

# From organic subjectivity to internal reality

Michel Henry, *Marx: An Introduction*, trans. Kristien Justaert (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). 101pp., £50.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 1 47426 942 1 hb., 978 1 47427 778 5 pb.

As a phenomenologist who prioritises the ‘appearing’ of life, Michel Henry distinguishes the foundational content of subjectivity from the horizon of pure exteriority and inert appearances. In *Marx: An Introduction*, we see how Henry’s approach to political economy qua Marx is fundamentally positioned around living subjectivity or, in his own terminology, ‘incarnation’. According to Henry’s phenomenological reading of Marx, life is fundamental and non-economic; the frame outside of which economic reality has no grounding. Life, phenomenologically conceived of as the ultimate modality of manifestation, is precisely what makes economics intelligible, rather than vice versa. According to Henry, the phenomenological inauguration of life is inherent to Marx’s thought and the concept that has unwittingly been displaced by Marxism’s misreadings. Henry contends that Marxism fails to conceive of the economic as an ‘unreal’ and a fantasised double of reality, treating it as inherent to and parasitic upon life.

In turn, Henry’s ‘Introduction to the thought of Marx’ illuminates how Marxism has been presented, and is still being presented, as a dialectical and historical materialism despite Marx’s thought not having any true connection to the doctrine of materialism. For Henry, the dialectic plays a secondary role in Marx, being a Hegelian remnant that disappears as Marx’s oeuvre progressed. According to Marx, there is no dialectic essence that constitutes its own internal law or reality vis-a-vis the foundation of negativity. Furthermore, while for Hegel there is a *history*, or a substantive and ontologically existent thread – this reality produced by the objectification of Spirit (*Geist*) – for Marx history is not the ‘self-accomplishment of a homogenous substance’. In contrast to Hegel (and to Bruno Bauer, who also subordinates man to a mediating history), for Marx there is no history, there are merely historical individuals. Furthermore, while the notion of class is a Hegelian concept, repeated in neo-Hegelians such as Max Stirner – who believes that the State constitutes a power above human beings – for Marx class

constitutes the identity of its members. The Hegelian affirmation of the primacy of class over individuals is part and parcel of ideology. As Henry will evince, it is this individualised characterisation that is central to Marx and which is lost in Marxism(s).

Henry separates Marx’s work into three categories: first, the early writings until 1845; second, the historical-political texts (*The Communist Manifesto*, *Class Struggle*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *Civil War in France*, and so on); and, third, the economic-philosophical texts (including the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*). Identifying the historical-political texts as those that have given birth to Marxism, constituting their meaning via the conception of an origin, Henry ushers a return to Marx-*sans*-Marxism by focusing on the economic-philosophical texts. Henry produces a reading of Marx via an economic genealogy, wherein economic reality is rooted in the conversion of use values (*Gebrauchswert*) into exchange values (*Tauschwert*) via the systematic adoption of an objective scale to measure labour. It is only through the adoption of universal measurement to products of labour as exchange value that various products (e.g., linen, wheat, metal) are equally systematised. This invariably distorts the essence of labour – that is, it is not ‘real’ labour that this objective scale measures but, instead, its *representation*, which is always exterior to that which is being represented. As the nexus of the transcendental genesis of (capitalist) economy, measurement results in subjective labour’s transmogrification into an objective equivalent. ‘Real labour’, or ‘labour as real’, is alien to representation and is *subjective*, or immanent. For Henry – who here echoes Plato – living praxis is interior and invisible while economics implies a derealisation of labour, transforming it into an unreal double that is mimetic. Henry asserts that Marx’s thesis is that economics is an abstraction that presupposes and refers to a foundational substratum.

Economic realities, which result from a process of alienation, substitute the general for the singular, the

social for the individual, the ideal for the real/representational. Henry's critique is not that this is a process that can necessarily be reversed or undone but that, unrecognised, it produces a calamitous result: *that the abstract is the real*. For those reader's familiar with Francois Laruelle's work, this will be quite familiar, since, according to Laruelle's non-standard reading of Marx, it is ethico-political praxis that emancipates raw materials and exchange-based economic practices from Standard Philosophy's possessive domination (or the mistaken identification of transcendence with the real). According to Henry's reading, Marx establishes how *subjective labour* escapes qualitative and quantitative forces of objectifying determination. Real labour ought not to be conflated with labour as it is objectively represented, for this is always a result of a *fiction*, an artificial process born out of socio-economic necessities. Scientism – the ontological claim that those mathematical-empirical molds that constitute and define reality objectively (*vis-à-vis* laws, objects, and so on) – is one such hold, as it mistakes immanent life for its abstracted representation. Henry, writing towards the end of the twentieth century, identifies scientism (which ought not be confused with science) with the dominant contemporary ideology, one that results in the negation of subjective and immanent life.

Subjective labour, reified via exchange value, is guided by money/capital, which distances us even further from real labour as it enacts a transcendental genesis – i.e., the representation of a representation (labour). Henry repeats one of Marx's central tenets, that without any ultimate reference to labour, capital is entirely deprived of its illusory value, illuminating how, in the last instance, capital has no economic autonomy but is, instead, stilted by extracting and increasing surplus labour. Due to the limits of the work day – and Henry qualifies this by noting that 'here again it is life that imposes its regulations on economy' – the technical and instrumental production of surplus impinges on increasing productivity, or 'relative surplus value'. Henry's reminder of this is a critical contemporary rejoinder to those who point to automation as an inherently post-capitalist phenomenon. Automation, digitisation and actuarial finance are merely contemporaneous articulations and extensions of relative surplus value. With automation, productive forces are neither the co-labour of

humans nor what is at the core of the force of production, praxis (in the sense of the potentials and actualisations of organic subjectivity and life). Instead, automatised technics simply produce value as a coherent, instrumental totality through objective functioning. Automation expresses a shift by foreclosing the subjective forces that create economic wealth and rendering objective forces that produce an 'ever-bigger mass of use values'.

Accordingly, in capitalism, economic circulation is not directed at exchanging commodity goods (C) against other commodity goods (C') via a universal medium of exchange or money (M), but by increasing capital itself. This is precisely how the formula CMC' transforms into MCM', where M' is greater than M and the exchange of use values is replaced by the maximisation of exchange values. Thus, it is 'labour power (*Arbeitskraft*) that becomes central to this transformation, which according to Henry, cannot be separated from living praxis, or subjectivity, insofar as labour is an essential modality of life. For Henry, 'the economic' is prefigured by something meta-economic, which Henry terms the 'pure economy' (*l'économique pur*). Praxis is thus necessary to lift the veil of the 'pure economy' and recover a genealogical reading of economic reality.

In 'Life, Death: Marx and Marxism', Henry clarifies a contradiction inherent to capitalism: the development of productive forces, whereby objective factors are exacerbated, resulting in the increase of constant capital and, therefore, a decrease in the source of economic profits, which inevitably results in the decline of the rate of profit. Thus, the self-development of capital furthers the necessity of automatised production processes, where labour activity is designated to the machine, an 'objective process' that is 'no longer defined by subjective praxis'. On the one hand, subjective praxis is inherently ontological insofar as it relates to what Marx calls 'consciousness', in which the world of ideas is structured via apperception; on the other hand, it also stratifies the proletariat, which has no thought, will or capacity to act in and of itself – the proletariat is an objective class. According to Henry, Marx's critique of economy is truly radical because, in exchanging the lived determinations of praxis for a relational system of ideal entities, 'what it accomplishes is nothing less than the substitution of life for death'. It is *life* that we must turn to in order to conceptualise economic phenomena, for surplus value is incomprehens-

ible on the plane of pure economy – this helps resolve queries such as why and how exchange (value) eclipses production costs. The conservation of exchange value is essential here, as it refers to a radical ontology of life – exchange value cannot be conserved unless the *form* of use value, which bolsters it, is also conserved.

The book's third chapter, 'Subjective Forces and Productivity', sees Henry turning to socialism, where praxis can emerge as it is removed from the concept of being as production vis-à-vis the totality of mechanical production. Socialism is here regarded as a system characterised by the partial absence of subjectivity in production processes, which Marx identified with subjective praxis' re-orientation from processes of production towards the development of individual faculties such as education, art, science, and so on. Thus, the historical situation finds a rebirth in 'living activity'. Since society has no autonomous existence, the primacy of individual praxis always returns to the action of individuals, rather than that of society or a group. Here, Henry echoes Marx's 1842 manuscripts in rejecting Hegelian universalism. Henry and Marx afford heterogeneity primacy before determination, reversing the Hegelian part-whole relation whereby, according to Hegel, society-cum-Spirit constitutes individuals. Because the individual ultimately determines the reality of society, society's 'reduction of totalities' – insofar as it is represented, classified and historicised – must be reducible to individual praxis.

It is at this point that a question arises concerning an individual's integration within the sphere of immanence. If, according to Henry, actualisation is predicated upon subjective praxis, then social determination remains external to individual life – that is, it is *unreal*. Henry's solution is that, following Marx, the activity destined to satisfy material needs, as part and parcel of subjective life, is *independent* from social determination. As Frédéric Seyler notes in the preface, this 'need' originates as ipseity and self-generated movement (auto-affection). Following Henry's phenomenological approach to causation – which denies that there is any social causation that cannot be reduced to individual praxis – are not the social relations (*rappports sociaux*) which are produced by and identical to individual praxis entangled within reciprocal/circular causation? That is, social conditions are produced by the individuals that are subjected to them.

Here, Henry appeals to 'habits', which form and de-

termine the 'concrete life of individuals' – rather than referring to a transcendent exteriority. It is through repetition enacted by individuals that social conditions are reproduced. The onto-phenomenological status of purely objective determination is treated as a product of *unreality*, in need of a radically subjective approach which ensures that the affective reality of social conditions constitutes a frame imposed upon action. In his analysis of alienation, Henry remarks that the labourer experiences *accidental determinations*, or constraints of the workplace, as distinct from the movement of subjectivity, or *essential determination* – the former is alienating insofar as it constrains the development of subjective potentialities. Because an individual reproduces their social conditions, any *origin* is outside of individual subjectivity – Henry resolves alienation without appealing to the mediation of an ideological or transcendent structure.

While *essential determinations* are inherent to subjectivity, *accidental determinations* designate social mediations reproduced through divisions of labour reproduced subjectively; consider how in the workshop, factory or within the machinery of any industry there is no objective experience but subjective experience, or phenomenological existence. *Contra* Marx, Henry's critique of social praxis lionises the individual; social praxis can only describe an intertwining of individual actions. For instance, a city is a stratified production ultimately reducible to the sum of individual efforts – any generalised abstraction, as seen from the aperture of the 'outside', is a mere representation. (Here, the reader may be reminded of Deleuze's machine ontology.) The division of labour is equivalent to the division of subjectivity. Thus, 'social praxis', at odds with individuated 'real praxis', is the product of an abstraction comparable to the forces of both the social and capitalist market economy, as both repeat the 'substitution of individual labour by general social labour'.

Henry sees communism and socialism as opposed to one another. Communism – or 'communitarian socialism' – submerges the originally individual character of praxis within the social, reproducing the same abstractions that led to capitalist alienation. Despite attempting to reject the alienation that constitutes capitalism, i.e., the exploitation of the labourer via surplus extraction, communism fails to abolish the alienation of differentiation that anchors 'real praxis'. Socialism galvanises

the free development of individualities and indexes the overcoming of alienation by rediscovering subjectivity as life's absolute. From this sprouts the free development of individualities instead of the reduction of necessary 'labour time' so as to posit (relative) surplus value, setting free the artistic, scientific and cultural development of individualities. Hence, activity is no longer determined by, or confounded with, the union between individual and production; socialism allows for *private* labour to blossom as it overcomes the abstract universal of the market economy's 'transcendental genesis'. The solution that socialism posits is that use value takes the form of the community, which is characterised by the transparency of social relations in accordance to participatory common activity while, simultaneously, also understood

as private (in its production).

Henry recovers from Marx the notion that the pure substance of the labour process is, in itself, neither material nor economical but rooted in the development of productive faculties, i.e., in living. Ontologically dissolving these productive forces into capacities, dispositions and activities of individuals, Henry identifies the development of productive forces as signifying the identical and indefinite development of individual activities. *Marx: An Introduction* reveals Henry's singular and rigorous close reading of Marx himself, a reading that is often muddled or lost in the deluge of Marxist and post-Marxist critical thought.

Ekin Erkan

## Cleaning artefacts

Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury, eds., *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77* (London: Raven Row, LUX and Koenig Books, 2018). Box-set containing two books (214pp.) and two DVDs/Blu-Rays. £24.00, 978 3 96098 381 1

From campaign film to experiment in documentary representation, and from exemplary instance of anti-realist and self-reflexive 'Brechtian' counter cinema (according to some film theorists of the 1970s) to a semi-mythical and almost impossible to view work of leftist filmmaking: the history of Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* (begun in 1970, released in 1975) is characterised by continual transformations and conflicting understandings. In the twenty-first century, the film has returned to wider visibility, circulating particularly in the context of contemporary art. Its latest instantiation is as a pared-down, tasteful object: a neat box-set comprising two books of essays and archival materials, alongside the two films by the collective arising from the night-cleaners campaign – *Nightcleaners* itself and the later, lesser-known *'36 to '77* (1978), initially billed as 'Nightcleaners part 2'. Few comparable moving-image works receive such reverential treatment, and it seems that *Nightcleaners* is now a canonical work of radical cultural production in Britain, although academic film studies continues to show practically zero interest in the film. Why has this work resurfaced to claim such talismanic status? And what does this publication contribute to the process?

Recent interest in *Nightcleaners* and *'36 to '77* should be tracked in terms of a wider reinvestigation in the last decade of post-1968 British radical and experimental film manifested in exhibitions, publications and retrospectives. The two editors, Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury, have been influential figures here. Kidner organised a retrospective of the work of Marc Karlin, one of the members of Berwick Street Film Collective, at Picture This in Bristol in 2012, and presented *'36 to '77* as part of 'The Inoperative Community' in 2016 at Raven Row in London, of which Sainsbury is the director. This is itself part of a more general process in which historic figures of radical cinema such as Chantal Akerman, Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker increasingly have their work displayed in art galleries as much as in cinemas. Moreover, this has occurred alongside a positive re-evaluation of documentary practices discernible in contemporary art over the last few years, as well as this field's fascination with collaborative artistic production, both of which are enacted in the Berwick Street Film Collective's work. (The group that made *Nightcleaners* was composed of Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott and Humphry Trevelyan, with Kelly being replaced by Jon Sanders for *'36 to '77*.) There are parallels here with an-