tant, T., (Eds.), *Marxism and Social Science*, (Chicago, University of Illinois Press), p. 300.

⁶³⁵ Bromley, ‘Marxism and Globalisation’, p. 300.

⁶³⁶ Bromley, ‘Politics and the international’.

manifestation of human multiplicity. It necessitates thinking seriously about the way in which the multiplicity of human political life can be used to effect a hegemonic project, and with it, a transition to a social metabolic system in which commons are the hegemonic reproductive strategy. Thinking about this problem in terms of the state, in terms of hegemony, and in terms of transition goes against a lot of current thinking about political challenges to neoliberalism in contemporary academia, which appears to foreground resistance and insurrection over and above an analytics of fully conscious transition. In the context of this, it is vitally important to think about the commons *strategically and politically*, and practices of commoning have to be thought about in terms of how they can engage with and be supported by wider structures than simply those that exist within commons.

Politicising Commoning, Althusser's Modernism and The Significance of Political Reason

Althusser's politics is consistent not only with the idea of modernism, but also with the revolutionary political movements that were brought into being by the rupture of 1789, incubated in the *Vormärz*, and which reached political maturity in the 20th Century. This tradition suggests that the political revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries had been insufficient because they remained only at the level of the political; a movement was required that brought the political and the social spheres into conjuncture.⁶³⁷ In this context, the political is both a form of disintegration, and a regulative principle by which society must be run. Indeed, this invokes Marx & Engels' comments on communism in *The German Ideology*, when they say: "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result

⁶³⁷ Indeed, in recent research conducted as to the specifically *political* thought of Marx, a similar conception of the political has been identified. See for example Kouvelakis, S., (2003), *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx*, G.M. Goshgarian (trans.), (London, Verso), Kouvelakis, S., (2007), 'Marx's Critique of the Political: From the Revolutions of 1848 to the Paris Commune', *Situations* 2(2), pp. 81-93.

from the premises now in existence.”⁶³⁸ Here, the political is not a regulative principle that organizes human activities, as it is in classical political thought ranging from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt,⁶³⁹ so much as it is a force applied to the current conjuncture that can decompose the existing power structures of global politics. Marxism is not a doctrine of the state, or a discourse on how to wield state power; at its heart, Marx’s political problematique arises from a desire to find the appropriate ‘political form’ through which to exercise proletarian power, and how this form might be used to destroy the value form and the existing structures of the political state that maintain it.⁶⁴⁰ Politics is, then, a form of strategy, not an end in itself, but a means through which the alienated and alienating forms of capitalist life might be transformed.

One of the great mistakes of Western Marxism has been to its tendency to downplay the significance of the political as a significant category.⁶⁴¹ The philosophical origins

⁶³⁸ Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, ‘Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook’, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>), (accessed on: 26.03.2015).

⁶³⁹ James, *Modern Politics*.

⁶⁴⁰ Kouvelakis, ‘Marx’s Critique of the Political’, p. 88.

⁶⁴¹ Here, I follow Alex Callinicos in identifying Western Marxism with a very specific discourse that emerged in Western Europe following the writings of Karl Kautsky and Georg Lukács. For Western Marxism, Marx’s contribution to philosophy can be understood in terms of the relationship between subject and object. The emergence of the discourse of Western Marxism marked an historical break with the Marxism of the second international, which is often thought to be deterministic and leads to a fatalistic politics, but also encouraged the ‘philosophisation’ of Marx’s thought. Lukács’ work in particular was dominated by his preoccupation with Western philosophy, and its quest for a rational and comprehensive understanding of reality. An object that is entirely alien to the subject that wishes to comprehend it cannot be known: for it to be known, there must be an underlying unity of the subject and the object. The grandiose conception at the heart of Western philosophy- that thought can only grasp that which it has itself created- results in its obsession with the identification of the ‘identity of subject and object’ as the *non plus ultra* of philosophy. However, where Western Marxism departs from the remainder of Western philosophy is in its identification of totality as the determining factor for any rational and true appreciation of the world. Of the Western philosophers, only Hegel had been able to *both* reconcile the subject and the object of knowledge, *and* to think of the world as totality, rather than a regional knowledge. However, even his attempts to do so came at an immense price, for the world of nature and men had to be understood in terms of the Absolute Idea, and the point of self-knowledge for the philosopher was when he identified the world as the emanation of the Idea. Fascinatingly, the tragic contradiction at the heart of Western philosophy reflected the constitutive tension of capitalist society; that is, the extent to which society can be

of its problematique, in which the bourgeois preoccupation with the identity of subject and object comes to the fore, means that for Western Marxists, ‘the political’ is often rejected as a form of instrumental abstraction, and thus is incapable of grasping the expressive totality of capitalist social forms.⁶⁴² At the same time, in insisting on the necessity of *the political* as a mode of intervention, Althusser does not promote the ontologisation of the political that has become prominent among some sections of the continental left.⁶⁴³ In Althusser’s conception, politics is a way of accessing the world, of thinking strategically about the way it is formed, and might be disassembled. By way of contrast to one of the most prominent ways of thinking about the political from a Marxist perspective in contemporary thought, embodied in the writings of thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Peter Hallward, for whom the return to the political

subordinated to a form of rationality and control, and the way in which the totality of capitalist social relations escapes these forms of control. The rationalization of man’s activities under the formal laws of the market, and the formal laws of the state, serve to control some aspects of human activity, but fundamentally obscure other ways in which humans interact with each other and relate to the natural world. For theorists operating in the Western Marxist tradition such as Lukacs, this is the opening proposition of a theory of reification. Reification, imposed on man and the natural world in order to master some of its aspects, not only leads to an inhumane society; it is also the intellectual operation that undergirds the crisis of classical philosophy that the world encountered in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. For Lukacs and his fellow Western Marxists, the proletariat holds the key to the exit of this philosophical problem, because-shorn of the ideological interests of the bourgeois philosopher and the class he represents- it becomes the most uncompromising force for understanding the world in terms of its totality. To put it in the philosophical terms they prefer, only the proletariat can achieve the unity of subject and object that so eluded bourgeois philosophers because their degradation to the status of commodities enables them to grasp the essence of the reification of society. This tends to mean that within Western Marxism, the decisive political struggles are fought at the level of consciousness, and the bourgeois conception of the political is an ideological distortion that rationalizes the world in favour of one class, in a fashion that elides the totality of the situation.

See for example Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism*.

⁶⁴² This is a theme that has been explored recently in International Studies by Andrew Davenport.

Davenport, A., (2011), *At the Limit: Of Realism, Materialism and International Theory*, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex).

⁶⁴³ See for example the work of Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Claude Lefort, and Jacques Ranciere. An excellent summary of their work, and the way that their thought relates to the Marxist tradition can be found in:

Marchart, O., (2007), *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press),

A broader study of the treatment of politics as ontology in contemporary philosophy can be found in the subsequent German publication of the same work:

Marchart, O., (2010), *Die Politische Differenz: Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*, (Berlin, Suhrkamp).

is voluntaristic and dependent upon the cultivation of will,⁶⁴⁴ the type of political reason required for thinking about political action around the commons is, by its very nature, strategic. Most obviously, this necessitates an engagement with the thought on dialectics associated with the history of 20th Century Marxism and the thought of Vladimir Lenin,⁶⁴⁵ but Althusser's attempts to develop forms of political reason adequate to the strategic question of how capitalism might be ended led him to draw similar conclusions. In the face of actually existing Communism's appropriation of Marxist terminology, this led him to engage with thinkers not usually canonical within Marxist theory. As Mikko Lahtinen and others have demonstrated, Althusser's approach to the political bears the deep and lasting inheritance of an engagement with the political thought of Niccolo Machiavelli.⁶⁴⁶ Pointing to Althusser's treatment of Lenin in 'On the Materialist Dialectic', Lahtinen identifies that Althusser reversed the polarity of his earlier 'theoreticism',⁶⁴⁷ suggesting that Marxist philosophy should learn from Marxist political practice. Key to understanding how this reformulated Althusser's thought is the concept of the conjuncture: Marxist politics "*in the practical state, [gives us] a theoretical concept of capital importance: the concept of the 'present moment' or 'conjuncture'.*"⁶⁴⁸ The concept of conjuncture is often tied to poststructuralist readings of Althusser, which build upon the metaphysical dimensions of Althusser's thought.⁶⁴⁹ Rather than developing this discourse further, in the remainder of this section I want to explore how the political concept of the conjuncture helps us to think about commons politically.

⁶⁴⁴ See for example Hallward, P., (2009), 'Notes towards a dialectical voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 155.

⁶⁴⁵ In particular Althusser, L., (2001), *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New York, Monthly Review Press).

⁶⁴⁶ Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolo Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism*.

Lahtinen, M., (2013), 'Althusser, Machiavelli and us: between philosophy and politics', in Diefenbach, K., Farris, S.R., Kirn, G. & Thomas, P.D., (Eds.), *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, (London, Bloomsbury), pp. 115-125. Althusser is, of course, not unique in identifying Machiavelli as a figure of significance to the Marxist tradition. This is also a feature of Antonio Gramsci's re-interpretation of the Marxist canon.

⁶⁴⁷ 'Theoreticism' put simply, is the belief that practical political interventions can be established on the basis of premises that are developed theoretically.

Lahtinen, 'Althusser, Machiavelli and us', pp. 116-117.

⁶⁴⁸ Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, p. 64.

⁶⁴⁹ See for example the 2005 'Althusser & Us' 4(2) issue of the e-journal *Borderlands* (available online at: <http://www.borderlands.net.au/issues/vol4no2.html>).

Conjunctural analysis of the contemporary situation suggests that commons are a point of capital's weakness. Where once, in the heyday of the welfare-capitalist era in the global North, the state and other centralised welfare institutions took on social reproduction, social reproduction is increasingly being made external to the reproduction of capital, with wages increasingly insufficient to fund it, and state welfare programmes cut back in favour of local resilience and self-reliance. Commons are significant because they demonstrate a key weakness of the capitalist mode of production, as various people become surplus to the circuits of capital's valorisation, and its linked social-reproductive mechanisms. The increase of a 'surplus' population that is outside wage labour, or in some cases, finds the wage relation insufficient to provide adequate sources of food and shelter, means that commons are able to take a position in the material and ideological terrain abandoned by capital. In other words, social reproduction (as the reproduction of lives, families, and communities) has become a key point of weakness within the structural reproduction of capital, and the type of place in which counter-hegemonic struggles can be waged. Capital's failure to provide for this surplus population, alongside its apparent incapacity to provide even for those who remain in waged labour, is damning indictment of its own claims to be a principle of social organisation that provides a high quality of life for the world's citizens. That alternative, co-operative forms of social reproduction can be established is significant, because it undercuts neoliberal capitalism's claims to be 'the only game in town', at the same time that social relations of mutual aid and local solidarity continue to be destroyed in the name of market relations. What is more, the counter-hegemonic project of commons argues that a higher quality of life can be provided by a system of commons, but also in a system where democratic self-control is appropriated through the local administration and organisation of commons.

At the same time, a conjunctural analysis warns that analysis and action remaining only at the level of social reproduction will be insufficient to challenge the hegemony of a capital's social metabolic system. The space outside of capital opened up by these specific acts of commoning remains relatively small, with the world of work and wages outside of it retaining a significant impact on the lives of the individuals and communities within the movements. Despite this, the hegemony established by the

idea of commons can be extended beyond these spaces, by a wider social movement that demands the principles by which human activity is determined by human need rather than the artificial necessity imposed by the value form. The other aspect of the conjuncture that is significant here is that commons speak to problems that are being experienced across the world, within the many different cities of the global North. By establishing links with other movements across the cities of the world in which similar problems, and similar political strategies are created, the conjuncture can be made about more than just this social centre, or that occupied square, and about the more general reconfiguration of social life according to the requirements of human needs.

In this, there is a necessity to re-examine the discourse of the state that seems to be absent from contemporary discussions of Marxism. If Marxism, or indeed any theory of the supersession of the capitalist mode of production is to be successful, it must in some way have a theory of the state. There is a theory of the state in Marx's writings, even if it is a somewhat ambiguous one. Many of Marx's ideas about the state stem from his early encounter with Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, the ideal of the state could be justified as a source of unity and 'concrete moral identity'.⁶⁵⁰ Berki and Critchley have argued that comprehending the influence of the Hegelian conception of statehood is a fundamental part of understanding Marx's political philosophy.⁶⁵¹ For Hegel, the state is an instrument of the universal that manages to rise above the conflicts of civil society that derive from individualism and private property. Marx (and following him Lenin, Gramsci and the rest of the classical Marxist tradition) rejects the Hegelian definition of the state as the reconciliation of the contradictions of civil society. Far from being a solution to the antagonisms of civil society, the state is a product of these antagonisms, and cannot resolve them without abolishing itself. What ultimately Marx objects to is the rationality of the state in Hegel's conception: although at fault for thinking it rational, Hegel's account of the way that the bourgeois state functions is not in and of itself mistaken.⁶⁵² While the true origin of the state lies

⁶⁵⁰ Pelczynski, Z.A., (1984), *Political Community and Individual Freedom in Hegel's Philosophy of State*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

⁶⁵¹ Berki, R.N., (1988), *The Genesis of Marxism*, (London, Everyman), p. 141.

Critchley, P., (2001), *Marx and Rational Freedom*, (Manchester, MMU Press), p. 2.

⁶⁵² Thomas, P.D., (2009), 'Gramsci and the Political: From the state as "metaphysical event" to hegemony as "philosophical fact"', *Radical Philosophy* 153, p. 31.

in civil society, this is not the same thing as suggesting that the relations of power in civil society are not influenced, or over-determined by the political state.

Political society posits itself as a speculative comprehension of a civil society that is constituted by its particularity precisely by political society's claim to be an instance of organising universality.⁶⁵³ In other words, political society came into being at the same moment as civil society, and political society has a conceptuality that shapes the emergence of civil society. This is not a form of the political that can simply be eradicated by ignoring it and hoping that struggles in civil society will be sufficient to make it wither: the conception of the political embodied in the bourgeois state must be tackled and replaced. The history of classical Marxism, including the writings of its great thinkers such as Lenin, Trotsky and Gramsci, is a history of a project to develop a counter-power, and with it a conception of the political that is at variance to the bourgeois conception of the political. It is not simply an abandonment of the political, but an attempt to construct it on the basis of a new social power. The corollary of this is that the attempt to create some kind of hegemonic force is necessarily the formation of a new kind of state.

Without form or shape, a commons movement that remains a social movement and does not become a political movement, will have little reality for the vast majority of people on earth. Capital itself dictates that, if we wish to establish democratic self-control over our lives, or establish life on the basis of an alternative set of principles, a political movement must emerge that overcomes capital as a social relation. This means transforming social relations beyond where they have emerged through the cooperative production of commons. This political strategy cannot remain at the level of either simply producing commons autonomously from capital, or the attempt to grasp control of the levers of the state. Rather, they must be the more comprehensive project of dismantling the system of social-metabolic control that capital has built, and substituting it with another. In order to manufacture and maintain this alternative system of social-metabolic control, a form of political organisation is required, which has the capacity to organise and negotiate between various commoning projects.

⁶⁵³ Thomas, 'Gramsci and the Political', p. 31.

What this political form will look like is not something that can be established *a priori*, and there is reason to be suspicious of accounts that suggest that the political form adequate to the 21st Century will look exactly like the political forms of Marxist-Leninist parties in the 20th Century. Nonetheless, conjunctural analysis suggests that we should start thinking in terms of ‘strategic hypotheses’,⁶⁵⁴ and longer-term institutional achievements that place the pursuit of hegemony alongside the goal of constituting local, self-managed commons. This means that the experience of revolutionary politics in the 20th Century and beyond is not wholly uninformative. The question of unity, of constructing a collective will that is capable of opposing the hegemonic project of capital with another hegemonic project is to ask the question of politics anew. This suggestion about political organisation differs from that of the prevailing neo-Gramscian perspectives put forward in International Studies and beyond, and particularly scholars such as Stephen Gill, Alf Gundvald Nilsen and Laurence Cox, who see this logic of hegemony as something present, or emerging, within the dispersed environmental, social justice and commons movements across the world.⁶⁵⁵ Although these movements are both politically progressive, and politically necessary for a movement that operates conjuncturally, they are not in and of themselves consubstantial with this movement.

So, what does this mean?

Perhaps the best way to summarise this reading of capitalist totality and political strategy is to return to the formulation used at the beginning of this thesis, which understands a theory of commons as a three-dimensional phenomenon.

1. Capitalism is a social-metabolic system whereby human activity is organised around the valorisation of value. Capital itself should be understood primarily as a social relation that structures this social-metabolic system, which establishes two key dynamics: the separation of man from his means of

⁶⁵⁴ This is a term used by Daniel Bensaïd.

Bensaïd, D., (2007), ‘The return of strategy’, *International Socialism* 113, (available online at: <http://isj.org.uk/the-return-of-strategy/>), (accessed on: 10.03.2015).

⁶⁵⁵ Gill, S., (2000), ‘Toward a Postmodern Prince? The Battle in Seattle as a Moment in the New Politics of Globalisation’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29(1), pp. 131-140.

production; and the establishment of a competition between capitals. The capitalist mode of production is dependent on a number of structural determinants, rather than being a simple, uncomplicated unity. Primitive accumulation is the fundamental structural violence that underpins capitalist production, separating man from the means of his social reproduction, but capital has a material reality beyond these acts of primitive accumulation, developing technological and organisational knowledge, as well as productive forces that have the potential to free man from natural necessity. As a social force, capital operates through subsuming concrete reality under abstractions. Capital as a social force is fundamentally universal, because it has two dimensions: the separation of man from his means of subsistence, and the remorseless logic of the competition between capitals.

2. Commons emerge where social reproduction is threatened, either by accumulation through dispossession, or where populations are forced out of existing cycles of social reproduction. This can be due to unemployment removing people from the wage economy, or the withdrawal of state interventions into social reproduction. Commons socialise reproduction, establishing local, democratic control over resources and collective infrastructure. Commons have a powerful ideological content. However, we should not limit our interest in commons to taking back that which capital stole from labour: we should be more interested in socialising and communising the potentials that lie within the capitalist mode of production.
3. Political action should not, therefore be understood as consubstantial with the commons. As it deals only with questions of social reproduction, acts of commoning are not, in and of themselves political. Indeed, commons movements themselves have often withdrawn from political engagement, framing their own engagement as fundamentally anti-political. Nonetheless, given capital's universal quality, the illusion that action that remains only social can overcome capital remains precisely that: an illusion. A political project is required that can generalise commons, to take them beyond existing anti-political framings, such that they become the hegemonic component of social life in the 21st Century. Secondly, only a political movement can negate

the political and social mediations capitals, which re-inscribe it at the level of totality, against individual social attempts to become free of it. In order to conceptualise political action, conjunctural analysis is required that establishes the present as a site of political intervention, and the basis of hegemonic political action.

The final sections of this chapter will unpack some of the most significant implications of this analysis. In particular, it explores some of the implications that this study has for social inquiry with emancipatory intentions in the 21st Century. In particular, I want to suggest that conceptualising the existence and transcendence of capitalism is fundamental to all attempts at emancipatory social theory today, a task which suggests that it is the politics of critique rather than the politics of resistance that might be the most important task facing contemporary academic inquiry.

Critique, Structure and Politics

Having spoken about the necessity of a strategic reading of commons, and the centrality of critique and the application of political reason to any capital-transcending form of political action, I would like to unpack the implications of this notion of critique for politics. Although this thesis began with the question of structure and struggle, and the way that we understand capital-transcending action, in answering it, we saw that this was not just about the way we think about transition from a society dominated by capital to one that is not, but that it was also about the way the actuality of Marxist critique is understood in the 21st Century. On this subject, it has suggested some directions for the reformulation of Marxist critique within world politics. In the first instance, it suggests that critique is of profound importance for any attempt to transcend capital's social-metabolic system. Secondly, it has a number of implications for how this critique should proceed. In challenging some of the premises of Autonomism and communisation theory, which identify the unity of practice and structure in the name of 'avoiding the political illusion' of bourgeois theory,⁶⁵⁶ I am

⁶⁵⁶ Vasilis Grollios epitomizes this relationship when he suggests that "the economic and the political are moments of the same social relationship: that of the form that our doing takes in the capitalist system, which is to say, capital. Thus, they are mediated to each other; they exist through each other,"
Grollios, V., (2013), 'Alex Callinicos' Marxism: Dialectics and Materialism in Althusser

not primarily concerned with the categories of agency and structure. In part, this reflects a conceptual weakness with these categories. The juxtaposition of agency and structure in social theory leads to discussions of whether individual actions are the result of individual motivations, or structural determinations. This framing is perhaps partly why E.P. Thompson's dismissal of Althusserian anti-humanism has had so much traction in Anglophone academia,⁶⁵⁷ and praxis-oriented structuration theory has become so prominent within the social sciences.⁶⁵⁸ Although many contemporary Marxist theories *do* understand the question of agency against capital in these terms,⁶⁵⁹ I wonder whether conducting a discussion in these terms is at all helpful. When discourses of commons talk about capital, they are not talking about structure in abstract terms, or as it is most commonly understood: "as social relations among social positions."⁶⁶⁰ Capital is a very specific way of relating between different actors. Marx's critique of political economy demonstrates that within capitalism, relations of power and domination between individuals are re-established on a higher, systemic level, and the specificity of capitalism is that it is a social system that occludes and universalises these relations so that- in effect- capitalism is a social system defined by relations between classes as a whole. The question is not whether or not the actor has free will, but whether the actor- exercising their autonomy against the capital system- can act in a way that truly allows them to negate- and ultimately escape- this system. As such, the question facing investigations of commons (or indeed, any other potentially capital-transcending action) is not so much whether structural factors or individual volition cause commons to emerge (which seems to be one of the core points of contention between autonomism and communisation theory), but what kinds of action are necessary in order to produce and maintain commons in the face of the unique structural domination of the capital relation.

and Frankfurt School', *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 41(1), p. 66.

⁶⁵⁷ Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, pp. 88-103.

⁶⁵⁸ Porpora, D.V., (2002), 'Social Structure: The Future of a Concept', in Chew, S.C. & Knottnerus, J.D. (Eds.), *Structure, Culture, and History: Recent Issues in Social Theory*, (Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield), p. 52.

⁶⁵⁹ Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique*, Callinicos, (1987), *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory*, (Cambridge, Polity Press).

⁶⁶⁰ Porpora, 'Social Structure: The Story of a Concept', p. 52.

In order to ask this question of action in relation to the structure of capitalism, it is necessary to return to the question of dialectics in Marxist social theory. As suggested earlier in this chapter, at their heart, dialectics are about making sense of a fractured and fragmentary social totality,⁶⁶¹ by distinguishing between the surface appearance of things and their inner reality in the context of the totality of social relations. Such a distinction demonstrates that the totality is not harmonious; it is riven by contradictions that cannot be reconciled. The dialectical method has the capacity to trace the structural tendencies and contradictions in the mode of production that lead to its weakness. In revealing these weaknesses in the real-abstractions that produce and reproduce capitalism that the dialectic reveals the hidden contradictions that underlie totality. It is this task that contemporary emancipatory critique must pursue.

The Marxist project for our time is one of mapping capital, and how it has metastasized in the 20th Century, and then devising a political logic from our understanding of the nature of the capitalist totality. There is not one particular political reading that is appropriate to meet the task of superseding capital. Nor, indeed, can we derive a logic of struggle from theoretical texts, even those as empirically and conceptually rich as those of Marx. If the validity of the claims made in this thesis rests on their capacity to make certain dynamics of the world- dynamics that relate to commons and social emancipation- intelligible, rather than argument based in the authority of Marx's theories, perhaps it is time now to turn to what these empirical findings mean for reading Marx (politically), and how the approach developed in this thesis relates to the wider Marxist project. This is another way of situating my immanent critique of autonomist assumptions about commons, given that autonomism is both a set of tools that can be used to interpret the world, and an orientation towards the Marxist canon. Autonomism, taking its orientation to Marx from texts such as *Reading Capital Politically* and *Marx Beyond Marx*, generally sees the politics of Marxism framed in the terms of direct struggles between labour and capitalists.⁶⁶² This is epitomised by the autonomist treatment of the value form, which

⁶⁶¹ Lenin, V.I., (1914), 'Summary of Dialectics', in (1965) *Lenin's Collected Works*, (Moscow, Progress Publishers), pp. 220-222.

⁶⁶² Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*,
Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*.

is understood as the stabilised form of ongoing conflict between capital and labour.⁶⁶³ However, in terms of how we are to approach Marx today, I have suggested that whilst Marx is a political thinker- one only needs to read Marx's essays such as *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* or *The Civil War in France* to see that he was deeply concerned with the political events of his time- not all of his works are directly political. Marx's exposition of the global system of capitalist exploitation shows that while the capital system is structured antagonistically to the very bottom, these antagonisms do not necessarily correlate with where we should look for the agencies that can do away with the present state of things. More specifically, I claim that neither *Capital* nor *The Grundrisse* should be understood as having political content beyond simply the suggestion that the working class organise in order to overcome the social-metabolic system of capital. Contra the autonomist presuppositions with which I began this thesis in chapter one, Marx's *Capital* does not contain a political formula for transition from capitalism to socialism.

Marx's *Capital*, his *magnum opus*, is an empirically grounded attempt to explain the workings of the capitalist social system when it is viewed from the perspective of a historically developed structural totality. In this, I agreed with Frederic Jameson's recent assessment that *Capital* is not a book about politics (although I do not share his belief that it is not a book about work either).⁶⁶⁴ As a consequence, I also find myself in agreement with Richard Ashcraft's suggestion that Marx's political theory is a fundamentally 'anarchistic' one,⁶⁶⁵ driven neither by a desire to establish the necessary limits of politics, in the usual liberal mode of political theory, nor by identifying an ontological foundation of the political.⁶⁶⁶ Politically, Marx's project was about expanding and deepening the revolution of 1789 through bringing the political into contact with the social in order to create the 'specific and expansive' political action that could break with the existing state machinery, in order to

⁶⁶³ Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*.

⁶⁶⁴ Jameson, *Representing Capital*.

⁶⁶⁵ Ashcraft, R., (1984), 'Marx and Political Theory', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(4), pp. 637-671.

Ashcraft himself credits Robert Tucker with this recognition.

Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, pp. 85-91.

⁶⁶⁶ Ashcraft, 'Marx and Political Theory', p. 668.

fundamentally transform social relations.⁶⁶⁷ This logic works in both directions. It is just as important to avoid ‘the illusion of social sufficiency’ as it is to avoid the ‘political illusion’. In other words, if political action alone cannot transform the totality of capitalist social relations, then social activity alone cannot do so either.

Rather than seeking to found the political ontologically, as is currently fashionable within contemporary academic studies of resistance,⁶⁶⁸ Marx’s approach to the political is essentially *conjunctural*. The relationship between social and political revolution is not necessarily given, but contingent and dependent upon conjunctural factors. In part, this is why I suggest that his politics cannot necessarily be deduced from *Capital* or *The Grundrisse*, and instead, his politics can be found in his writings such as *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. As Richard Ashcraft has suggested, these texts are “the *normal* mode of Marx’s treatment of political theory, and they ought, therefore, to supply the model or standard for a Marxist approach to politics and to political theory: once one has demonstrated what, empirically, the connections were in a society between political ideas and actions and the existing social relations of production, one has said everything of importance there is to say about politics in that society.”⁶⁶⁹ More than this, however, conjunctural political analysis can tell us how the structures of global capital can be unpicked, but these structures cannot be understood in terms of the agencies that we would like to overcome them. In this regard, we can say that conjunctural political analysis is the corollary of Marx’s structural analysis of capitalism, rather than *vice versa*.

The significance of commons is that they offer a new way of mediating between the social and the political. Marx, following Hegel, suggested that the political was the concentration of the contradictions that were found within civil society. The political constitution of the proletariat as a political force necessitated the articulation of the contradictions of civil society as a political project. It is my contestation that if the commons are to become the foundation of a social and political project of transformation, they must become a hegemonic social force. This means that a political project must be articulated with the commons at their heart. Autonomist

⁶⁶⁷ Kouvelakis, ‘Marx’s Critique of the Political’, p. 92.

⁶⁶⁸ See for example Brennan, *Wars of Position*.

⁶⁶⁹ Ashcraft, ‘Marx and Political Theory’, p. 668.

Marxism, although sensitive to way that commons struggles have emerged in the context of transformations in the mode of production and changes to the means of social reproduction, it is less successful at expanding its analytics of ‘commoning’ out in order to understand the relationship between commons and social totality. Through the writings of Louis Althusser and István Mészáros, I have attempted to demonstrate that ‘classical Marxism’ offers a better frame through which to understand the relationship and totality, and use this relationship to develop a political project.

Understanding the relationship between the social and the political is fundamental to any attempt to theorise social movements or politically transformative action. This is an ongoing problem for attempts to develop a Marxist ‘Social Movement Theory’.⁶⁷⁰ In particular, this places the material discussed in this thesis in conversation with some of the ways in which Gramsci’s thought has been used to analyse social movements. In recent years there has been a welcome re-engagement with Antonio Gramsci’s thought as a means of analysing state formation, the construction and maintenance of hegemony, and class power. As a meditation on the way in which class power is formed, reinforced, contested, and replaced, Gramsci’s thought offers perhaps the most complete classical Marxist political philosophy.⁶⁷¹ At the same time, the way that Gramsci’s thought has been used in order to analyse the construction of hegemony and political power has sometimes obviated the significance of modes of production and social contradictions in providing the ground for social movements to emerge. In other words, the neo-Gramscian literature is very good at describing the ways in which social movements must grapple with the logic of hegemony, but this often comes at the expense of a deep and sustained engagement with the nature of the capital in the contemporary world, and the way in which this creates the possibility of radical politics. In recent writings in this vein, for example those of Lawrence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, social movement struggles are described in terms of struggles for hegemony between ‘social movements from above’ and ‘social movements from below’.⁶⁷² The emphasis on hegemony, and the reluctance to theorise it in relation to *capital* suggests that the approach seems to

⁶⁷⁰ See for example Cox & Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History*, Barker, Cox, Krinsky & Nilsen, (Eds.), *Marxism and Social Movements*.

⁶⁷¹ Thomas, ‘Gramsci and the Political’.

⁶⁷² Cox & Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History*.

follow- implicitly rather than implicitly- the approach to hegemony taken by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who describe hegemony as an empty structuring principle around which political struggles take place.⁶⁷³ By way of contrast, autonomist Marxism seems to approach the question from the opposite direction, bringing social movement practices into focus in relation to the structural conditions of capital, but demonstrating suspicion towards the *problemtique* of hegemony. In some ways, because it foregrounds the question of the value-relation, and the nature of capitalism, autonomist Marxism offers us resources that Gramscian Marxism does not.

At the same time, through exploring the way in which autonomist theory deals with the capital in relation to commons movements, this thesis has argued that without a conception of the political, or the totality of capitalist social relations, autonomism has its own pitfalls. In the concluding chapter of the thesis, I have suggested that by returning to the classical Marxist tradition (the tradition within which Gramsci's thought originated) we can theorise the political potential of social movements in relation to the wider dynamics of capital. The approach that I have taken in this thesis suggests the validity of a classical Marxist approach to this question, exploring the social contradictions that are foundational to social struggles around the commons, and the necessity of understanding the dialectical relationship between the social and the political. This method, rooted as it is in the tradition of classical Marxism, and the vital importance of understanding capitalism as a totality has much to offer to both the Gramscian and autonomist Marxist approaches to social movements.

At the same time, I do not want to suggest that the autonomist Marxist and Gramscian traditions are in any way aberrant for failing to think in terms of the conjuncture between capitalism and the social conditions of struggle. This lacuna is present in much contemporary thought about social and political problems, not least the thinking about commons that falls outside the Marxist tradition. In this final section of the thesis, I want to revisit these discourses on commons in order to demonstrate the significance of the political and a conception of capitalism's social totality to any discourse of commons, and any project of political transformation that invokes them.

⁶⁷³ Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C., (2014), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London, Verso).

Contemporary Discourses of Commons, and the Significance of the Political

Given my argument in this chapter that the production of commons is not in and of themselves politically sufficient to overcome the value form, questions emerge about whether existing discourses of commons alluded to in chapter one, within and beyond the autonomist tradition usefully speak to the promise of a post-capitalist future? In this section, I want to explore some of the existing discourses of commons as possible indications of what post-capitalist life might look like. Given this project's origins in questions of structure and struggle and the transcendence of capital, questions of whether political agency is required to establish the conditions for generalising commons, or whether they emerge organically within social relations are of profound importance. In this context, the question of how existing instances of commons relate to political agency is of particular importance.

The modernist framing of the political that I have offered in this chapter might suggest that the political supersession of the value form and the creation of local human communities are incompatible tasks. This suspicion is given credence by the common gloss given to the history of Marxist thought in the 20th century, which is often thought to have been inimical to pre-capitalist social forms. Whilst this reading is partial, it is not without foundation, for some orthodox Marxist thought portrays ideas such as commons as conservative forces, insofar as they occlude the ways in which classes oppose each other as classes. This is an idea expressed by Marx and numerous Marxist thinkers (such as Lenin in his early writings on Russian Social Democracy),⁶⁷⁴ as well as a number of contemporary Marxist commentators. So this criticism goes, the type of universality that is required to negate the value form cannot be founded on the production of particular communities of resistance, and what is more, these communities prevent the emergence of such global consciousness. By focusing on the dynamics internal to specific attempts at commoning, it is possible that the true *structural* nature of capitalism is misrecognized, and as a result, political action is organized around a set of concepts that confuse cause and effect, taking the urban dynamics of capitalist accumulation at face value. As a result, Marxist theories

⁶⁷⁴ See for example, Lenin, V.I., (2008), '1895-96: Draft and Explanation of a Programme for the Social-Democratic Party', in *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism: Selected Writings*, LeBlanc, P., (ed.), (London, Pluto Press), pp. 85-93.

of the political have tended to suggest ‘pushing through’ the romantic forms of pre-modern critique that oppose capitalism from the standpoint of an idyllic, non-capitalist society, in favour of identifying ‘seams’ and ‘potential points of rupture’ within the totality. Not coincidentally, these points of rupture tend to emerge where the social forces of capital are at their most developed. As a result, whole generations of Marxist thinkers have eschewed the various forms of communal property regime that have emerged across Europe and the wider world.

This, however, is only a partial and, for this partiality, sclerotic reading of the concept of universality within the Marxist tradition. It is true that Marx wrote about the necessity of transition, and political forms that are adequate to this,⁶⁷⁵ but Marx was also deeply interested in the social forms that were emerging through struggles against capitalism. Marx’s letters to Vera Zasulich, a Russian socialist interested in the communal forms of Russian agriculture as a potential transitional form to post-capitalist society, reveal a mind that was deeply invested in exploring the potentials of the ‘romantic’ critique of capitalism.⁶⁷⁶ What is more, Marx’s writings on the social history of proletarian struggle, such as those on the *Civil War in France*,⁶⁷⁷ indicate not only a deep sympathy for the content of these struggles, but also an interest in the ways that the forms of struggle are related to their contents. Marx argued that only through the urban insurrections of Paris in 1871, or the rural experiments of communal property in 19th Century Russia, could political weapons be forged that could be wielded against capital. As a result of this, the content of practices of commoning matter for two main reasons: first, they create struggles that necessarily lead to consciousness of the wider class-struggle (ie the struggle against capital at an object of generality); and secondly, they have a bearing on the social forms that will replace the social-metabolic system that is dominated by capital.

⁶⁷⁵ See for example Marx, K., (1875), *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>), (accessed on: 16.06.2015),

and Marx, K., (1871), *Drafts of the Civil War in France*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/drafts/>), (accessed on: 16.06.2015).

⁶⁷⁶ Marx, K., (1881), *Letters to Vera Zasulich*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/zasulich/>), (accessed on: 17.06.2015).

⁶⁷⁷ Marx, *The Civil War in France*.

In this sense, commons have significance not because they will *prefigure* non-capitalist life, but because they *inform a vision* of what non-capitalist life will look like. As a result, they are an ethical critique of capitalism, from a set of values that are rooted in the project of imagining a world other than that created by capitalism, without being the direct and immediate production of an alternative world. As a result, thinking around the commons is of considerable significance, even if it is not in and of itself directly political. Indeed, a long history of counter-hegemonic politics surrounds most successful political transformations in modern history. For example, the Marxist-Leninist politics of the early 20th Century was not born *ex-nihilo*. Rather, it was the product of long struggles over local issues, and the fragmentation of global society by a prolonged world war. If a social form is to emerge in which commons play a significant role in determining what happens in the world, and it requires a political *moment*, or a political intervention to do so, then it also requires the cultivation of wider political sentiments upon which such a project can be built.

Commons will necessarily be integral to the construction of any putative post-capitalist social-metabolism. At the same time, these commons will not simply spring into existence with the supersession of the value form. Rather, a new sociality can and should be built that exists in parallel to the social-metabolic system of capital. In building this sociality, social movements appear to be working with, rather than against, the grain of recent historical developments. Evidence of this can be found in the practices of contemporary economy, where sharing and commons appear to have a more significant role in the production of value than under Fordism,⁶⁷⁸ and in the proliferation of speculative thought about property questions. Political thinking about property often has a utopian quality, and has often bloomed during periods of transition between property orders.⁶⁷⁹ Typically, when we think of political theory at the threshold of a property order, we think of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who inhabited the threshold between medieval and modern property orders, and their

⁶⁷⁸ Vercellone, 'From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism', *Historical Materialism* 15, pp. 13-36.

⁶⁷⁹ This is the central argument of the Political Marxist approach to questions of intellectual history. For more on this approach, see: Wood, E.M., (2012), *Liberty & Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, (London, Verso).

thoughts echo the class interests of the emerging bourgeois classes of early modernity.⁶⁸⁰ If Hobbes and Locke articulated a conception of property that ideologically sympathised with the interests of the emerging commercial classes, the high road to the liberal, property-owning subject was by no means the only conception of property developed in this period.⁶⁸¹ In their own ways, groups like the ranters, the diggers, and the levellers outlined a set of ideas about property that stand opposed to the modern, liberal idea of liberty.⁶⁸² Each of these ideas, from the Utopian socialism of Thomas More,⁶⁸³ to radical egalitarian Christianity such as the Ranters, Planters, Muggletonians, and the various Anabaptist sects in Germany and Switzerland that renounced private property⁶⁸⁴ represents a fundamental anxiety about the transformation of the property order, and the possibility of constructing a human community based on principles of justice and fairness in this context. Indeed, struggles over commons in early modern England, and the political thought that emerged from it, signify a similar anxiety about the transformation of society. Perhaps the recent spate of ‘utopian’ thinking about the nature of property speaks to another such transition between property orders, and the possibilities of organizing human life according to common principles (and a common property order) within this transition. What is missing from this literature, however, is the political perspective, as thought seems to depend either on the assumption that commons are taking over the capital-system from within, or that commons can be produced by de-coupling life from capital. As a result, although Marxists should be skeptical of claims that we are witnessing the emergence of non-capitalist life, they should be profoundly interested in writings about the commons produced elsewhere.

Academics and non-academics alike are currently thinking deeply about property, and it is becoming more readily accepted that common property regimes are both indispensable to a more equitable form of society’s self-reproduction and absolutely

⁶⁸⁰ This is an argument put forward by Antonio Negri in *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*.

⁶⁸¹ Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*, pp. 110-111.

⁶⁸² See for example Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

⁶⁸³ Kautsky, K., (1888), *Thomas More and His Utopia*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1888/more/index.htm>), (accessed on: 01.10.2014).

⁶⁸⁴ For more on the political thought of the Anabaptists, see Toscano, A., (2010), ‘Introduction’, in Thomas Muntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, (London, Verso).

necessary for the ecologically sustainable reproduction of humanity. The pertinence of commons in today's world has provoked a cascade of publications on the subject. In the time that it has taken to write this thesis, numerous texts have emerged that seek to promote the commons as a set of ideas for political renewal, or for re-ordering social relations. David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, for example, have written about the commons as resources that are managed through what might be known as 'vernacular law'.⁶⁸⁵ For these authors, the significance of commons derives from the ways in which we understand the relationship between humans and nature, and the potential of commons for re-establishing these relationships on more ecologically secure grounds. Elsewhere, writers such as Jeremy Gilbert share autonomist assumptions in locating commons and commoning at the level of social interaction, describing a process of how, as explicit negotiations about how resources might be managed settle into habit, customary behaviour emerges, and in the coffeehouses, streets, forests, beaches, and abandoned properties, commons emerge as the basis of life itself.⁶⁸⁶ Each of these accounts seems to strip commons back to the social, describing man's relationship to nature, or his relationship with man, and the way that commons can be utilized to change the nature of man's social interactions.

In another context, commons have emerged at the centre of a techno-utopian imaginary. Jeremy Rifkin's 2014 book, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism*, argues that the contemporary global economy is undergoing what he terms 'a third industrial revolution', which has restructured global economic production around a system that is, although retaining many capitalistic elements, altogether distinct from the capitalist mode of production.⁶⁸⁷ The information revolution of the 1970s to the present day has reoriented the global economy, which no-longer has the commodity form (when the commodity is understood as a physical object that is produced through the mixing of labour power with raw materials/other commodities) as its cell form. Although products usually reach consumers in commodity form (we buy iphones, music, films,

⁶⁸⁵ Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, Bollier & Helfrich, (Eds.), *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*.

⁶⁸⁶ Gilbert, J., (2014), *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*, (London, Pluto Press).

⁶⁸⁷ Rifkin, J., (2014), *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan), p. 310.

or computer programs *as if* they were commodities), their commodification is, in actuality, external to the productive process. This has fundamentally transformed the nature of commodities, and particularly changed where value comes from in the manufacture of commodities. When we take a close look at the value chains that comprise global capitalism, we see an increasingly significant role for intellectual and cognitive labour, with ideas, and the enclosure and regulation of these ideas indispensable to the way that money is made.⁶⁸⁸ This twin process- the production of collaborative commons and their enclosure and regulation- is now central to the extraction of value in the 21st century economy. Whilst elements of the old economy persist, particularly the way that- at least at the point of access for the consumer- use values remain cocooned within the commodity form, and ‘Protestant’ cultural notions about the dignity and necessity of work, Rifkin predicts this hybrid system has a fairly limited lifespan, and we can expect the collaborative commons to throw off the fetters of capitalist production, and produce another economic system. The driver of this process is not the alienated proletariat, so much as it is the productive process itself: the types of intellectual, scientific, and collaborative production that drive today’s global economy have no need for the commodity form, in much the same way that the ‘second industrial revolution’ incubated within the economic system created by the first, before coming to supersede it. Rifkin’s argument is clearly a technologically deterministic one, in which developments within digital, immaterial, and collaborative production makes the emergence of new, post-capitalist social forms inevitable. This optimism about the capacity of technology to overcome the most alienating aspects of commodity production is decidedly utopian, and Rifkin consistently fails to develop the specifically political aspects of collaborative commons. Nonetheless, there are more than fertile grounds for the cross-pollination of Rifkin’s ideas about late capitalist production with the ideas about post-Fordist production that are popular in late autonomist thought.

If technology is the leitmotif of Jeremy Rifkin’s account of commons in late capitalist production, then it is the changing relationship between society and work that undergirds Andre Gorz’s engagement with the same theme. Gorz suggests that the exodus from capitalism is already underway, as computerization and automation have

⁶⁸⁸ Mason, P., (2015), *Post Capitalism*, (London, Penguin).

made it possible to produce increasing quantities of commodities with decreasing input from labour.⁶⁸⁹ This has led, Gorz argues, to investors turning away from the real economy where productivity gains and profits are harder to achieve, and towards an economy predicated on financial gain through speculative investment. On the one hand, this is concerning because it has led to an increasing reliance on intangibles within the economy that lead to speculative booms and busts, but on the other, it greatly increases the potential for human emancipation. The most promising way to resolve the contemporary capitalist crisis, he suggests, is to decommodify production and consumption through extending non-market ways of meeting human needs. Commons are foremost amongst these ways in which life is being de-coupled from capitalism.

Gorz's theoretical approach to questions of neoliberalism and worklessness is of particular pertinence today, with the strange non-death of neoliberalism. Whilst in the autumn of 2008 it appeared that the collapse of deregulated banking might topple the hegemonic edifice of neoliberalism, as many commentators have noted, neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that- rather than dying, has mutated.⁶⁹⁰ At the same time, it is worth thinking of the specific failure of the social democratic response to crisis in terms of a longer-term crisis of the project. As thinkers from Gorz to Frederic Jameson have suggested, since the late 1970s, the social base upon which social democracy has been in crisis.⁶⁹¹ Society in the global North is no longer so clearly defined by the 'universal' experience of the labourer in the workplace, as it was in the

⁶⁸⁹ Gorz, A., (2010), 'The Exit From Capitalism Has Already Begun', *Cultural Politics: An International Journal* 6(1), pp. 5-14.

⁶⁹⁰ See for example:

Crouch, C., (2011), *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, (Cambridge, Polity Press),

Blyth, M., (2013), *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, (New York, Oxford University Press),

Streeck, W., (2013), *Politics in the Age of Austerity*, (Cambridge, Polity Press),

Streeck, W., (2014), *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, (London, Verso),

Gamble, A., (2014), *Crisis Without End? The Unravelling of Western Prosperity*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan).

Davies, W., (2012), 'After Markets', *Aeon* (available online at:

<http://aeon.co/magazine/society/after-neoliberalism/>), (accessed on: 04.02.2015),

Davies, W., (2014), *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty, and the Logic of Competition*, (London, Sage).

⁶⁹¹ Gorz, A., (1999), *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-based Society*, (London, Polity Press), Jameson, *Representing Capital*.

mid-20th Century. Paradoxically, however, as Andre Gorz presciently established in *Reclaiming Work*, work has been mobilised as a political guarantee of ‘social normality’ even as social forces have thrown ever greater proportions of the population into ‘precarity’⁶⁹² and wagelessness: “[n]ever has the ‘irreplaceable’, ‘indispensable’ function of labour as the source of ‘social ties’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘integration’, ‘socialization’, ‘personalization’, ‘personal identity’ and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfil any of these functions.”⁶⁹³ Whilst work has become ever more central to the normalising and normative discourse of ‘austerity’ and the retrenchment of neoliberal reason through new inscriptions of citizenship, the institutional left has struggled to react to the reality of a world in which worklessness is increasingly normalised beyond a weak and ambiguous demand for ‘the right to work’, training programmes, and the protection of some aspects of the welfare state.

As suggested in earlier in this chapter, there has been a tendency among Marxist thinkers- notably Michael Denning,⁶⁹⁴ Ken Kawashima,⁶⁹⁵ Frederic Jameson,⁶⁹⁶ and Aaron Benanav⁶⁹⁷ to look for an emancipatory politics from the phenomenon of worklessness, or surplus population, a concept articulated by Marx in Chapter 25 of *Capital, Vol. I*. For much of the 20th Century, socialist thought has laboured under the burden of wage labour as the glue that holds the experience of capitalist modernity together. However, Michael Denning points out that if the wage is the salient dimension of 20th and 21st Century production, it is not the origin of the dynamics of capitalist society: “capitalism begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living. Dispossession and expropriation, followed by the enforcement of money, taxes, and rent: such is the idyll of ‘free labour’.”⁶⁹⁸ Commons

⁶⁹² Standing, G., (2014), *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, (London, Bloomsbury).

⁶⁹³ Gorz, *Reclaiming Work*, p. 57.

⁶⁹⁴ Denning, M., (2010), ‘Wageless Life’, *New Left Review* 66, pp. 79-97.

⁶⁹⁵ Kawashima, K., (2014), ‘On the Method and Concept of Surplus Populations in the Thought of Karl Marx and Uno Kozo’, paper presented at Harvard University’s Political Economy Workshop, 10.03.2014.

Kawashima, K., (2009), *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan*, (Durham, Duke University Press).

⁶⁹⁶ Jameson, *Representing Capital*.

⁶⁹⁷ Endnotes & Benanav, A., (2010), ‘Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital’, in *Endnotes 2*.

⁶⁹⁸ Denning, ‘Wageless Life’, p. 80.

are radical in that they challenge the basis upon which capitalist exploitation takes place: rather than redistributing the wealth that has been produced within an unchanged production process, commons suggest ways in which people might be free from the necessity of wage labour in certain parts of their life.⁶⁹⁹ The absence- or the ability to become free- of work is, perhaps, *the* cultural horizon of the present day.⁷⁰⁰

Politically, a movement rooted in the commons, but which is more aware of the necessity to make direct political interventions the structured nature of global capitalism has the potential to bring together narratives that describe the terminal decline of social democracy and the form of work that underpinned it in the global North, with discourses that reject the developmentalism of international political strategies to bring prosperity to the developing world. At present, these two discourses largely exist in parallel with one another, and the fertile intersection of the two has been under-investigated. Through exploring the capitalist totality as a complex and agonistically structured whole, the work of thinkers such as Andre Gorz, for whom ‘the end of work’s centrality to production’ can be brought together with the analyses of those for whom ‘development’ has stalled and come to an end, given its manifest failure to deliver on its promises, and the inherent problems of the very idea of development.⁷⁰¹ The two speak to the same, structured whole of late capitalist totality, without individually being able to fully grasp the significance of their own object of analysis.

⁶⁹⁹ Indeed, one startling feature of capitalism is just how many different distributive arrangements can persist within the capitalist world system. Various degrees of redistributive arrangements have existed, and continue to exist, within the totality of capitalist social relations.

⁷⁰⁰ See for example Srnicek, N. & Williams, A., (2015), *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, (London, Verso).

⁷⁰¹ See for example:

Ferguson, J., (1990), *The Anti-Politics Machine: ‘Development’, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Escobar, A., (1995), *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press),

Latouche, S., (1993), *In the Wake of Affluent Society: An Exploration of Post-Development*, (London, Zed Books),

Rist, G., (2003), *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, (London, Zed Books),

Parfitt, T.W., (2002), *The End of Development? Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Development*, (London, Pluto Press).

In the same way that the ‘end of work thesis’ has sought to decouple GDP, productivity, and standard economic indicators from the social values according to which work is organised, ‘postdevelopment’ theory seeks to decouple economic policy from the usual path-dependent, quantifiable indicators according to which it is usually practiced. The encounter between the ‘end of work’ thesis and ‘postdevelopment’ is a potentially fertile one because both perspectives seek to decouple the way that people live their lives from the imperatives of capital. In *Encountering Development*, Arturo Escobar argues that development emerges as a discourse capable of shaping and controlling the way that people in developing countries lived their lives, pushing them in certain directions beneficial to the maintenance of global hegemony and international capital.⁷⁰² The endgame of Escobar’s ‘postdevelopment’ project ends in the displacement of the global narrative of development in favour of forms of local knowledge more adequate to the organisation of life in the locality.⁷⁰³

In bringing together local forms of knowledge, founded in the theoretico-practical context of a struggle against primitive accumulation and the imposition of private property regimes, with a question of the global, both discourses articulate a perspective in which the local and the global are articulated dialectically. The necessary corollary of this dialectic is the integration of these two discourses. The necessity of this encounter is not just philosophical: it is also political. If the ‘end of work’ discourse is to have political purchase in Europe and North America, it must be accompanied with a global movement to decouple finance and sovereign power from the organisation of life globally: it cannot afford to be a movement interested only in the condition of life in Europe. Neither can the ‘end of development’ discourse afford to be one solely pertaining to development: it must, in the same way that commons discourse must recognise that the path to diversity and local autonomy lies in confronting totality, recognise that its aspiration to decouple economics from the path-dependency of development discourse lies in its conceptualisation and practice of the global. At the same time, in bringing these two discourses together, necessitates that they encounter the universal problematique of

⁷⁰² Escobar, *Encountering Development*.

⁷⁰³ See for example Escobar, A. & Mignolo, W., (Eds.) (2010), *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, (London, Routledge).

capital, presented by capital, and can be resolved only through confronting *capital as such*.

This is the shared political horizon of our time: the sense in which the technological and productive forces of the world are changing. Just a few minutes spent within the movements that have emerged in opposition to capitalism in the last few years is enough to sense that there is a sense of change in the wind. What is not clear, however, is that this change will be brought about without the subjective, strategic application of political reason. Commons are no different from this. Since the early 1980s, Marxist theory has been in retreat, retreating into the ‘social illusion’ that resistance alone is sufficient for the transformation of the world.⁷⁰⁴ The Marxist perspective, in its original textual form (as worked out in the writings of Karl Marx) and in the subsequent history of Marxist philosophical and political practice, require the application of political reason to an historical conjuncture. Marx’s famous dictum that ‘man makes his own history, but not in the circumstances of his own choosing’ has a decidedly political resonance. Without the application of the political, these aspirations for a world in which the value-form is no-longer hegemonic will remain as aspirations. The truly political struggle will not just be a struggle for autonomy from the world created in the image of capital. It will be a struggle within the world created in the image of capital, which politicizes and transforms- often in the face of great resistance- the social relations which, embedded in the value form, and sustained through the crushing global logic of capital, presently come to dominate and constrain attempts to exercise the sovereign autonomy of man. Only by confronting the way that these social relations constrain political action, can questions of sovereignty be made meaningful, and commons be established as the true measure of human activity. In Oakland and Rome, the movement for commons is encountering the necessity of politics, the sphere of transfigured social antagonisms,⁷⁰⁵ a necessity that it must embrace if it is to have transformative political purchase.

⁷⁰⁴ Bensaïd, ‘The return of Strategy’.

⁷⁰⁵ Bensaïd, D., (2013), *An Impatient Life: A Political Memoir*, (London, Verso), p. 86.

Whither Commons?

Given all of this, and the suggestion that spontaneous struggles over commons are unlikely to be effective what implications does this have for our understanding of social movements in general, and movements of the commons in particular? As the attempts to develop commons Oakland and Rome demonstrated, the capital relation cannot be overcome in one social centre, or even one city, as capitalism is a form of social mediation that acts back on individual acts of resistance. This shows the limits of social movements, and the impasses reached by acts of commoning demonstrate the necessity of the recomposition of commons on a 'higher level', as a political movement. At the same time, this is not the same thing as demonstrating that commons are not significant. On the contrary, the demand for commons- the right to access basic, universal needs such as food, water, air, and the right to participate in the democratic management of one's own environment- is radical because it forces struggles to mutate and become more wide-ranging in their orientation and scope. In this regard, the demand for commons is radical because it is a demand that cannot be met so long as capitalism (understood as a social-metabolic system in which labour and capital meet under conditions that permit capital to be valorized) remains. To this end, action is required that can negate or supersede the value form specifically, and the social totality of capitalism more generally. This means a political process is required through which commons can be related to wider structural dynamics.

The problem with the theoretical frameworks examined in this thesis, on a political level, is that both autonomism and communisation theory reject the type of long-term institution-building and political strategy that is required for such a transition. The strength of humanity to create an alternative system of social-metabolic organisation is not something embodied in the strength of its will, nor in the insurrectionary rejection of all identity and all social determination, but in the capacity of humanity to establish an alternative system of social regulation. Whilst any political process aiming towards the supersession of the capital relation must necessarily go beyond the acts of commoning described in chapters two and three of this thesis, such acts of commoning maintain their importance because they can spark the emergence of political demands around which wider movements can be developed. Movements that have transformed the world in the past have themselves rarely begun with grand

stratagems for the radical and total transformation of the world. Rather, they more usually began with simple demands- such as the demand for bread and peace in 1917- that, because they cannot be answered within the current system of political intelligibility, demonstrate the necessity of more thoroughgoing transformations than any of its original participants imagined. The demand for commons cannot be met without radical transformations of the state, and potentially the supersession of the value form; transformations that cannot be affected by acts of commoning alone. To this end, commoning- if it is to provide successful social forms through which the free development of individuals might be pursued- must necessarily be reconstituted as a political movement that has the wider aim of the global supersession of the value form.

However, perhaps strangely given the critique of the autonomist position I have offered here, one of the strengths of commons- and more specifically acts of commoning- as an organizational tactic is that they are *not* about the immediate abolition of capitalism. Acts of commoning are the immediate and direct satisfaction of needs through use values in the face of a social system that is oriented towards the valorization of exchange value. Whilst they are normatively situated, they are not systematic attempts to transform society from the perspective of a particular subject-position. This goes against much of what the existing writing on the commons from an autonomist perspective, however. Hardt & Negri, for example, establish commons as the origin of a new revolutionary political moment.⁷⁰⁶ Indeed, in *Declaration* they argue that commons function in a way that allows for the formation of a new social subjectivity- that of the commoner- through which revolutionary politics can be practiced.⁷⁰⁷ This is consistent with the *operaist* insistence on ‘workers resistance’ at the expense of other strategies, that autonomist theory should identify the subjective

⁷⁰⁶ This is a more general feature of Hardt & Negri’s thought, from Negri’s earliest writings on class struggle in Italy, to their recent collaborative efforts. Of course, as Michael Hardt has suggested, Negri’s Lenin, and his conception of the vanguard party, are by no means the usual way that these concepts are presented.

Hardt, M., (2005), ‘Into the Factory: Negri’s Lenin and the Subjective Caesura (1968-1973)’, in Murphy, T.S. & Mustapha, A.K., (eds.), *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Volume 1*, (London, Pluto Press), p. 14.

Harrison, O., (2014), *Revolutionary Subjectivity in Post-Marxist Thought*, (Farnham, Ashgate), p. 75.

⁷⁰⁷ Hardt & Negri, *Declaration*.

struggles around commons as key to the emergence of a new, potentially revolutionary, political subject. However, I argue that the strength of acts of commoning is that they allow for demands to be articulated across the social field, without subordinating specific contradictions to a central contradiction that will necessarily produce the social forces that will do away with capitalism, or a unique political subject that will produce transformation. In this regard, a strategic-relational approach to understanding the political implications of commons is distinct to the autonomist vision summarized in the first chapter of this thesis. The nature of commoning, taking social reproduction and making it immediately and directly common, does not reduce the other contradictions of the mode of production to a single, central antagonism. Struggles around wages, working conditions, and the politicization of the workplace are also important sites of struggle. There is no simple, easily identifiable centre of political struggle that is the manifestation of a central contradiction from which the rest of social reality emanates.

To this end, even if commons- as the freedom to develop human capacities for leisure, and autonomous self-reproduction- are not sufficient for the establishment of a new social-metabolic system, they should remain key demands of anti-capitalist social movements and political organisations. Commoning is a political phenomenon that speaks directly to the ‘crisis of social reproduction’ that has seen struggles against capital move into the domestic sphere.⁷⁰⁸ Critical urban Geographers such as David Harvey,⁷⁰⁹ Manuel Castells,⁷¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre,⁷¹¹ Neil Smith,⁷¹² and Andy Merrifield,⁷¹³ have identified a crisis in social reproduction within European and North American cities, as the social processes and state interventions that sustained

⁷⁰⁸ Caffentzis, G., (2002), ‘On the Notion of a Crisis of Social Reproduction: A Theoretical Review’, *The Commoner* 5.

⁷⁰⁹ Harvey, D., (1973), *Social Justice and the City*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press).

⁷¹⁰ Castells, M., (1977), *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, A. Sheridan (trans), (Cambridge, MIT Press).

⁷¹¹ Lefebvre, H., (1968), *Le Droit à la Ville*, (Paris, Anthropos).

⁷¹² Smith, N., (1986), ‘Gentrification, the frontier and the restructuring of urban space’, in Smith, N. & Williams, P., (Eds.), *Gentrification of the City*, (Boston, Allen & Unwin), pp. 15-34.

⁷¹³ Merrifield, *The New Urban Question*.

social stability in the post-war period have been halted or withdrawn.⁷¹⁴ So long as this is a contradiction that arises from capital, its contestation is a necessary strategy of resistance to capital's capacity to re-shape social practices and the lives that reproduce them.

Practices of commoning such as those described in this thesis are also useful prefigurations of what a post-capitalist society might look like. Unlike the Hegelian-influenced proclamations that appear to suggest that human productive arrangements can be periodised (we might think, for example of Gramsci's beloved dictum of Marx's that: "[n]o social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed"⁷¹⁵), there is also a strong current of Marxism that places already existing alternatives to capitalism at the forefront of analysis and political practice.⁷¹⁶ Taking Marx's letters to Vera Zasulich, and the discussion of the dissolution of the Russian peasant commune contained within then as an example,⁷¹⁷ Marx recognized that capitalism's development is uneven, and there is no linear development of capital. Indeed, it followed from this that premise that pre-capitalist social forms did not have to be eradicated before capital could be threatened and superseded. Commoning creates communities that place use values first, and human needs at the heart of a social-metabolic system,⁷¹⁸ and any system that replaces capitalism must simultaneously treat humans as ends in themselves,⁷¹⁹ and attempt to manage the metabolic rift between humanity and the natural world.⁷²⁰ Although these social formations that appear within capitalism cannot be sufficient

⁷¹⁴ Pratt, G., (1989), 'Reproduction, class, and the spatial structure of the city', in Peet, R & Thrift, N. (Eds.), *New Models in Geography, Vol. II*, (London, Unwen Hymen), p. 103.

⁷¹⁵ Marx, K., (1859), 'Preface', *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29, (London, Lawrence & Wishart), pp. 261-265.

⁷¹⁶ See for example Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*.

⁷¹⁷ Marx, K., (1983), 'Drafts of a reply to Vera Zasulich', Shandin, T. (Ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road, Marx and the 'peripheries of capitalism'*, (New York, Monthly Review Press), (unpaginated version available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/zasulich/>), (accessed on: 20.03.2014).

⁷¹⁸ Wilding, A., Gunn, R., Smith, R.C., Fuchs, C. & Ott, M., (2014), 'Occupy and Prefiguration', *Occupy, Emancipatory Politics & Radical Democracy*, (available online at: <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/occupy-prefiguration-roundtable-discussion/>), (accessed on: 20.04.2015).

⁷¹⁹ Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, pp. 16-18.

⁷²⁰ Wark, *Molecular Red*.

simply to replace existing social arrangements, they have the potential to prefigure post-capitalist social forms, and will be absolutely necessary to new forms of self-government in the absence of capital.

Commons have the capacity to perform yet another strategic-relational role. The reformulation of the revolutionary imagination is an important task facing emancipatory politics in the 21st Century. For all that historical materialism remains a vibrant mode of academic *critique*, its presence in the popular imagination is not as strong as it once was (indeed, this is one of the primary reasons that autonomism and anarchism have found such fecund territory within the social movements of the current cycle of struggles). As Perry Anderson remarked of the generation that reached political and intellectual maturity during the 1960s: “[v]irtually the entire horizon of reference in which the generation of the sixties grew up has been wiped away – the landmarks of reformist and revolutionary socialism in equal measure. For most students, the roster of Bebel, Bernstein, Luxemburg, Kautsky, Jaurés, Lukács, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci have become names as remote as a list of Arian bishops.”⁷²¹ The strength and the vitality of ‘the movements of 2011’ emerged from their refusal to be bound by the weight of tradition. Not only did these movements act in a way that demonstrated no fear of the constraints of the repressive and ideological apparatuses of capital, but they also seemed unconcerned by the constraints of orthodoxies regarding how and where resistance should be carried out. Hardt & Negri suggested in *Declaration* that “some of the more traditional political thinkers and organizers on the left are displeased with or at least wary of the 2011 cycle of struggles. “The streets are full but the churches are empty,” they lament. The churches are empty in the sense that, although there is a lot of fight in these movements, there is little ideology or centralised political leadership. Until there is a party and an ideology to direct the street conflicts, the reasoning goes, and thus the churches are filled, there will be no revolution. But it’s the exact opposite! We need to empty the churches of the left even more, and bar their doors, and burn them down!”⁷²² Although I am sceptical about the power of pure democratic creativity, there is a sense in which the decline of older institutions of the left open space for the emergence of new imaginaries around which to organise politically. The idea of commons can provide such an imaginary, and I

⁷²¹ Anderson, P., (2000), ‘Renewals’, *New Left Review II* 1, p. 17.

⁷²² Hardt & Negri, *Declaration!*

think that it might be a profitable avenue to pursue for two main reasons. The first, of these reasons is that, as suggested earlier, commons transcend the specific productive relations within which each labourer finds herself. This is particularly significant at the current conjuncture considering that the history of neoliberal capitalism is a history of fragmentation and dislocation, and factory organisation no longer holds the same universal resonance that it was previously believed to have held. The consequence of this is fragmentation and dislocation has been the search for new ways of organising politically.⁷²³ Often, this search has been drawn in the direction of efforts to politicise precarity and the conditions that it creates. The problem with precarity as an organising tool is, however, that labour's capacity to affect capital is limited by the weakness of its structural position. Through articulating what it means to live differently, where human needs and human desires are foregrounded, commons have the potential to knit together disparate struggles that take place in different environments. The strategic function of discourses of the commons can be that they establish and reinforce the importance use values over and above exchange value in the way that we construct the world politically. They offer a positive vision not only of what humans *need* to live a fulfilled life, but also what they *desire*. Emancipatory politics has a fundamental problem with the question of desire, often finding itself portrayed as having more to do with self-denying sacrifice than Promethean plenitude. Another reason why commons may prove useful for weaving together an emancipatory narrative because they follow the contours of the main ways in which the economy is being transformed- the simultaneous emergence of immaterial forms of production, and the increasing surplus populations that have been created by austerity capitalism. These surplus populations are of more than just intrinsic interest: perhaps they can also help us to re-assess the relationship between primitive accumulation and commons.

⁷²³ See for example Tyler, I., (2013), *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, (London, Zed Books).

Primitive Accumulation, the Commons and the Question of Politics:

Primitive accumulation has become a central feature of accounts of commons in the contemporary world,⁷²⁴ and has significance beyond discussions of commons because it demonstrates the relationship between the political and the reproduction of capitalism. Indeed, much of the contemporary literature on capitalism has established that primitive accumulation is not a historical feature of the *creation* of the capitalist mode of production, but the form taken by its *ongoing* contingency, demonstrating dependence upon the continuous reproduction of its conditions of existence.⁷²⁵ This perspective has not only countered the idea of a teleological transition from feudalism to capitalism,⁷²⁶ but also emphasised the significance of contingency and the political in the reproduction of capitalist social forms. In the writings of David Harvey, Slavoj Žižek, and Antonio Negri, for example, primitive accumulation has become central to conceptualising capital as a social force in the contemporary world.⁷²⁷ The analysis conducted throughout this chapter, however, has a number of implications for the theorisation of primitive accumulation and its relationship to capitalist totality.

The heart of capital's social-metabolism is the encounter between the proletarian who has nothing to sell save his labour power and the capitalist in possession of capital but who needs labour in order to produce more capital. Primitive accumulation is an intervention in the capitalist totality in order to ensure the (continued) encounter between labour power and capital. The production of 'unfree' labour is not just a feature of the dawn of capitalism, but of capitalism *tout court*.⁷²⁸ The conditions of primitive accumulation are not simply peripheral to capitalism, but undergird the

⁷²⁴ See for example Harvey, *Right to the City*,

De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*.

⁷²⁵ Özselçuk, C., (2013), 'Louis Althusser and the Concept of Economy', in Diefenbach, K., Farris, S.R., Kirn, G. & Thomas, P.D., (Eds.), *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, (London, Bloomsbury), p. 217.

This is, of course, the theme developed in the introduction of Althusser's famous *Ideological State Apparatuses* essay.

⁷²⁶ There are strong echoes of Brenner and Wood's approach to 'Political Marxism' here. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*.

⁷²⁷ See for example Harvey, D., (2005), *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

⁷²⁸ Brass, T., (2010), 'Capitalism, Primitive Accumulation and Unfree Labour', in Veltmeyer, H. (Ed.), *Imperialism, Crisis and Class Struggle: The Enduring Verities and Contemporary Face of Capitalism*, (Leiden, Brill), p. 119.

accumulation process.⁷²⁹ At the same time, *primitive accumulation* is not capital, and in theorising it, we should not quickly abandon the central categories of Marx's critique of political economy: capitalist accumulation is more than just primitive accumulation, it has work, and the relations established between capital and the worker through the exchange of abstract labour for a wage, at its centre. The existence of primitive accumulation is, however, significant because it demonstrates the way in which capital depends upon certain mediations that reproduce the encounter between the capitalist and the proletarian. In this case, one of the most significant mediations is the way that capital produces a class that is defined only by its lack of property and its externality to capital.

Treating primitive accumulation as a mediation that sustains the capitalist totality distinguishes the approach developed in this thesis from theories of primitive accumulation that interpret it in terms of the battle between two social classes, one of which must enclose in order to achieve profit and the other must dis-enclose in order to ensure human flourishing. This is central to the way that, for example, Hardt & Negri have discussed 'post-modern primitive accumulation'.⁷³⁰ Contra Hardt, Negri and other autonomists, I suggest that the significance of primitive accumulation is not given by its violence (the act of labour's separation from the means of subsistence), so much as it is given by the conceptuality of capital itself (that is to say, its totality). Primitive accumulation remains the centrifugal point around which the capitalist production process is made, but its *significance* comes from the totality of social relations within which primitive accumulation operates. It is as Marx suggests, "[that what] originally appeared as conditions of its becoming...now appears as results of its own realization, reality, as posited by it."⁷³¹ In this way, the content of primitive accumulation, although necessary for the ongoing maintenance of the separations that are required for the capitalist mode of production, is suspended within capitalism itself. This is an argument that has been taken up by Werner Bonefeld recently, who establishes that the conceptuality of capital lies in its capacity to fold the violence of its foundation into itself, with the essential character of primitive accumulation being

⁷²⁹ Althusser & Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 276.

⁷³⁰ Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 258.

⁷³¹ Marx, *The Grundrisse*, p. 460.

maintained.⁷³² Paraphrasing Marx's assessment of the commodity, Bonefeld suggests that "the process of disappearance of primitive accumulation in accumulation proper 'must, therefore, appear at the same time as a process of the disappearance of its disappearance, i.e. as a reproduction process.'⁷³³ Capital's system of social-metabolic reproduction is itself key to understanding the significance of primitive accumulation, rather than *vice versa*. As Marx suggests, it is as if the anatomy of man is key to the anatomy of the ape, and it is as if the totality of capitalist social relations is key to the anatomy of the violence conducted in its name. Indeed, "the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of self-earned private property; in other words: the expropriation of the labourer,"⁷³⁴ but this expropriation is only meaningful given the totality of the capital system. In this context, the conceptuality of capital is significant, for the material processes of world politics, and how political action might be leveraged against them. What is more, the significance of the concept of capital extends beyond primitive accumulation, and is of significance for more than just the analysis of commons. In the final sections of this chapter, I want to expand this discussion of capital beyond the context of commons and primitive accumulation.

The Problem of Capitalism in I.R. and Beyond

Indeed, the conceptualisation of capitalism within accounts of primitive accumulation is far from the only place where an alternative conceptualisation of capital might prove fruitful. In the contemporary world, any critical theory worth the name has to situate itself in relation to capital, as all of the obstacles to human freedom and autonomy are, in one way or another, mediated by it.⁷³⁵ Pressing contemporary issues such as climate change and environmental degradation, for example, are impossible to mediate or control within a system that maintains the metabolic rift between the two

⁷³² Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason*. 79.

⁷³³ Bonefeld, W., (2011), 'Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Notes on Social Constitution and Expropriation', *Science & Society* 75(3), pp. 379-399.

⁷³⁴ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 724.

⁷³⁵ Wark, M., (2013), *#Celerity: A Critique of the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, (published online at: <https://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/wark-mckenzie-celerity.pdf>), (accessed on: 27.04.2015).

forms of value identified. The nature of these social problems, and their mediation by the metabolic rifts of capital, suggests engagement with the social form of capital is the most pressing task ahead of critical social theorists. Engaging with this agenda necessitates a re-thinking of the most coherent and consistent systemic critique of capital, as developed by Karl Marx in the eponymously titled trilogy, and throughout his wider analytical *corpus*. This engagement need not be dogmatic, and in fact, it is far better that it is not. Nonetheless, the social form of capital is the horizon of all social inquiry today.

The specificity of this social form has been one of the key analytical drivers of this thesis, which has argued that in order to understand the challenges and the opportunities facing anti-capitalist politics in the contemporary world, it is necessary to give further consideration to questions of structure, and more specifically the structure of capital. In the final chapter of this thesis, I have tried to outline what approach to the structure of capitalism might look like in the case of commons movements. The problem of capital is not limited to commons movements, however, and there is a far greater research programme to be conducted beyond it. This is a research agenda that is already, in some senses, being explored within Philosophy, Human Geography, and- perhaps more surprisingly for a discipline perennially regarded as ‘backward’- International Studies. In insisting on the centrality of critique of global structures of capital, this research agenda has much to contribute to I.R. and its cognate disciplines. Indeed, the thrust of this research agenda should not be alien to international studies, as it is a field of scholarly reflection that “is not based on a dogmatic insistence on the certainty of its claims but, rather, rests on a commitment to constant critique.”⁷³⁶ As Kai Koddenbrock has argued, however, theories of International Politics have been altogether less successful at articulating what exactly this critique does.⁷³⁷ Given the openness of its theoretical project, the category of totality may well have particular significance for understanding the dynamics of

⁷³⁶ Kurki, M. & Wight, C., (2006), ‘International Relations and Social Science’, in Dunne, T., Kurki, M. & Smith, S., (Eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 15.

⁷³⁷ Koddenbrock, K., (2014), ‘Strategies of critique in International Relations: From Foucault and Latour toward Marx?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, (published online first: DOI: 10.1177/1354066114538854), p. 2.

global politics, and the conceptualisation of capitalism as its theoretical object.⁷³⁸ This is incipient within disciplinary suggestions that the totality of capitalist social relations should be the basis of I.R.'s project of understanding the emergence and development of the state system.⁷³⁹ Even within the nascent disciplinary attempts to make sense of global political dynamics in terms of economic phenomena, there has been a general reluctance to conceptualise capital as the subject of global politics.⁷⁴⁰ The type of mapping of global capital in the 21st Century, in the style of Rosa Luxemburg,⁷⁴¹ Vladimir Lenin,⁷⁴² Robert Brenner,⁷⁴³ or Ellen Wood,⁷⁴⁴ is more needed today than it ever has been. The discipline of International Relations not only stands to benefit from this kind of engagement, but it can also contribute immeasurably to attempts to make the capitalist totality intelligible.

Resistance Studies

The research presented in this thesis has the potential to be brought into conversation with recent discussions of resistance in I.R. and beyond. In recent years, resistance has become something of a *leitmotif* of attempts to imagine a critical, anti-systemic politics.⁷⁴⁵ This preoccupation with 'resistance' has conditioned the way that academic accounts have dealt with neoliberalism and its crisis, prioritising resistance over and above classical enlightenment ideas of emancipation. Mass opposition to

⁷³⁸ Koddenbrock, 'Strategies of critique in International Relations', p. 12.

⁷³⁹ See for example Bieler, A. & Morton, A.D. (2004), 'A critical theory route to hegemony, world order, and historical change: neo-Gramscian perspectives in International Relations', *Capital and Class* 28, pp. 85-113.

⁷⁴⁰ See for example Wood, E.M., (2003), *Empire of Capital*, (London, Verso).

⁷⁴¹ Luxemburg, R., (1913), *The Accumulation of Capital*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1913/accumulation-capital/>), (accessed on: 09.07.2015).

⁷⁴² Lenin, V.I., (1916), *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>), (accessed on: 09.07.2015).

⁷⁴³ Brenner, R.P., (2006), *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005*, (New York, Verso).

⁷⁴⁴ Wood, *Empire of Capital*.

⁷⁴⁵ See for example:

Caygill, H., (2015), *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance*, (London, Bloomsbury),
 Mittleman, J.H. & Chin, C.B.N., (2005), 'Conceptualizing Resistance to Globalization', in
 Amoore, L. (Ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader*, (Abingdon, Routledge).

Pleyers, G., (2011), *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age*, (Cambridge, Polity Press).

neoliberalism has, in conjunction with the decline of 'postmodernism', brought to the fore a mass of new, critical intellectuals who have brought Marxist tools to bear on questions of social theory and the transcendence of capitalism. This 'form' of presenting political ideas as 'resistance' shares much with autonomist theory, in establishing the subject of contentious as epistemological and political architrave. It is not, however, an entirely unproblematic way of engaging with neoliberalism and its crisis.

This thesis has argued that the type of thinking that undergirds the discourse of resistance is problematic, albeit not so much in that it exists, but insofar as it has assumed a position of hegemony within the way that academics have approached anti-systemic politics. In making the experience and theoretical endeavours of activists themselves the *sine qua non* of theory, this experience becomes the theoretical object of inquiry, rather than the totality of capitalist social relations. Within much of the contemporary literature that seeks to provide an analysis of neo-liberalism, the experience of life under neo-liberalism stands in for neo-liberalism itself.⁷⁴⁶ Although experience is significant, and can be the basis of political interventions, it is dangerous to assume that capital can be reduced only to its symptoms. In this context, the role of theory might have more to do with Frederic Jameson's conception of 'cognitive mapping' - than it does with an attempt to found a particular revolutionary theory. In his (in)famous essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', Jameson suggested that the challenge facing the progressive intellectual in the latter decades of the 20th Century was that of creating 'cognitive maps' that would find new forms of orientation for the 'postindustrial' world. Defined in largely aesthetic terms, the cognitive map is an attempt to situate the position of the individual/the collective actor in relation to a symbolically unrepresentable totality. Rather than offering a view of the subject as totality, the cognitive map attempts to map the 'maze' of contemporary global capitalism from the perspective of a participant in the global economy attempting to find his or her way out. As Jameson suggests in relation to cognitive maps of the city: "[cognitive maps might] enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality

⁷⁴⁶ Kiersey, N.J., (2011), 'Everyday Neoliberalism and the Subjectivity of Crisis: Post-Political Control in an Era of Financial Turmoil', *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 4, pp. 23-44.

which is the ensemble of the city's structure as a whole."⁷⁴⁷ As Jasper Bernes has suggested, "[t]heory is a map produced by the lost themselves, offering us the difficult view from within rather than the clarity of the Olympian view from above."⁷⁴⁸ All of this is very well, but this perspective perhaps gives up too readily on the idea that positive knowledge of the capitalist totality is possible. It is striking that the language of resistance mirrors so much of neoliberalism, and its critique of linear, rational, state-based interventions could so easily be mistaken for neoliberal theory itself. Pierre Bourdieu once suggested that neoliberalism was a doctrine that proclaimed revolution, but brought about a restoration;⁷⁴⁹ it will be to humanity's detriment if the thinking that purports to counter neoliberalism does much the same thing itself.

The type of thinking that establishes resistance as the *sine qua non* of the critical logic of anti-capitalism is not just limited to academic studies that use the term 'resistance': its logic is present within much of contemporary political philosophy, and the way that we conceive of anti-systemic agencies. For example, thinking 'the event' has become commonplace within attempts to found new emancipatory politics, particularly in the writings of scholars such as Alain Badiou. Rather than the critique of political economy, Badiou's thought is founded on fidelity to 'the idea of communism', an invariant ideal that- through fidelity to this event- becomes the founding moment of a new reality.⁷⁵⁰ Although the subjective dimensions of political transformations are not without importance, this cannot replace the critique of political economy as the key to understanding what type of political action is required.

Alongside the ontologies of 'the event' espoused by thinkers such as Alain Badiou, a vitalist productivism is another prominent current,⁷⁵¹ within which life is opposed to power, a current that Michel Foucault described as a "savage ontology of life", in

⁷⁴⁷ Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping'.

⁷⁴⁸ Bernes, J., (2013), 'Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Project', *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes*, p. 117.

⁷⁴⁹ Quoted in Brennan, T., (2006), *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, (New York, Columbia University Press), p. 204.

⁷⁵⁰ Badiou, A., (2008), 'The Communist Hypothesis', *New Left Review* 49.

Badiou, A., (2013), *Theory of the Subject*, (London, Continuum).

⁷⁵¹ Toscano, 'Uses of the Useless'.

which life exceeds and erodes all constraints and attempts at limitation.⁷⁵² The turn to the vital has often been accompanied by the rejection of critique, which is seen as being somehow complicit with the structures of power, and the rejection of it as to be free of its constraints.⁷⁵³ If critique, in its classical form, is about establishing the proper limits of thought and human activity, the turn towards vitalism in contemporary critical thought is based on the supposition that only through transgressing these limits it is possible to overcome the constraints of power. Perhaps the most direct expression of this vitalist thought in anti-capitalist politics is the tendency called accelerationism. Originating in the writings of Nick Land,⁷⁵⁴ and invoked- if fundamentally different from the Landian version- by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek,⁷⁵⁵ if vitalism is most prominent within discourses such as ‘accelerationism’, Benjamin Noys has suggested, vitalism is a prominent way of understanding resistance to capitalism, and a philosophical motif that underpins not only critical, anticapitalist thought, but also a lot of contemporary thinking about resistance in general.⁷⁵⁶

Significantly, given the thrust of the earlier parts of this thesis, this logic comes from a particular conception of what capitalism is, and how it operates. Life politics, theorised within *Operaismo*, but also the radical social constructivism of Berger and

⁷⁵² Foucault, M., (1973), *The Order of Things*, (London, Routledge), p. 303.

⁷⁵³ Noys, B., (2012), ‘Life’s What You Make It: Vitalism and Critique’, *The Politics of Critique conference, 18th-19th July 2012*, (written version available at: https://www.academia.edu/2197542/Lifes_What_You_Make_It_Vitalism_and_Critique), (accessed on: 20.03.2015).

⁷⁵⁴ Land, N., (2012), ‘Meltdown’, *The Wayback Machine* 08.04.2012, (available online at: https://web.archive.org/web/20120408210441/http://www.ccru.net/swarm1/1_melt.htm), (accessed on: 13.05.2015).

⁷⁵⁵ Williams, A. & Srnicek, N., (2013), *#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, (available online at: <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>), (accessed on: 20.03.2015).

Williams, A. & Srnicek, N., (2015, forthcoming), *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, (London, Verso).

⁷⁵⁶ Noys, B., (2011), ‘The Savage Ontology of Insurrection: Negativity, Life, and Anarchy’, *Postanarchism seminar, Athens, 27th-28th November 2011*, (written version available at: https://www.academia.edu/1058231/The_Savage_Ontology_of_Insurrection_Negativity_Life_and_Anarchy), (accessed on: 14.03.2015).

Luckmann in the 1960s, or Giddens' structuration theory of the 1980s,⁷⁵⁷ suggests that the world is produced and reproduced by workers' activities, and capital is nothing more than the parasitic attempt to take what it is good from collaborative human activities. Within this formulation of political action, the structures of the state, the states-system and capital, are little more than epistemological mystifications of life's creative power.⁷⁵⁸ This is a sociological reduction; it establishes the 'sufficiency of the social', that it is in the social sphere that real power really lies, not in the artificial and obfuscatory 'liberal' discourses of sovereignty. No call for a return of the political is required, because we see that life itself, in the form of the multitude, or in the form of militant subjectivities, already resists capital, in the squares of Zucotti & Syntagma, or in the bodies of female workers in Ciudad Juarez.⁷⁵⁹ The alternative world already exists now, in the practices of resistance, in acts of women's solidarity, or in acts of commoning. All that is required to make the power of the worker manifest is the realisation that capitalist power over life is an illusion, and the self-production of social relations will take us elsewhere.

This thesis has suggested that there are numerous problems with this approach. First, and most obviously, this approach overloads what is possible simply by allowing social relations to take shape. Life is opposed to Power as if it is everything that Power is not. This is not only an improbably dualistic perspective on social formations, but also one that obviates the relationship between capital and life.⁷⁶⁰ The opposition of Life and Power is a common trope within contemporary discourses of resistance, having become a 'common sense' position underlying a great many of the post-structural accounts of resistance operative in the social sciences and philosophy today.⁷⁶¹ In the face of the 'common sense vitalism' that has pervaded discussions of resistance, it is vitally important to examine the concrete structures of oppression that

⁷⁵⁷ Berger, P. & Luckmann, T., (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (London, Penguin),

Giddens, A., (1986), *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (Cambridge, Polity).

⁷⁵⁸ Chandler, D., (2013) 'From sour grapes to vitalism: the life politics of the left', *Global Change, Peace and Security* 25(3), p. 368.

⁷⁵⁹ Staudt, K. & Méndez, Z.Y., (2015), *Courage, Resistance & Women in Ciudad Juárez: Challenges to Militarization*, (Austin, University of Texas Press), esp. chapter three.

⁷⁶⁰ Jappe, A., (1999), *Guy Debord*, D. Nicholson-Smith (trans.), (Berkeley, University of California Press), p. 114.

⁷⁶¹ Brennan, *Wars of Position*, p. 159.

force life into particular forms, and develop emancipatory pathways out from it. In much the same way that I have tried to argue that capitalism is not simply the vampiric extraction of a surplus from a laboring subject, I claim that the relationship between power and life is altogether more complex than some of these ‘speculative leftist’ accounts suggest.⁷⁶² Life itself is conditioned and shaped by capital, such that the second-order mediations of capital currently serve to mediate between man and nature.

The critique of the discourse of resistance implicit within this project, however, is more significant than simply the rejection of its biopolitical or its vitalist assumptions. In much the same way that conceptions of commons bring with them implicit theories of political action, the discourse of resistance brings with it an orientation towards political action, where our desire to give credence to the experience of activism, and vitiate its energies, overstates the capacity of these acts of resistance to overcome the obstacles they face. The transformation of the world through human praxis is key to understanding man’s unique essence; the thing that divides him from biological life, and it is the conscious transformation of the world that offers him the possibility of emancipation. The conscious fashioning of the objective world is what divides human reproduction from the automatic, biological reproduction of animals. In the contemporary world, human life is alienated through capital’s production and reproduction processes, but at no point does human life stop being a product of man’s own activity. The invocation of life can only be emancipatory when it is guided by human reason, which is fully conscious of its own alienation, and seeks to re-organise human life on a rational, egalitarian basis. In short, this necessitates a turn from a focus on resistance to capital, neoliberalism, and the state, to the practice of critique and the development of an emancipatory project on this basis. In short, the deficiencies of a theoretical and political approach rooted in resistance leads back to historical materialism. To realize this, is to realize the most radical aspirations of enlightenment.

⁷⁶² Badiou, A., (2005), *Being and Event*, O. Feltham (trans.), (London, Continuum), pp. 210-211,
Bosteels, B., (2005), ‘The Speculative Left’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104(4), pp. 751-767.

Chapter Conclusion

The idea with which this chapter began was that commons cannot be treated in isolation; they are only meaningful- either as a theory of transition or as a theory of class recomposition- in relation to the structural totality of capitalist social relations. Rather than looking to the movements themselves, focusing primarily on the subjective dimension of how, why and where commons are produced, it suggested that we should look at the structural origins of these struggles, and develop a political strategy for leveraging commons against capital on this basis. To do so, the chapter advocated a reading of the structure of capitalist totality derived from the writings of Marxist philosopher István Mészáros. Taking the mediating functions of the capital system seriously, Mészáros outlines a framework for understanding the world that capital has created as a social-metabolic system of reproduction in which the entirety of man's relationship with nature (and thus the resources that sustain both biological and social life) has been enclosed by a system of social mediation that is structured around the self-reproduction of capital. These mediations have influenced capital's expansion across the globe, which despite its attempt to create a world market, is not homogenous. More specifically than this, Mészáros' focus on the mediations that comprise the capital system have implications for the way that we understand the relations between commons and capital. Rather than necessarily comprising the outside, or the absolute negation of capitalism, commons exist alongside, both *within and outside* circuits of the capital-system. These alternative forms of social metabolic organisation form part of a war of position against capital, but simply in their existing, they are insufficient to overcome the capital system.

The implication of this reading is that the significance of these commons lies not in the act of their foundation, but in the relation between parts of the totality. Commons are meaningful insofar as they can be leveraged against the structures of capital, in order to carve out a more permanent freedom from the value form. They need to be leveraged in such a way that they can transform the entirety of society in their image. This is problematic within existing accounts of commons which do not say very much about how commons can be used to re-shape man's productive activities. Commons touch upon questions of production, but in their current manifestation, they remain more focused on questions of distribution, or finding solutions for living in/off the

ruins of industrial civilisation. Mészáros' approach suggests that if a successful transition to a society centred on commons is to be affected, we must understand the dialectical unity of production and consumption, taken at the level of totality, as the referent object of a theory of transition from one social-metabolic system to another.

Mészáros' account of social-metabolic transition also has a lot to say about the limits encountered by commons movement. These limits are faced even within the commons instantiated in Rome and Oakland, where the forms of mediation sustained by (and sustaining) the capitalist totality remained embedded within the everyday lives of those involved in commons movements. The necessities of jobs, debt, rent and the imperatives of work remained outside the liberated spaces of commons, and the communities produced by these actions remained only partial movement away from the social-metabolism of capital. Acts of commoning demonstrate the capacity of commoners to exercise autonomy, but this is not the same thing as overcoming the social-metabolic system of capital.

Understanding of capital as a social form that exercises social-metabolic control has a further corollary for commoning, which is that acts of commoning are not in and of themselves directly political. Political moments come when commons become the dominant form of social-metabolic regulation. This produces a bifurcation within what autonomist theory and communization theory has considered a unitary action, as forms of commoning become distinct from the political interventions that can make commons of more significance to the reproduction of everyday life. At the same time that Mészáros' writings suggest the necessity of a political moment over and above the production of commons, they are not particularly well-developed treatises on what this kind of political moment looks like. The chapter then turned to the philosophy of Louis Althusser, in order to develop from his corpus a conception of politics conceived in terms of the structured totality of capitalist social relations. The political use of commons as points of leverage to capture and dismantle the hegemonic forms of control within the social metabolism cannot be carried out as social movements that only organise around commons: they must seek to be more hegemonic movements that wrest away social-metabolic control from capital itself. How this movement is to be constituted as a political one that thinks in terms of hegemony is a fundamentally practical question, and beyond the scope of this dissertation.

The final sections of this chapter went on to explore the consequences of this political-theoretical statement for a number of contemporary topics of scholarly debate. First, it established that we have to be slightly more circumspect in our discussions of primitive accumulation, before going on to suggest that the problems facing scholarly and political investigation with emancipatory aims are the problems presented to us by capital itself. This has implications for the way that we understand the politics of resistance, a particularly prominent trope of political thought today. In particular, it suggests that ‘the politics of resistance’ is a problematic way of framing political problems, unconsciously re-creating neoliberal ideas about politics and agency, as well as occluding the potential for radical political transformation. The chapter concluded by examining the ramifications of this for our assessment of commons in contemporary struggles is they are most significant for their capacity to ignite a radical imaginary, rather than being the direct and immediate overcoming of capitalism. The final section of this chapter explored the ways in which commons have emerged as a wider political imaginary, and how a Marxist approach to the political as developed in this thesis might prove fruitful to expand these ideas and bring various discourses around the commons together. Although neither the Mészáros-inspired conception of capitalist totality as capital’s system of social metabolic control, nor Althusser’s conception of the groundless political intervention offer a comprehensive account of how commons might be wielded against capital- this is a fundamentally practical question- they give a number of significant hints.

Conclusion

One of the truisms of the contemporary cycle of struggles and the political philosophy that has sought to make sense of it is that the most interesting political developments of the last 30 years have taken place within the movements themselves.⁷⁶³ The preponderance of imaginative new forms of democratic self-organisation and innovative solutions to low-impact, collective living within them have led commentators to identify the movements themselves not only as ‘an alternative’ to existing ways of organizing politically, but also as an alternative way of organising life itself, beyond the constraints of capital. This is not the question that faces social movements in the contemporary world; at least, this is not the entirety of the question facing them. The question that is facing social movements is the question of how an alternative social-metabolism might be produced that replaces capital and its established social-metabolic mode of existence. The issue facing these social movements is, in rather old-fashioned terminology, a question of transition: the transition between a system that is predicated on the valorization of value towards one that is rooted in human needs.

This thesis has outlined some aspects of a theory of transition, and argued that if Marxist social theory is to meet its analytical, normative, and transformational potential, it must take this question, the question of what transition, more seriously. More specifically, it has tried to outline these aspects of a theory of transition in relation to recent discussions about commons. Theorists of various stripes have often invoked Commons as a possible alternative organizing principle for a society that is not driven by the valorization of value. Discussion has often focused on the emergence of commons within or outside the social relation of capital, at the expense of a theory of transition that places the relationship between the two at its forefront. The willingness to put commons in conversation with the social logic of capital is

⁷⁶³ Graeber, D., (2012), ‘Occupy Wall Street’s Anarchist Roots’, in Byrne, J., (Ed.), *The Occupy Handbook*, (Boston, Black Bay), pp. 141-149,
Miller, J., (2012), ‘Is Democracy Still in the Streets?’, in Byrne, J., (Ed.), *The Occupy Handbook*, (Boston, Black Bay), pp. 173-183,
Browne, C. & Susen, S., (2014), ‘Austerity and its Antitheses: Practical Negations of Capitalist Legitimacy’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113(2), pp. 217-230.

what drove this thesis to begin with Autonomist Marxism. Autonomist Marxism is a diverse theoretical project, and the first chapter of this thesis demonstrated that the development of autonomism as a theoretical school has proceeded by way of disagreements about key subjects. As Borio, Pozzi and Roggero have argued, autonomism is “neither a homogenous doctrinaire corpus, nor a unitary political subject”, but rather “multiple pathways with their roots in a common theoretical matrix.”⁷⁶⁴ The chapter sought to navigate these pathways in two ways: first, by identifying a core to autonomist theory, rooted in Mario Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’ that places labour in the ‘driving seat’ *vis a vis* Capital; and secondly, by exploring how the legacy of Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’ is refracted in debates about commons within the autonomist tradition. Building on this, the chapter traced the way that Tronti’s thesis is applied differently to commons (and their relationship to capital’s totality) by two authors in particular: Antonio Negri & Massimo De Angelis.

Chapter One of this thesis ended with De Angelis’ invocation of the commons in terms of the ‘beginning of history.’ De Angelis’ engagement with the question of commons in this way is an engagement with the question of modernity. De Angelis quotes Marx’s famous depiction of ‘the association of free individuals’, rooted in ‘self-awareness’ and a means of production held in ‘common’.⁷⁶⁵ He suggests that in the practices of the social movements that are struggling against capitalism today, there is the emergence of a movement that articulates what this self-determination would look like, articulated as ‘value practices’.⁷⁶⁶ He recognises that what is ongoing within these movements is a process of transition as the totality of capital is confronted with other totalities, and its hegemony is challenged. Despite offering some strategic directions according to which this encounter takes place, his work has – with some exceptions⁷⁶⁷ – stopped short of offering a theory of transition.

This thesis has attempted to take up the question of how commons might be wielded against capital at the point at which De Angelis’ interpretation of commons stopped. In particular, it has asked the question of what a transition might look like, and how it

⁷⁶⁴ Quoted in Wright, S., (2008), ‘Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism: A Preliminary Survey’, *Historical Materialism* 16, p. 111.

⁷⁶⁵ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 240.

⁷⁶⁶ De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*, p. 246.

⁷⁶⁷ See for example De Angelis, ‘Social Revolution and the Commons’.

might be affected. What is more, it has asked whether an autonomist method is adequate for thinking through this transition, or whether new theoretical tools must be developed for thinking through both any transition, and the significance of the commons within the contemporary world. In so doing, this thesis has sought to examine the emergence of commons within two of the most significant commons movements in the global north: chapter three explored the Italian *bene comune* movement that has been prominent in Rome and many other cities; and chapter four the Occupy movement in Oakland, U.S.A. These case studies demonstrate that even when they are not explicit rhetorical or ideological features of social movements, commons do play a significant role within the ‘social movement ecology’ of the contemporary struggle against capital. Each of these case studies are significant, however, because they demonstrate ways in which the thoughts and the practices of social movements are trying to articulate new approaches to the question of transition. In the case of Italy, participants within the *bene comune* movement have sought to explore the possibility of articulating commons politically as constituent power. By way of contrast, in Oakland, movements themselves have thought about commons and the way in which commons are mediated by the state and the capital relation.

As a response to these developments, chapter four explored the success of these attempts to theorise transition within the movements, and the type of concerns this raises. In the case of Oakland, this necessitated engaging with the theoretical tendency called ‘Communitisation’, which shares much with autonomism but also marks a significant theoretical departure, both in terms of the bits of Marx that they pick up on, and the conclusions they reach. The chapter concluded that while they demonstrate what is at stake for contemporary social movements of the commons, and point in the direction of a focus on the political and mediations of the commons, they do not provide all of the answers. The chapter conjectured that perhaps the reason for this is that they remain committed to certain autonomist orthodoxies (in particular the unity of our critique of political economy and the way that we develop political strategies in contradistinction to capital) and concluded by suggesting that more adequate resolutions to these problems might be found elsewhere.

Chapter five explored two such resources and how they could be used: the philosophical account of capital and the political in the writings of Louis Althusser

and the idea of mediations and social-metabolic totality in the writings of István Mészáros. These theoretical perspectives offer a means of understanding commons in relation to the totality of capitalist social relations and the possibility of forging a political project from the commons. The idea that commons can emerge as self-sufficient spheres of social reproduction without engaging, confronting and superseding the mediations of the capitalist totality, although not inevitable within autonomist readings of the commons, does appear within some contemporary interpretations. The final chapter then used the framework developed through Mészáros and Althusser to explore the possibilities of radicalising existing literatures on commons through the application of classical Marxist insights into the nature of totality and the vital significance of a conception of the political.

At its highest aspiration, I hope that this thesis demonstrates the necessity of the self-transcendence of the autonomist method, and the re-positing of the question of human emancipation at a higher, global level. At its lowest, it is a journey through autonomism into new terrain, establishing the necessity of a new theoretical framework through which to understand the possible relationship between commons and the transcendence of capitalism. This necessitates bringing in, or developing anew, theory that is capable of dealing with the two primary problems that I feel face autonomist theory: the absence of a theory of the capital relation's mediation by other social relations (and its inverse, a theory of mediation that accounts for the way that commons are mediated by- and mediate- other social relations); and a theory of the political. In this thesis, I have attempted to provide some answers to these questions by bringing in theoretical resources developed in István Mészáros' theory of mediations & an account of the political developed in the writings of Louis Althusser. This is far from the only theoretical framework through which these questions could be answered, and these questions will- because they must- be answered by movements in the future. No doubt these questions will be answered according to the political and philosophical grammar particular to the context in which they are raised; however, what I hope to have done in this thesis, is to point out some of the key issues that must be addressed for a project of commoning with emancipatory intent.

This has a number of implications for future studies of commons, which I will attempt to outline briefly here. Underlying this discussion is the pressing necessity of

recognising the ways in which commons are subject to mediations, and their significance ultimately depends upon the ways that they are mediated by, and mediate, other social relationships. In this context, if we are to understand commons and their significance for social and political transformation, then we need to develop a better understanding of the relationship between commons and their mediations. Of particular importance is the relationship between commons and the state. The state is a key mediation for a number of reasons. In the first instance, the state threatens commons through upholding the capitalist property order. In other instances, the state is metastasizing in such a way as to fundamentally change the way that Autonomists have tended to be very sceptical about the state and its capacity for overcoming capital.⁷⁶⁸ Its *raison d'être*, they argue, is to establish and reproduce capitalist relations of production.⁷⁶⁹ In this context, the institutions of the state are poorly suited for the maintenance of any other kind of property order. At the same time, it is not immediately obvious that the state is *only* an institution that maintains the *bourgeois* property order. The state also fulfils- not entirely unproblematically- human desires for security and order & research conducted in the discipline of International Relations suggests that the absolutist state predates the capitalist mode of production.⁷⁷⁰ In this sense, the state is not necessarily an entity that can simply be done away with the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. Any putative movement away from the bourgeois state (and this is something that Marxist theorists and social movements should be committed to) will need to take these questions seriously. The tradition of Council Communism offers a lot of useful pointers for how such a project might take place; establishing an alternative framework for the social metabolic control of human interactions and the social sphere. At the same time, the relations between these spaces is vitally important for realising the concerns about security and the regulation of violence to which the bourgeois state has hitherto been

⁷⁶⁸ See for example:

Holloway, J., (2002), 'Revolt and Revolution Or Get Out of the Way, Capital!', in Bonefeld, W., Tischler, S., (Eds.), (2002), *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the question of revolution today*, (Aldershot, Ashgate), p. 199.

⁷⁶⁹ Bonefeld, W., (2002), 'State, Revolution, and Self-Determination', in Bonefeld, W., Tischler, S., (Eds.), (2002), *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the question of revolution today*, (Aldershot, Ashgate), pp. 128-149.

⁷⁷⁰ See for example Teschke, B., (2003), *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations*, (London, Verso).

a response. This is a major weakness of ‘council communism’ and the theories put forward by

The second problem that this poses is the question of understanding commons in the context of a ‘system of states’. One of the key problems facing a movement that attempts to establish commons as the hegemonic principle of human self-reproduction, is the fragmentation of political authority by the international system. In some accounts of world politics carried out through a Marxist lens, the international is the architrave of modernity, not simply the *tableau* against which the rise of capitalism can be understood, but fundamental to its very constitution.⁷⁷¹ There is both an analytical dimension to this thought, and a sense in which the international facilitates capital’s seizure of social-metabolic control. For example, the ‘anarchy’ of the interstate system acts as a ‘whip of external necessity’ that drives forward capitalist dynamics through interstate competition, and means that states are incapable of exercising sovereignty in favour of maintaining commons.

Another of the mediations that has to be taken seriously is the temporality of the class-relation. Class-compositional analysis is sensitive to this relationship, but it sometimes gets led down blind avenues by its commitment to a Trontian conception of the capital-relation (see chapter one). This is important for two main reasons. The first of these is that there is an internal logic to capital that creates weaknesses that a strategic orientation can take advantage of.⁷⁷² The Marxist theory of crisis, something that has often been downplayed by autonomists (and not without good reason),⁷⁷³ although indeterminate, does demonstrate weaknesses within the mode of production and places where commons can usurp capital as the primary mediator of social reproduction. The second reason for this is that there is much that needs to be communised that lies within the capital relation. Theories of commons can sometimes tend towards alternativism and a willingness to create systems of social reproduction

⁷⁷¹ See for example Teschke, B., (2003), *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations*, (London, Verso),

Rosenberg, J., (1996), ‘Isaac Deutscher and the Lost History of International Relations’, *New Left Review* 1:215.

⁷⁷² Bensaïd, D., (2007), ‘The Return of Strategy’, *International Socialism* 113.

⁷⁷³ See for example Clarke, S., (1994), *Marx’s Theory of Crisis*, (New York, St. Martin’s Press).

alongside capital. A social formation in which commons are fully hegemonic will necessitate the re-purposing of the productive potentials that are currently held within the capital relation to the purposes of commons. Understanding capital is thus something that cannot wholly be done through the Trontian lens that autonomist theory usually works with. Whilst Tronti's 'Copernican turn' helps us to see the way that class struggle permeates the entirety of the capital system, trace the political cleavages that open up within it, and establish the normative basis upon which an anti-capitalist project is predicated, it cannot grasp all the dynamics of capital.

In the context of these questions of mediation, we need to develop a coherent theory of the political. This is something that has often been absent from autonomist theory, some branches of which tend to associate this kind of 'political' thinking with the oppression inherent in Bolshevik Communism,⁷⁷⁴ or a bourgeois history of the separation of the political from the economic.⁷⁷⁵ This is not true of all autonomists of course, and by way of contrast, Hardt & Negri do talk about a re-engagement with the *problematique* of the political in the form of theories of constituent power, and a re-thinking of what the political might be within autonomist thought is a project to which Mario Tronti was sympathetic.⁷⁷⁶ What is needed in the contemporary context is an approach to the political that is capable of taking these mediations into account, and developing a political counter-power of negating capital and establishing a system in which commons become the dominant social-reproductive strategy.

In this context, dealing with the state as a site at which the contradictions of class-forces come to the foreground might be a productive strategy. Dealing with the state as a site of political struggle over the commons means re-opening classical Marxist questions about political practice such as the question of the party. What exactly a 'party of the commons' might look like, and what its contribution to struggles over the commons might be is not something that I can elaborate on further here. One thing that I think is essential to any theory of transition rooted in the commons is, however, the notion of internationalism. The international, and the fragmentation of political

⁷⁷⁴ Bonefeld, W., Tischler, S., (Eds.), (2002), *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the question of revolution today*, (Aldershot, Ashgate).

⁷⁷⁵ Tronti, M., (2014), 'The Political', M. Mandarini, (trans.), *Vienpoint Magazine* 4.

⁷⁷⁶ Tronti, 'The Political'.

space is a constitutive feature of international order, and a feature that is absolutely central to the continuation of capital's rule. The international is a key mediation upon which capital's hegemony rests, and it must in some way be transcended if an order is to emerge in which commons are hegemonic. The corollary of this is that an 'internationalism of the commons' is of profound importance to contemporary political practice. An international movement has the capacity to co-ordinate between local instances of commons *and* to challenge capital's attempts to snuff out instances of commoning that emerge across the globe.

As suggested earlier, these conclusions draw me towards the concerns and theoretical reference points of 'classical Marxism'. Indeed, in the same way that there is much to be praised about the autonomist method, its sensitivity to the class antagonisms that constitute late capitalist society, and its capacity to pose the question of political emancipation in terms of human freedom, there is also much to be praised within classical Marxism. Indeed, a re-engagement with national polities not as the illusory representation of a reality that is cleaved by class struggle, but as the crystallisation of class struggle and the contradictions of capitalism, is to re-engage with some of the theoretical legacies of the Trotskyist tradition, as articulated by Daniel Bensaïd and Alex Callinicos. In framing the expansion of commons as a question of 'transition'; emphasising the importance of national polities as a feature of the way that political space is delimited; *and* invoking the international as an important organisational and political site, I do come closer to this definition of politics than autonomist theory tends to.⁷⁷⁷ At the same time, I do not wish to suggest that *any* historical framing of Marxist politics holds the answers either to understand capital as it actually affects human life in the 21st Century, or to constituting the real movement that does away with the present state of things.

⁷⁷⁷ Important problems with this political tradition have been outlined by Mike Rooke: Rooke, M., (2005), 'Marxism is Dead! Long Live Marxism!', *What Next?* 30, (unpaginated version available online: <http://www.whatnextjournal.org.uk/Pages/Back/Wnext30/Contents.html>), (accessed on: 03.02.2016).

The Question of the Political in the 21st Century

To expand the implications of this research out, beyond specific questions of how commons might help transcend capital, I think that this research has a lot to say to some of the fundamental questions of critical theory in the 21st Century. Returning to the conference with which I began this thesis, *The Idea of Communism* conference at Birkbeck College, London, captured something of a *zeitgeist* among critical intellectuals. It suggested that, after many years in the neoliberal wilderness, the question of communism was once more back on the agenda. This resuscitation of the idea of communism, its proponents contend, is about more than just breathing new life into Communism as it had appeared in the 20th Century: it is about re-thinking the possibility of politics itself. In the accounts of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Bruno Bosteels, however, asking the question of communism is procedural, and voluntaristic, having more in common with set theory than it does with political economy. In this thesis, however, I have tried to argue that in order to establish a coherent account of the political in the 21st Century, self-determination must be sought in terms of a long-term project that seeks to establish self-determination through the transcendence of capital & the establishment of new social-metabolic mediations rooted in commons.

The discourse of autonomy establishes the political as a radically self-founded intervention, but ultimately it is limited by the way in which social control is intellectually and materially appropriated by capital. In recent social movement practice, and the way that academics and philosophers have sought to grasp it, democracy and autonomy have been evoked in their purest forms. The Occupy movement, for example, has the idea of democracy at its very core, with the stated aim of restoring democratic control over politics, and attempts to embed direct-democratic principles at every level of its operation. These movements have tried to evoke the question of politics in its most basic sense. Fittingly, given that the production of the municipality is an integral part of humanity's long journey from social relations which were primarily dictated by necessity, and thus subject to social relations dictated by blood ties, towards government by social institutions that place

reason at its apex,⁷⁷⁸ they have taken the city as their referent object. As the sphere in which human beings threw off their parochial ties to this or that community, in classical political philosophy, the polis was the sphere of man's transformation into a universal, cosmopolitan citizen. For Occupy, and movements like it, the city has taken on such significance because, in a world characterized by sovereign states, and transnational governance, the city remains the place where the political is most clearly felt by citizens. The city, and the civic as a sphere of action, has also been a remarkable feature of radical moments in history: from the creation of Soviets in 1917, through Barcelona in 1936, to the establishment of committees within the various *arrondissements* of Paris in 1789, 1848 and the various other revolutions in that city, the creation of committees and a local polis. Indeed, this conception of politics: the attempt to re-organise the city according to negotiated order, which may become the example for the rest of the world.

Very soon, however, these movements encountered the limits of their capacity to raise political questions about the organization of the polis, limits that are constituted by capital. The political questions that it is possible for them to ask were fundamentally limited by capital, which- if they are to reach resolution- necessitate re-engaging with the political on a wider scale, and in terms that deal with the fragmented political space any social movement that wishes to change the world must encounter. While many activists and scholars have rightly lauded these movements, none of these even approached being "the riddle of history solved."⁷⁷⁹ Rather, they each demonstrate the necessity of taking the struggle against capital beyond existing local, particularistic formulations of politics. Even to ask the question of the democratic organization of the polis, to offer a conception of the good life that is rooted in human needs, or human self-determination, is to encounter capital. A democratic struggle today must be an anti-capitalist one, and the question of politics today reaches its limits in its encounter with capital.

In the same way that I have argued, following Bidet, that there is a need to pose the question of the nature of capital again, at a higher, level (a level which takes the

⁷⁷⁸ Bookchin, M., (2015), *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies & The Promise of Direct Democracy*, (London, Verso), p. 43.

⁷⁷⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 'Private Property and Communism'.

fragmentation of competing capitals as absolutely fundamental to any attempt to understand capital), there is a similar necessity to re-frame the problem of politics at the international level, in a way that seeks to respond to the fragmentation of the political into local polities that so characterizes international society and so facilitates capital's expropriation of labour. In this context, our model of the political must depart from classical themes. The problem of politics as the exercise of republican autonomy (the problem posed, for example, by Machiavelli's *The Prince*)- and invoked do strongly by *bene comune* in Italy- is applicable to politics in the pre-capitalist era, but encounters problems insofar as a social system dominated by capital makes political reason applied in these terms an anachronism. Indeed, capital forecloses the political in a very significant ways, and as Frederic Jameson has argued in his recent book *Representing Capital*, the age of capital is the twilight of political theory as it has been traditionally conceived.⁷⁸⁰ It is simply not possible to practice democratic self-determination without simultaneously overcoming capital. As a result, the problem of the political for emancipatory politics today is one that capital itself has presented, for any putative or actual radical transformation of social conditions according to principles of self-determination must overcome the social forces of capital that have appropriated social control for itself. The constitutionalism of classical political thought- that is to say our way of understanding political theory as the cultivation of constituent power- reaches its limits with the emergence of capital as a social force. As C.B. MacPherson famously argued, there is a moment within the foundational political thought of John Locke, where political theory is thoroughly disabled, and this moment is the emergence of money.⁷⁸¹ If the moment of private property is a stumbling block for early modern political philosophy, then the moment of capital is a stumbling block for classical approaches to the political today, and with it, the question of the political has been wholly transformed.

Nonetheless, beginning with this conception of politics as self-determination is instructive, because encountering, confronting and transgressing the limits of locally focused direct action groups, and the struggles that emerge over wages, working conditions, and local autonomy, can help develop a movement that has an adequate political solution to the supersession of capital. In this context, raising the question of

⁷⁸⁰ Jameson, *Representing Capital*.

⁷⁸¹ MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*.

the commons today is intimately tied to the re-opening of politics in the 21st Century. Although, as I suggested above, the possibility of politics has been fundamentally transformed by capital, and self-determination foreclosed by the alienation of capital, the way that recent movements have tried to re-establish the political in a remarkably classical fashion. Rediscovering politics means going beyond questions of social reproduction and asking questions about the exercise of political power in the fashion of movements such as those in Barcelona in 1936, or Paris in 1789. If the political is about establishing collective will for the transformation of the world, then there has often been a strongly anti-political dimension to contemporary social movements, commons movements among them, which frame struggles in social terms. In part, this rejection of politics has been driven by the recognition that politics- as it is constituted in the modern world- has all too often been predicated upon the bourgeois subject & the type of sociality associated with capitalist civil society. Commons, as social forms based on communities of needs, provide a different sociality upon which the political is predicated, and their relationship with the political necessarily implies a different resolution to the relationship between unity and division, or singularity and the collective.

Emphasizing the significance of politics is of significance for ensuring that politically progressive movements are able to challenge the hegemony of capital. The emphasis on life processes within some commons movements risks vitalism becoming the dominant explanatory schema through which commons are assessed, suggesting that commons emerge as the vital embodiment of life as resistance to power, opposes the self-organisation of life to the dead hand of neoliberal management. For a number of reasons, this is a problematic formulation, not least because life itself is something that cannot be neatly dissociated from capital. Vitalism suggests that there is the potential to constitute new human agencies from the sinews of civil society.⁷⁸² The world, vitalists allege, is already in revolt,⁷⁸³ and all that needs to be done is to accelerate, or prioritise, these agencies in the face of capital. We are experiencing a 'global revolution' within which resistance from below establishes pluralist agencies

⁷⁸² This is a claim made by, for example Hardt & Negri.

Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, p. 53.

⁷⁸³ Chandler, D., (2004), 'Building Global Civil Society From Below?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33, p. 324.

that combine against capitalism.⁷⁸⁴ Critique, it seems, takes place within the practices of the movements themselves, and the truth of acts of commoning require no further critique or transcendence. Against this idea, I have attempted in this thesis to argue for the significance of critique to our approach to the relationship between commons and capital, critique that is the basis of the application of political reason conceptualized through conjunctural analysis. My hope is that this critique can disabuse us of the notion that the solution to the riddle of history lies in the untapped biopolitical agencies that already lie latent within neoliberal life, either *pace* Hardt & Negri at the centre of the neoliberal edifice, or *pace* John Holloway, through the act of rejecting capital as the condition of life. Perhaps, the fragmentation of our conception of agency, our rejection of the significance of critique, and the reluctance to conduct struggles in political terms, are not simply theoretical errors, but suggest that capital shapes our conception of leaving capitalism as well as the life of those subject to it. Given the neoliberal project's emphasis on decentralization, and the self-organisation of the market as the rejection of centralized state intervention, there are remarkable parallels between neoliberal thought and the critique practiced by emancipatory life politics.

In contradistinction to the 'life politics' of some strands of the contemporary anti-capitalist literature, which stresses the significance of resistance to capital, this thesis has suggested that a coherent political project against capital can only be achieved through the exercise of a critique that seeks to develop a positive theory of transition beyond the capital system. This necessitates embracing three notions that have been rejected in much contemporary thought about resistance in International Studies, and many of the contemporary discourses that deal with commons: the significance of critique; the emphasis on the political character of emancipatory struggles (and particularly political struggles that are oriented towards the totality); and the exploration of the production of a project of hegemony. To re-capture these is to raise the possibility of a fully conscious transformation of the world that negates capital and constructs a new world in the image of the commons.

⁷⁸⁴ Shaw, M., (2000), *Theory of the Global State: Globality as Unfinished Revolution*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), p. 18.

Theory, Intellectuals, and Commons Struggles

It is in this context that I want to make some kind of final recommendations of the directions in which theorists of the commons should seek to push theories of commons. Like all philosophies of a materialist persuasion, this research has been animated by the belief that scholarship- and political philosophy no less than any other branch of scholarship- should be driven by reality. Although ideas are an important driver of social change, their significance lies in the ways in which they can be brought to bear on social relations. Much like the ‘idea of communism’ invoked by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, the ‘idea of the common’ espoused by Michael Hardt, or ‘the commons’ articulated by Massimo De Angelis cannot transform the world in isolation from the world’s contradictions and social conflicts. The kind of tensions in, between, and alongside late capitalism provides fertile terrain for materialists to begin a critical analysis of human emancipation today. Beginning with the cleavages and contradictions within which social movements emerge, it is easy to become infatuated with the social movements of the crisis. This has, in many cases, resulted in a theorization from the position of, or in conjunction with social movements.⁷⁸⁵

This is a move that appears to serve the interests of human emancipation. In the 21st Century, one of the attractions of approaching Marxism through the issues of social movements has been that it allows us bypass the particular conjuncture of theory and practice that was associated with Marxism-Leninism.⁷⁸⁶ In the absence of Marxist-

⁷⁸⁵ See for example Cox & Nilsen, ‘We Make Our Own History’, p. 8.

Horton, M. & Freire, P., (1990), *We Make the Road by Walking*, (Philadelphia, Temple University Press),

⁷⁸⁶ Vladimir Lenin famously argued that: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity.”

Lenin, V.I., (1902), *What Is to Be Done?*, (available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>), (accessed on: 20.02.2015).

The critique of this doctrine has usually been that in the *Bolshevik* experience, this doctrine was used to substitute professional revolutionaries to lead the revolution. Of course, as so often with polemics within socialist politics, Lenin answers this question in the same document, suggesting- through analogy to bricklaying- that the suggestion of common direction is not the same as substitution or hegemony: “Pray tell me, when

Leninist political reason, social movements offer us the opportunity of a materialism written in a minor key,⁷⁸⁷ diametrically opposed to the deficiencies of the Marxist canon, and the failures of actually existing socialism, and taking global civil society rather than the materialism of Lukács and Lenin’s interpretation in the West as its key theoretical location.⁷⁸⁸ If, for Lenin and his followers, the role of philosophy was to ‘weaponise’ class consciousness, turning awareness of a wrong into a strong and coherent revolutionary programme, in short to answer the question ‘What is to be done?’, the dominant perspective of the contemporary critical imagination is that there is no need to play teacher to the agencies of downtrodden and the oppressed.⁷⁸⁹ Forms of consciousness and strategies of resistance appear to emerge organically from material conditions and the social relations formed and contested through collective acts.⁷⁹⁰ In this thesis, I have argued that it is neither forms of consciousness, nor academics and intellectuals that will decide the adequacy of systemic struggles against capital and its manifestations. Rather, it is the social form itself. In this context, there is a role for the academic and the intellectual not simply to praise the actions that are already taking place, but to subject them to thorough and far-reaching critique. As, more than 150 years ago, Karl Marx suggested in a letter to

bricklayers lay bricks in, various parts of an enormous, unprecedentedly large structure, is it “paper” work to use a line to help them find the correct place for the bricklaying; to indicate to them the ultimate goal of the common work; to enable them to use, not only every brick, but even every piece of brick which, cemented to the bricks laid before and after it, forms a finished, continuous line? And are we not now passing through precisely such a period in our Party life when we have bricks and bricklayers, but lack the guide line for all to see and follow?”

⁷⁸⁷ The term ‘minor key’ alludes to the writings of Gilles Deleuze, particularly Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F., (1986), *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, D. Polan (trans.), (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).

⁷⁸⁸ See for example Pianta, M., (2003), ‘Democracy v. Globalization: The Growth of Parallel Summits and Global Movements’, in Archibugi, D., (Ed.), *Debating Cosmopolitics*, (London, Verso), pp. 232-256, or Chin, C.B.N. & Mittleman, J.H., (2000), ‘Conceptualising Resistance to Globalization’, in Gills, B.K., (Ed.), *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan).

⁷⁸⁹ Marx, K., (1843), ‘Letter to Arnold Ruge’, *MECW 3*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart).

⁷⁹⁰ Classically, Antonio Gramsci suggested:

“All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”

Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 9.

Famously, E.P. Thompson suggested that consciousness is developed through the act of resistance, and the emergence of popular consciousness formed through social struggle.

See for example:

Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Arnold Ruge, the point is for the critical intellectual “not [to] say, Abandon your struggles for they are mere folly; let us provide you with the true campaign-slogans. Instead we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is something that it will acquire whether it wishes or not.”⁷⁹¹ The point, rather, is to inhabit the space that these movements have opened up. In this context, the role of the intellectual is that of clarifying and illuminating contradictions, tensions, possibilities, and opportunities for transformation already inherent within social struggle, but not necessarily from the position of their agency.

Although we can see that commons are an immanent challenge to the hegemony of capital, the hard reality that we face today is that the social system driven by capital’s valorization is not dead, and the victory of commons over capital is not inevitable; capital is an adaptive, reactive social system that both possesses an ineluctable reproductive logic and is capable of wielding repressive violence and ideological power to outflank and de-fang attempts to overcome it, or even simply to carve out spaces of autonomy to it. Because capitalism continues to degrade and impoverish life in its relentless extraction of surplus value, social movements will continue to emerge that oppose and contest capitalism and its manifestations. As a result of their focus on the way that social forms emerge through contestation and struggle, autonomist Marxist theory, and particularly those theories that have emerged around struggles that involve commons, are vital tools for thinking about human emancipation from capital. The nature of capital is such, however, that attempts to become autonomous from it soon encounter their limits, limits that are embodied in capital itself. Autonomist approaches to emancipation from capital must be aware of this and adapt to it. If actors are to be able to muster agencies that are capable of transcending capital and the social-metabolic system it has created, it will necessitate going beyond the perspective of theory written from the perspective of the insurgent commoner, towards an analytical orientation and political strategy that places capital at its heart.

This may mean not only going beyond existing autonomist theories of the commons, but also going beyond the autonomist method itself. This is the challenge facing social

⁷⁹¹ Marx, ‘Letter to Arnold Ruge’, p. 144.

movements of the commons today: not simply constituting themselves as insurgent commons that carve out spaces of autonomy from capital (as difficult as this may be), but of becoming political movements that truly challenge the hegemony of capital. It is the necessity of acquiring consciousness of this and sublating existing organisational forms in the context of contemporary struggles over the commons that I have tried to outline in this thesis. It is true that the battle for the future of humanity is being waged on grand scales, making use of cleavages opened up within capital through world-historical processes in which property orders are transformed, technology has reconfigured the way that man relates to nature, and man's needs as a social being are re-written. It is equally true, however, that without a movement, a real movement, to effect the supersession of the value form, and bring about a world in which commons have a hegemonic role in social reproduction, any number of philosophical tomes on this subject will stand idle. In this context, there is a role for philosophy and critique, a role that is more than simply aligning itself with the movements that seek to challenge capital's hegemony. Contra the prevailing cultural conditions which establish the knowledge practices of movements themselves are the epistemological, political, and emotional *architave* of theoretical endeavours,⁷⁹² establishing the conditions of what it might actually mean for the movements to win and outlining a strategy to get there could well be the most politically radical activity for critical theorists to engage in today.

⁷⁹² Bevington, D. & Dixon, C., (2005), 'Movement-Relevant Theory', *Social Movement Studies* 4(3), pp. 185-208,
Cresswell, M. & Spandler, H., (2012), 'The Engaged Academic', *Social Movement Studies* 11(2), pp. 138-154,
Wainwright, H., (1994), *Arguments for a New Left*, (Oxford, Blackwell), p. 7

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