

Dripping with Blood and Dirt from Head to Toe: Marx's Genealogy of Capitalism in *Capital*, Volume 1

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Marx's critique of political economy in volume 1 of *Capital* relies on a kind of genealogical argument that takes capitalism as its object. In the first section of the article, I sketch out an interpretation of the argumentative structure of *Capital* 1, highlighting what I take to be the two crucial turning points in Marx's critique of political economy. Marx's specifically genealogical argument comes to the foreground with the second of these turning points, which can be found at the start of his account of primitive accumulation in Part 8 of *Capital* 1. The first part of the paper defends the thought that the genealogy of capitalism's prehistory is no mere digression from or complement to the main theoretical argument, but rather the crucial completion of Marx's critique of political economy in *Capital* 1. In the second part of the paper, I turn to the somewhat thornier question of what sort of genealogy Marx offers. Drawing on and extending Bernard Williams's distinction between vindictory and subversive genealogies, I contend that Marx's genealogy of capitalism, despite containing both subversive and vindictory strands, is embedded in a longer vindictory historical arc that, while avoiding crude teleologies and strong claims to unilinearity, nonetheless maintains a kind of necessity claim for its genealogical object.

The subtitle of Marx's magnum opus *Capital* is *A Critique of Political Economy*. But what sort of critique does Marx offer? This question has been central to the reception of Marx in Frankfurt School critical theory.¹ For this tradition, Marx's critique proceeds *immanently*, revealing from within the contradictions internal to the basic conceptual and categorial framework of political economy, and its aim is the *defetishization* or *dereification* of a social world that appears natural, given, and fixed but that is in fact the changeable result of human social, practical activity.² The immanent orientation of Marx's critique helps to explain his extensive discussions in *Capital* 1 of the fundamental categories of political economy—commodity, capital, value, and labor. Marx spends so much time discussing these categories not because he is trying to offer his own theory of them and their interrelations, extending and radicalizing the insights of classical economists like Smith and Ricardo, but rather because these

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concepts provide crucial entry points that enable him to illuminate the social structure of capitalist society from within. Moreover, these are precisely the categories through which the socially determinate cultural, economic, and historical forms of capitalist society are reified and fetishized, that is, presented as objective, unchangeable structures that human beings are powerless to control.

As productive and illuminating as this understanding of Marx's critical method undoubtedly is, thus far, insufficient attention has been paid to a key component of that method, one that comes into view when we ask ourselves just *how* Marx's argument accomplishes its defetishizing effect. My wager in this paper is that the defetishizing or dereifying effect of Marx's critique of political economy is achieved through a kind of genealogical argument that takes capitalism as its object.³ For the purposes of this paper, I take genealogy to refer to a historical form of argument that traces the complex emergence of distinctive bundles of social practices, institutions, and structures and/or the concepts, ideologies, and discourses that serve to legitimate them. To say that Marx's critique of political economy in *Capital* 1 employs a genealogical argument, then, is to say that it reveals the apparently objective, natural, and fixed social practices, institutions, and structures associated with capitalism to be the changeable products of human activity and it does so *by uncovering their history*.

However, to say that Marx's critique of political economy employs a genealogical argument is only the beginning; we also need to ask what sort of genealogy this is. Following Bernard Williams, we can distinguish two types of genealogies: vindicatory and subversive.⁴ Whereas vindicatory genealogies *endorse* or *lend support* to their object (where "object" refers to the bundle of social practices, institutions, and structures and/or concepts, ideologies, and discourses in question), subversive genealogies *debunk* or *undermine confidence* in their object. Hegelian dialectics offers a prominent paradigm of vindicatory genealogy, whereby, for example, the cultural, social, and political structures of modernity are endorsed by being embedded in a progressive teleological logic according to which they have been necessitated by past developments. Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, which undermines confidence in its object by exposing its unsavory or shameful origins, revealing those origins to be the contingent and changeable result of multiple lines of influence, provides the best-known paradigm of subversive genealogy.⁵

This way of dividing up the conceptual terrain, with Hegel and Nietzsche as the primary exemplars, is potentially misleading insofar as it suggests that only vindicatory genealogies make a claim to necessity and that subversive genealogies always reveal their objects to be contingent. But we can certainly imagine a vindicatory genealogy that lends support to contemporary concepts and practices by revealing them to be the result of contingent yet progressive historical learning processes;⁶ similarly, we can imagine, at least in principle, a subversive genealogy that contends that the decline and fall of its object is necessary.⁷ Thus, I take it that, in general, a genealogy is vindicatory just insofar as it shows us that we have good reasons to believe in or support a concept or practice because of certain features of the way it came to be, that is, of its history, and it is subversive insofar as it shows us that we have good reasons not to do so. These two types of genealogy can also be combined in various ways. A genealogy might combine subversive and vindicatory strands or

elements with the aim of revealing the contingent history of its object, thus opening that object up to transformation without making a normatively ambitious claim about the object one way or another.⁸ Conversely, a genealogy could contain subversive and vindictory strands while making a case for the historical necessity of the object and the developmental path that leads to it. Whether such an argument would amount to an endorsement of or a resignation to the status quo would then depend on whether the developmental path that is claimed to be necessary has reached its completion.

With this brief map of the conceptual terrain of genealogical arguments in hand, I'll proceed in this paper as follows. First, I will briefly sketch out an interpretation of the argumentative structure of *Capital* 1, highlighting what I take to be the two crucial turning points in Marx's critique of political economy. Marx's specifically genealogical argument comes to the foreground with the second of these turning points, which can be found at the start of his account of primitive⁹ accumulation in Part 8 of *Capital* 1. The aim in the first part of the paper is to establish the claim that the genealogy of capitalism's prehistory is no mere digression from or complement to the main theoretical argument, but rather the crucial completion of Marx's critique of political economy in *Capital* 1. In the second part of the paper, I turn to the somewhat thornier question of what sort of genealogy Marx offers. This question leads us into deeply contested debates about whether the Marx of *Capital* 1 still adheres to the progressive, teleological, unilinear theory of history advanced in his earlier work. Whether Marx remains committed to his early philosophy of history, according to which capitalism represents a developmental historical stage between feudalism and communism, by the time he writes *Capital* 1 is a topic of heated debate among Marxists and Marx's critics alike. Although I won't pretend to be able to settle all the issues at stake in this debate definitively in this short paper, I will suggest that Marx's genealogy of capitalism, despite being deeply ambivalent, is embedded in a longer vindictory historical arc that, while avoiding crude teleologies and strong claims to unilinearity, nonetheless maintains a kind of necessity claim for its genealogical object.

1. MARX'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The critique of political economy articulated in *Capital* 1 famously combines theoretical discussions of the fundamental categories of political economy such as money, capital, labor, and value with historical reflections on the development of capitalism in England, including the decades-long struggle over the length of the working day and the prehistory of capitalism in land enclosures, colonialism, conquest, and other forms of primitive accumulation. However, it is far from obvious how the theoretical and historical aspects of Marx's critique are related to one another. As a result, this relationship is easily misconstrued, even by readers as perceptive and attentive as Seyla Benhabib, who describes the historical sections of *Capital* 1 as "digressions,"¹⁰ and Michael Heinrich, who contends that the historical passages found at the end of *Capital* 1 are complementary to but not constitutive of the theoretical account.¹¹

A more promising line of interpretation is offered by Moishe Postone, who argues that the historical aspects of Marx's argument are a function of the intrinsically

dynamic nature of capitalism, a dynamic rooted in the never-ceasing drive for the expansion of value and accumulation of capital at capitalism's core. For Postone, given this internal self-valorizing dynamic of capital, "the logical unfolding of [Marx's] presentation becomes historical as well."¹² In other words, the theoretical exposition of the distinctive conception of value at the heart of capitalism *demands* a historical presentation. Although Postone is right to insist on an internal connection between the theoretical and historical strands of Marx's argument, his interpretation ends up de facto treating what I take to be the most important historical strand of Marx's argument as a footnote to the primary theoretical argument—as evidenced, for example, by the fact that his discussion of primitive accumulation is relegated to a single paragraph in his lengthy study.¹³ As I read *Capital* 1, the discussion of primitive accumulation is crucial to Marx's argument—and not only, though this is also tremendously important, because it shows Marx's deep awareness of the evils of conquest and colonialism and the role that these played in the development of European capitalism. This section is *also* crucial because it represents the second of two major turning points in Marx's overall argument; it is, in fact, the genealogical hinge that *completes* his critique of political economy.¹⁴

Each of the two major turning points in Marx's argument effects a kind of perspectival shift; in combination, they enable us to see not only that capitalism is not natural, fixed, or unchangeable but also that underneath its veneer of freedom and equality is a structure of exploitation and domination that ought to be changed.¹⁵ The first turning point occurs at the end of Part 2 of *Capital* 1, when Marx leaves behind his opening discussion of commodity circulation and turns his attention to production. Recall that Marx's critique of political economy begins with the commodity precisely because it represents the "elementary form" of "the capitalist mode of production."¹⁶ The commodity form is also, famously, the primary target of Marx's defetishizing critique in *Capital* 1. Although a commodity seems at first glance to be "an extremely obvious, trivial thing"—a useful object that is produced and sold—on further inspection it turns out to be "a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (*Capital*, 163). Its mysterious, mystical, fetishistic character, Marx contends, consists in the way it presents the social relations of human labor as objective characteristics of the products of that labor. In other words, in the commodity form, the "definite social relation between men" assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (*Capital*, 165).

Marx's argument claims to uncover not only the fetishism of the commodity form, but also its secret. The secret of commodity fetishism turns on the way that value is determined in capitalist society, namely, through the amount of socially necessary labor time expended in a commodity's production. The details of that account need not concern us here, as Marx's main critical point is that bourgeois political economy is unable to see that its own theory of value is valid only for the historically specific mode of production of capitalism characterized by commodity production. As Marx puts this point:

Political economy has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But

it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of the labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists' bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labor itself. (Capital, 173–75, emphasis added)

In other words, bourgeois political economy presupposes without question the “self-evident and nature-imposed necessity” of its basic categories, first and foremost the labor theory of value.¹⁷

To be sure, capitalism involves more than just commodity production; it also entails a particular kind of commodity circulation, the aim of which is not the acquisition of useful things that meet human needs (encapsulated in the formula C-M-C), but rather the necessarily ongoing valorization and accumulation of capital (M-C-M'). But how does value increase its own magnitude? How does it create surplus value? From whence arises its “occult ability to add value to itself”? (*Capital*, 255). Marx's answer is that the valorization of value arises from the sale and purchase of labor power, because labor power is a special type of commodity, one “whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labor, hence a creation of value” (*Capital*, 270).

In order, however, for labor power to appear in the market as a commodity, the worker must be free in a twofold sense: freely able to sell his own labor power in the market, and free in the sense of unencumbered by any other commodities that he might sell to survive (see *Capital*, 272–73). Crucially, these are not natural conditions, but rather historical conditions of the existence of capital that “are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities” (*Capital*, 274). To understand this process of self-valorization, however, we must leave the sphere of the market where commodities circulate, “where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone,” and venture into “the hidden abode of production” (*Capital*, 279). Only once we have done so will we be able to see that what appears, from the point of view of bourgeois economics, to be a free contractual exchange between equals—the buyer and seller of labor power—is in fact a relationship of exploitation and domination.

Here, then, is the first turning point in Marx's critique: the perspectival shift from the surface phenomena of commodity circulation to the background sphere of commodity production. Making this shift allows us to see “not only how capital produces, but also how capital is itself produced,” thus laying bare “the secret of profit-making” (*Capital*, 280). Viewed from within the sphere of commodity circulation, or, we might say, from the perspective of the market, the exchange of labor power appears to be, Marx writes, “a very Eden of the innate rights of man,” the “exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” (*Capital*, 280). That is to say, from the perspective taken by bourgeois political economy, it appears that both parties *freely*

agree to the labor contract; that they exchange things of *equal* value (wages and labor power); that each exchanges only what belongs to him, that is, his *property*; and that each pursues only his own self-interest (Bentham). However, Marx continues:

when we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities, which provides the 'free-trader vulgaris' with his views, his concepts and the standard by which he judges the society of capital and wage-labour, a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. (*Capital*, 280)

When we shift perspectives and view capitalist society from the perspective of the sphere of production, our understanding of the labor contract shifts accordingly, revealing the fundamentally antagonistic character of the capitalist-worker relationship. In the wake of this shift, Marx explains: "The [capitalist] smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the [worker] is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning" (*Capital*, 280). The capitalist can only be seen *as* a capitalist and the worker *as* a worker when we shift perspectives from the circulation of commodities within the market to the sphere of production.

The second turning point in his argument occurs after Marx has spelled out his theory of capitalist exploitation in the central chapters of *Capital* 1 (Parts 3–7). These chapters detail the capitalist's extraction and appropriation of surplus value from the labor power of the worker, which drives the ongoing accumulation of capital. The capitalist employs a variety of strategies to this end, from lengthening the working day to increasing efficiency through ever more complex divisions of labor to the employment of machinery and other technological innovations. The process of capital accumulation is not only ongoing and never-ending—if capital does not continue to expand, the system will collapse—but also self-reinforcing.¹⁸ But how does this cycle begin? As Nancy Fraser puts the point: "where did capital come from?"¹⁹ To answer this question, we must follow the second turning point in Marx's argument:

We have seen how money is transformed into capital; how surplus-value is made through capital, and how more capital is made from surplus-value. But the accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus value presupposes capitalist production; capitalist production presupposes the availability of considerable masses of capital and labour-power in the hands of commodity producers. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn around in a never-ending circle, *which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation . . . which precedes capitalist accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure.* (*Capital*, 873, emphasis added)

The only way to break out of the apparently never-ending, self-reinforcing circle of capitalist accumulation—in other words, the only way to see *capitalism for what it*

is—is to posit a primitive accumulation that precedes capitalist accumulation and makes it possible. For the capitalist could not have sprung forth fully formed, as if from Zeus's head; he was only able to become a capitalist because, as a beneficiary of primitive accumulation, he was in the position to enter the market as a buyer of labor power. Just as capitalist production centered on the extraction and accumulation of surplus value serves as the enabling condition for the distinctively capitalist mode of commodity circulation, primitive accumulation serves as the enabling condition for capitalist production.

Political economy tells a different story about what Marx calls primitive accumulation. From that perspective, the story of where capital came from is akin to the theological doctrine of original sin—it not only *explains* but also *justifies* why the workers are propertyless. Here is Marx, channeling the bourgeois political economist:

Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals spending their substance, and more, in riotous living Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work. (*Capital*, 873)

Marx's account, by contrast, exposes this story of original sin as the "nursery tale" that it is, revealing the "notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part" in the transformation marked by so-called primitive accumulation (*Capital*, 874).

Primitive accumulation thus constitutes the necessary prehistory of capitalism in the sense that capitalism's emergence is only possible on the basis of the acquisition of the means of production by the would-be capitalist.²⁰ As Marx says quite clearly, money and commodities in themselves are not capital; they only become capital under very specific conditions, namely, when capitalist and worker meet in the labor market to exchange wages for labor power. But this labor-market structure presupposes a capitalist who has the means to purchase labor power and a worker who is "free" in the dual sense described above—free to enter into contracts and unencumbered by ownership of the means of production. This duality, in turn, presupposes workers who have no ownership of the conditions of their labor. Again, here is Marx:

The process, therefore, which creates the capital-relation can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labour; it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers. So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as 'primitive'

because it forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital. (*Capital*, 874–75)

As Marx emphasizes, in the context of European capitalism, primitive accumulation was a bloody, violent, brutal process of expropriation that included the enclosure of the commons in England and the extraction of wealth—in the form of both resources and slave labor—from the colonies.

Marx's critique of political economy thus moves from an abstract, conceptual analysis of the elementary form of the capitalist mode of production (the commodity and commodity circulation) to a consideration of the relations of production that make commodity circulation possible (the extraction of surplus value from living labor) to the historical conditions that enable this mode of production to gain a foothold (primitive accumulation). As the argument progresses, the apparently natural, fixed, quasi-objective structure of capitalist economic and social relations posited by bourgeois political economy is defetishized and dereified, revealed to be the product of human activity and history. From the point of view of political economy, the historical and social nature of these relations are invisible, as is the exploitative and dominating nature of the relation between capital and labor. The political economist sees only the buyer and seller of labor power—two free, equal, property-owning parties, each acting according to his own self-interest—meeting in the market for the purposes of exchange. It is only once we shift our perspective to the primitive accumulation that makes capital accumulation possible that we can see the violent, brutal, bloody, historical conditions of domination and expropriation that make capitalism possible. This suggests, in turn, that his historical account of primitive accumulation is not a mere digression from or complement to Marx's theoretical argument. It is, instead, the genealogical argument that completes his defetishizing critique of political economy by revealing the historical conditions of emergence of capitalist exploitation. Just as we must leave the sphere of circulation and enter the hidden abode of production to see that the apparently free labor contract is in fact exploitative, we must move from the sphere of production to its prehistory to see the force, violence, and brutality on which capitalist exploitation rests.

2. THE GENEALOGICAL FORM OF MARX'S ARGUMENT

Thus far, I hope to have justified my primary claim that Marx's argument in *Capital* 1 includes a genealogical component, and, moreover, that this component plays an important role in his critique of political economy. Marx's immanent, defetishizing critique aims to reveal to the reader what cannot be seen from the point of view of political economy: namely, that capitalism is not governed by objective, fixed, and unchangeable economic laws but is rather a historically emergent and therefore changeable system of social relations, a system made possible by the violent, bloody, brutal process of primitive accumulation. Still, even if convincing, this argument does not settle the question of what sort of genealogy of capitalism Marx offers. Before I can address that issue, I need to say a bit more about Marx's account of primitive accumulation.

Unlike the political economist, for whom “the idyllic reigns from time immemorial,” Marx’s account of the history of capitalist development contends that “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part” (*Capital*, 874). Primitive accumulation comprises two interrelated transformations: the transformation of collective means of subsistence and production into private capital and the concomitant transformation of “immediate producers” (i.e., those who produce for themselves, without the mediation of capital) into wage-laborers (*Capital*, 874–75). Both transformations are exemplified by the enclosure of the commons in England in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Through a process of forcible expropriation, land that was previously available for common cultivation was turned into private property and those who had previously subsisted by farming that land were turned into wage-laborers. Marx summarizes this long, brutal history this way:

The spoliation of the Church’s property, the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. (*Capital*, 895)

Marx also emphasizes the role of “brute force” of “the colonial system” in the emergence of capitalism in England:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. (*Capital*, 915)

In a related vein, Marx decries the “frightful” treatment of the indigenous population in the West Indies and the plunder of Mexico and India (*Capital*, 917); he notes that European capital was created on the basis of the “undisguised looting, enslavement and murder” of the colonies (*Capital*, 918); and he contends that “the veiled slavery of the wage-laborers in Europe” rests on the “pedestal” of “unqualified slavery” in the New World (*Capital*, 925).²¹ Capital, Marx says memorably at the conclusion of this discussion, “comes [into the world] dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (*Capital*, 926).

Is Marx’s genealogy subversive or vindictory?

Given this vivid description of the historical conditions of capitalism’s emergence, it might seem obvious that Marx’s genealogy of capitalism is subversive. However, matters are not quite so simple, because the subversive elements of Marx’s genealogy are interwoven with a vindictory story of the technologically, economically, and politically progressive features of capitalist development. His genealogy of capitalism’s emergence is thus better characterized as ambivalent, combining both subversive and

vindictory strands. This ambivalence is evident, for example, in the following passage where Marx discusses the “secret” of primitive accumulation:

the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-laborers appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and it is this aspect of the movement which alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire. (*Capital*, 875)

In other words, the bourgeois historian's view of the emancipatory aspects of the transition from feudalism to capitalism isn't so much incorrect as it is woefully incomplete and one sided. Capitalism did indeed emancipate the serfs from serfdom and the stultifying structure of the guild system, but it simultaneously robbed them of their means of production and deprived them of the security afforded by the feudal system. Capitalism is undoubtedly exploitative and dominating, in Marx's view, but it also represents genuine political, and economic progress over earlier social forms. Indeed, crucially, for Marx, *without violence, pain, and destructiveness there would be no progress*. As he puts the point in *Capital* 1: “Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one” (*Capital*, 916). Progress is not undermined or undone by the antagonism, force, and negation necessary to achieve it; rather, in true dialectical fashion, it is achieved *through* them.

Moreover, Marx's ambivalent genealogy of capitalism's emergence is arguably embedded in a longer progressive, hence vindictory, historical arc. That is to say, *Capital* 1 remains committed to certain core features of the theory of history familiar from Marx's earlier work. I realize that by making this claim, I am wading into deeply and fiercely contested terrain. Given the limited space I have here, I won't be able to offer a complete defense of this claim; the best I can do is to provide some considerations in favor of it.²²

Marx's early theory of history is expressed most clearly and succinctly in the following well-known passage from the preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it

will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or at least are in the process of formation.²³

I take it that the core of the view of history expressed in this passage is that the economic structure of a society is conditioned by the level of development of its productive forces, where these, in turn, condition the remaining social, political, legal, and cultural institutions.²⁴ To say that the economic structure of a society is conditioned by the level of productive forces is to say, for example, that different levels of productive forces will require different divisions of labor in order to be realized. Consider, in this regard, the transition from artisanal to industrial modes of production. The latter represents an expansion of productive powers—that is, it allows societies to produce a greater quantity and variety of goods—but, to operate efficiently, it requires a much more complex, finely graded, and internally differentiated division of labor. On this view, historical development is initiated when the existing economic structures no longer facilitate—indeed, they impede or become “fetters” to—the expansion of productive forces. At such points, those structures are replaced by more developed or advanced structures through a process of social revolution.

Note that this view of history need not entail a crude teleology. As Marx puts it in *The German Ideology*: “History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity.”²⁵ Although it is always possible to retrospectively read later historical developments as the goal of the earlier ones, to do so is to engage in a speculative distortion of this process. However, as G.A. Cohen has argued, there does appear to be a much less metaphysically robust notion of functional or organic teleology at work here.²⁶ Communism may not be the goal or telos of human historical development, but, according to this view, it is the noncontingent and functionally superior outcome of contradictions that are internal to the existing stage of the development of human productive powers.²⁷

Notably, Marx recapitulates many of the main features of this theory of history in the short penultimate chapter of *Capital* 1, entitled “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation”—a chapter that comes *after* his unflinching exposure of the bloody brutality of primitive accumulation. Marx opens this chapter by considering the relationship between primitive accumulation and the small-scale, artisanal mode of production characteristic of precapitalist societies. Such modes of production are “immediate”—which is to say that artisans also own the products of their labor. This mode of production “is the foundation of small-scale industry, and small-scale industry is a necessary condition for the development of social production and *the free individuality of the worker himself*” (*Capital*, 927, emphasis added). At the same time, it is “compatible only with a system of production and a society moving within narrow limits which are of natural origin. To perpetuate it would be . . . ‘to decree universal mediocrity’” (*Capital*, 927–28). In other words, although this mode of production represents both material and social progress over prior modes—it is necessary for the expansion of material production and the development of the worker’s “free

individuality”—it is also limited, both materially and socially, in ways that leave room for (and will in fact help to elicit) future progress. Thus, Marx contends, “at a certain stage of development, it brings into the world the material means of its own destruction” (*Capital*, 928). The “annihilation” of this mode of production is the process of primitive accumulation that has already been outlined, or what Marx also calls the “terrible and arduously accomplished expropriation of the mass of the people [that] forms the pre-history of capital” (*Capital*, 928).

No sooner is the process of expropriation of the masses complete, however, than a new process begins, one whose ultimate end is the expropriation of the capitalist. This is accomplished through the expansion of the very forces that are immanent to capitalist production and accumulation—including the centralization of capital in the hands of the few, the increase in technological capability, and the emergence of a global, interconnected market—and through the concomitant growth in “misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation” of the workers, which, in turn, increases “the revolt of the working class” (*Capital*, 929). At a certain point,

the monopoly of capitalism becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. (*Capital*, 929)

Thus, Marx concludes:

capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not re-establish private property, but it does indeed establish individual property *on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era*: namely co-operation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labor itself. (*Capital*, 929, emphasis added)

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this passage is that Marx still refers here to the “achievements” of capitalism, despite his trenchant criticisms of the brutality, force, and violence that make it possible. I take it that these achievements include, for Marx, capitalism’s break from the mediocrity imposed by the constraints of small-scale production and the rigid, hierarchical social forms in which such production was embedded. As such, capitalism, like the small-scale artisanal mode of production that preceded it, represents an improvement in both material (mode of production) and social (free individuality of the worker) terms. A *deeply flawed, highly destructive, and radically incomplete* improvement, to be sure, but an *improvement* nonetheless.

This recapitulation of the core features of Marx’s theory of history near the conclusion of *Capital* 1, after Marx has exposed capitalism’s bloody, dirty roots in primitive accumulation, suggests to me that his ambivalent genealogy is embedded in a vindictory historical arc. In this arc, however, what is vindicated is not capitalism per se but rather the historical process in which capitalism is embedded. Its roots in a violent, bloody process of forceful expropriation and domination notwithstanding,

capitalism represents economic, technological, and political progress over earlier social forms. However, since it is not the final stage in the process of historical development, the vindication provided by Marx's genealogical argument is necessarily incomplete; it awaits completion in the coming communist revolution.

Given Marx's undisguised outrage at the horrors of primitive accumulation and the destructiveness of capitalism, one might wonder in what sense he offers a *vindication* of capitalism, even if an incomplete one? The thought here is a Benjaminian one: Marx reads the historical development in which capitalism is embedded from the point of view of the future, from the standpoint of the impending socialist revolution. From this standpoint, the suffering of those who were vanquished in the past is not so much denied as it is (or: will be) vindicated by the historical process. If progress is not undone by the force necessary to achieve it, but rather is achieved through force, then it is also wrought from historical defeat.²⁸

Does Marx's genealogy claim the necessity or contingency of its object?

As I argued above, the defetishizing aim of Marx's critique is to reveal that what bourgeois economists take to be eternal, quasi-natural laws are in fact valid only for a particular form of production, namely capitalist production. Thus, his argument aims to uncover the deeply social and historical nature of something that we tend, from within capitalist societies and from the point of view of bourgeois economics, to view as ahistorical and in that sense necessary. But does this amount to a claim that capitalism is a contingent social form? Or that the historical process that led to the emergence of capitalism in Europe is contingent? This is an equally vexed question that is often assumed to turn on the issue of whether *Capital* 1 remains committed to the unilinear theory of history—according to which history necessarily proceeds through a developmental series of modes of production, from 'Asiatic' modes to slave societies through feudalism and capitalism to communism—articulated in his earlier work.

In his watershed 2010 book, *Marx at the Margins*, Kevin Anderson argues that, by the end of his life, Marx had left behind this unilinear model.²⁹ While early texts such as *The German Ideology* may have presented a "unilinear model based on Western European history, which ran in a straight line from 'clan or tribal', to 'ancient', to 'feudal', and on to modern bourgeois forms of society,"³⁰ later texts such as the *Grundrisse* paid greater attention to the "alternative historical trajectories of Asia"³¹ and even to the "possibility of peasant-based upheaval"³² in Russia—multilinear historical trajectories that would seem to have been ruled out by his earlier model. Relatedly, through careful attention to the different translations and editions, Anderson contends that this multilinear perspective is also evident in *Capital* 1, even if this fact is occasionally disguised by misleading translations and editorial decisions made by Engels.³³ Thus, against those critics who claim that Marx's theory of primitive accumulation lays out a universal developmental path that all societies must pass through on their way to becoming capitalist (and, later, communist), Anderson insists that the "narrative of primitive accumulation was meant as a description of Western European development, nothing more, and hardly a grand global narrative."³⁴

It seems to me, however, that this line of argument tends to conflate multilinearity with necessity. It may well be that unilinear theories of historical development implicitly make a sort of necessity claim: if any society is to develop historically, such theories claim, it must do so along this one, single trajectory. Does this mean that all multilinear theories of history thereby imply the opposite, namely, that which path a particular society will follow is contingent? As far as I can see, this does not follow. In other words, Marx could acknowledge a multiplicity of historical trajectories while maintaining that each one evinces its own internal logic or necessity.³⁵

That Marx remains committed to some claim to the internal logic or necessity of the historical process through which capitalism emerged in Europe and by means of which it will eventually be overthrown is evident in a passage I discussed above from the chapter “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation” (see *Capital*, 929). There, Marx argues that the impending expropriation of the capitalist is to be accomplished through the expansion of forces immanent to capitalist production and accumulation: the centralization of capital, the progress of technology, the globalization of markets, and the concomitant immiseration of the proletariat. The expansion of capitalism simultaneously increases “the revolt of the working class” (*Capital*, 929), producing capitalism’s own grave diggers from within. At a certain point, capitalist economic structures become incompatible with the further expansion of its own mode of production; at this point, the mode of production bursts apart its capitalist shell (*Capital*, 929). Thus, Marx concludes: “capitalist production begets, *with the inexorability of a natural process*, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation” (*Capital*, 929, emphasis added).

To be sure, in his later correspondence with the Russian socialist Vera Zasulich, Marx famously limits the scope of this necessity claim. It is meant, he insists, to apply *only* to the historical course of capitalism’s emergence in Western Europe; thus, Marx insists that his analysis says nothing about the fate of the peasant commune in Russia. Still, at the same time, Marx reiterates the “historical inevitability” of the course of developments in “*the countries of Western Europe*.”³⁶ Thus Marx distinguishes between a conception of transhistorical necessity that posits a *universal* historical trajectory leading to and through capitalism—which his earlier work advanced but which he now rejects—and a conception of necessity more restricted in scope—one that, while leaving room for multiple historical trajectories, nonetheless claims historical inevitability for the specific historical trajectory that gives rise to capitalism in Europe.

Thus, it seems to me that the genealogical argument in *Capital* volume 1 retains a claim to historical necessity, even if that claim is more limited in scope than the reading advanced in Marx’s earlier work. The point of Marx’s critique of political economy, as I’ve argued above, is to enable his reader to see not only that capitalism consists of a historically emergent set of social relations but also that beneath its veneer of freedom and equality is a structure of exploitation and domination that ought to be changed. But insofar as the trajectory of capitalism’s historical development follows an internal developmental logic, the direction in which those social relations can change is not contingent.

3. CONCLUSION

Marx's genealogy of capitalism thus works by revealing that what appears, from the point of view of bourgeois political economy, to be natural and ahistorical (capitalist economic and social relations) is in fact the result of an (unfinished) process of historical development. Marx's genealogy of capitalism's emergence is deeply ambivalent, with both vindictory and subversive strands. In addition to having devastating consequences in the here and now, capitalism undoubtedly has unsavory and objectionable origins—as Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation shows—but it is also the provisional result of a series of historical developments that Marx views as progressive—technologically, economically, and politically. But this ambivalent genealogy is embedded in a longer, vindictory arc, whereby capitalism will inevitably collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions, giving rise to communism. Thus, unlike genealogical arguments that aim to problematize their object(s), revealing their contingency and thereby opening them up to an open-ended transformation,³⁷ Marx's genealogy embeds the emergence of European capitalism in longer historical trajectory, albeit one that is limited in scope, leaving room in the end for multilinear historical trajectories. This suggests that, in the end, Marx's genealogy of capitalism's developmental trajectory is vindictory, even if not straightforwardly so. Marx's genealogy of capitalism contributes to his critique of political economy in the following way: it shows that things could be otherwise (because what appears to be natural, fixed and given is in fact historically and socially produced) and that things should be otherwise (because despite the progressive achievements of capitalism, it also rests on exploitation which in turn rests on bloody, brutal, and violent enabling conditions), but that change, if and when it comes, will move along a progressive and noncontingent developmental arc.

NOTES

1. This is also a question that many readers fail to consider, leading them to misread *Capital* as a *contribution* to rather than a *critique* of classical political economy. On this point, see Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 33; and Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43–83.
2. In my view, Postone offers the best and most rigorous argument of the role of immanent critique in *Capital* 1; see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, op. cit. For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between immanent and defetishizing critique in *Capital* 1, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
3. For a related claim, see Andrew Sartori, "Genealogy, Critical Theory, History," *Critical Historical Studies* (Spring 2020), 63–74. Although I agree with Sartori's contention that "Marx . . . was a genealogist of capitalist society" (70), I understand the form of genealogical argument that Marx makes differently than Sartori does for reasons that will become clear in the in the final section of this paper.
4. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
5. For helpful discussion, see Catarina Dutilh Novaes, "Conceptual Genealogy for Analytic Philosophy," in Jeffrey Bell, Andrew Cutrofello, and Paul M. Livingstone, eds., *Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

6. Jürgen Habermas arguably employs such a version of vindicatory genealogy. On this point, see my "Having One's Cake and Eating It, Too: Habermas's Genealogy of Post-Secular Reason," in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, Craig Calhoun, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (London: Polity Press, 2013) and *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 37–79.
7. Heidegger's history of modernity could be considered an example of this type of genealogy. See Sacha Golob's paper in this issue of *The Monist*, "Is Heidegger's History of Being a Genealogy?" *Monist* 105(4) (2022), 507–20.
8. This is roughly what Colin Koopman calls genealogy as problematization; see Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 58–86. I discuss this type of genealogy in more detail in Allen, *The End of Progress*, op. cit., 90–93.
9. Marx's German term, *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, would perhaps be better translated as "originary accumulation," as this locution not only avoids potential misunderstandings from the use of the word 'primitive,' it also suggests that this is not a specific historical stage that is left behind but an ongoing process. On this point, see Rosalind Morris, "Ursprüngliche Akkumulation: The Secret of an Originary Mistranslation," *boundary 2*, 43(3) (2016), 29–77. Although I follow the conventional translation here, the reader should bear these issues in mind.
10. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, op. cit. 125. As Benhabib notes, much of the twentieth-century debate about the relationship between the historical and theoretical sections of *Capital* 1 has turned on the problem of determinism, specifically whether Marx's historical materialism leaves room for revolutionary praxis (373, note 33).
11. Heinrich, *Introduction*, op. cit., 31–32.
12. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, op. cit., 285.
13. Ibid.
14. This reading of the argumentative structure of *Capital* 1 builds on the work of Nancy Fraser, who outlines a similar reading though without drawing the connection to genealogy. See Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," *New Left Review* 86 (March–April 2014), 55–72, 60–61; and Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 2018), 29–30.
15. For the purposes of this paper, I set aside the difficult question of whether Marx believes capitalism to be unjust, or whether his claim that it ought to change rests on other (ethical or otherwise nonmoral) grounds. For discussion of this issue, see Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125–62.
16. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 126. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *Capital*.
17. This way of reading Marx raises the possibility that it is a mistake to dismiss Marx for his adherence to an outmoded labor theory of value, as many economists do, or to apologize for this aspect of his work, as many analytic Marxists do. On this point, see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, op. cit., 43–83.
18. This is an aspect of Marx's argument that Postone captures beautifully in his analysis of the internal dynamism of capitalist accumulation. See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, op. cit., 286–306. Still, although Postone helpfully emphasizes Marx's concern with the way that capitalism subordinates everyone, capitalist and worker alike, to the abstract, impersonal domination of the production and valorization process, it seems to me that he downplays the importance of exploitation critique to the argument of *Capital* 1, especially given how much space is taken up by this aspect of Marx's argument.
19. Fraser, *Capitalism*, op. cit., 29.
20. Thus, it is a bit misleading to say, as Postone does, that the discussion of primitive accumulation simply recounts the actual history of capitalism's emergence in England as opposed to being part of the developmental logic of capitalism. See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Domination*, op. cit., 285. Granted, the specific form of primitive accumulation that took place in England prior to the emergence of capitalism is historically contingent; still, some type of original accumulation is necessary for capitalism to emerge, because without it the capitalist could not become a capitalist.
21. Marx's analogy between wage slavery and chattel slavery is complicated and questionable, but I don't have space to deal with this issue here. I discuss this in more detail in Allen, "Slavery, Work, and History: DuBois's Black Marxism" (forthcoming).

22. The claim that there is a significant rupture—an epistemological break—between the early and the late Marx is at the center of Louis Althusser's work. See, for example, Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015); and Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005). Thus, it's worth noting that even Étienne Balibar, who is as closely associated with the Althusserian reading of Marx as Althusser himself, concedes that most of Marx's general texts on the theory of history are committed to "the idea of a universal history of humanity, of an ascending, uniformly progressive line of evolution of modes of production and social formations" and that there is evidence that Marx held on to this view in *Capital 1* (Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, new and updated edition, trans. Chris Turner and Gregory Elliott [London: Verso, 2017], 116). Balibar reads the relevant passages in *Capital 1* as evidence of an unresolved tension in Marx's work (103), one that stems from his inability to fully accept the radical conclusions of his nonprogressive, contingent, and multiplicitous history of capitalism in *Capital 1* (107). As will become clear, I read these passages differently, but a full defense of this reading will have to await another occasion.
23. Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 4–5. For an extensive discussion and defense of this view of history, see G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, expanded edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
24. Obviously, the "base-superstructure" model of society implied by this passage is every bit as controversial as the teleological nature of Marx's reading of history, but a discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.
25. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, op. cit., 172.
26. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, op. cit., 278–96.
27. Note that this doesn't necessarily imply a commitment to historical determinism, as it may be the case, as Marx sometimes emphasizes, that this outcome can only be realized through the action of social agents.
28. By contrast, Benjamin argued that history should be written from the perspective of the vanquished, with the aim not of *vindicating* their suffering but *redeeming* it. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253–64. The secondary literature on Benjamin's philosophy of history is vast, but an excellent starting point, with an emphasis on Benjamin's relationship to Marx and Marxism, is Ronald Beiner's, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Political Theory* 12(3) (August 1984), 423–34.
29. Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For a related argument, see Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 80–112.
30. *Ibid.*, 2.
31. *Ibid.*, 159.
32. *Ibid.*, 163.
33. For a related argument, see Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, op. cit., 106–12.
34. *Ibid.*, 179.
35. Compare Postone, who presents readers with a false either/or choice between the transhistorical account of the logic of historical development found in Marx's early work and a dialectical understanding of history laid out in *Capital 1* that, according to Postone, applies *only* to capitalist society, not to its pre-history. See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, op. cit., 285.
36. Marx's reply to Zasulich. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/zasulich/index.htm>
37. This reading of Marx as a genealogist thus suggests that genealogy's capacity to show that things could and/or should be otherwise can be detached from the claim that this opens up a contingent space of "possibilities"—in other words, that genealogy need not be "possibilising" in form. For insightful discussion of possibilising genealogy, see Daniele Lorenzini, "On Possibilising Genealogy," *Inquiry* DOI: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1712227>

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