'Critical Antiquities and Radical Readings: Ancient Greek Political Thought with and against Marx.' In Carol Atack (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Political Thought*.

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Can, how, and should one use ancient Greek political thought in the present? Recent developments in classical studies and critical theory means one could give an expansive answer with respect to "critical" engagements with ancient Greek political thought.[1] We, for example, since 2020 have been thinking about various ways in which ancient world studies and critical theories interface and called this broad field "critical antiquities." It is a new name, but not a new practice. Critical antiquities take inspiration from earlier generations of activists and scholars who have worked with and against ancient thought to critique and transform the present. Yet our answer to the opening question is more delimited. We focus here on one particular strand of critical antiquities: the ways that ancient Greek political thought can be read *with and against* Karl Marx.

There are numerous justifications for this choice. Few would deny that one major approach to ancient Greek political thought comes out of the work of Marx, but in this instance, one must be careful in explaining the nature of that influence. We ought not presume that Marx is merely an *intellectual* influence that proceeds directly from his writings in the first instance. Such a presumption makes Marx akin to Cambridge contextualism, for example, that is, an academic approach available to those doing careful scholarship. But until recently, Marx's overwhelming influence has been *political*. By "politics" here we mean politics in terms of institutions, in this case, the communist states of the twentieth century and the political left. Omitting that political route of Marx's influence would be a mistake because it obscures a *kind* of influence that separates Marx and those who respond to him from other influential readers of ancient Greek political thought. Our claim is that Marx is a figure worth grappling with because of the *nature* of his influence: *it is via Marx—both with and against him and his interpreters—that ancient Greek political thought has been used in the modern era in the most palpably transformative ways (and it all centres on politics)*. This makes him uniquely meaningful for answering our opening question.

Our claim must be explicated because "politics" now plays three distinct roles: politics is a means, an instigator, and a concept by which theorists want to delimit a specific activity they call *praxis*. We will explain each of these meanings in turn.

First, politics is *a means* by which ancient Greek political thought has transformed the present because Marx greatly influenced politics and ancient Greek political thought informed Marx. So, when the Soviet Union is formed on the back of Marx's ideas, it is a form of using ancient Greek political thought in the present. This, however, needs to be qualified because the relationship between Marx and ancient Greek political thought, on the one hand,[2] and Marx and "actually-existing socialism,"

[1] For a survey and discussion, see Bradshaw and Brown, Forthcoming 1.

[2] It is not the case that Marx sought to apply Plato's *Republic,* or any other ancient text, to the modern era in a straightforward manner, which would make AGPT's influence equivalent to Marx's influence. Moreover, while much scholarly work has detailed the ways that antiquity informed Marx's writings, not

on the other, is complex.[3] We explore the former in what follows, but for now we stand by the observation that Marx was influenced by ancient Greek political thought and therefore makes ancient Greek political thought influential in the present.

Second, Marxist politics *instigates* further engagements with ancient Greek political thought in the twentieth century. That is, it makes Marx a major interlocutor for those who have sought to use ancient Greek political thought in the modern era. For instance, Hannah Arendt, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jacques Rancière, and other political theorists in the twentieth century took up and critically confronted Marx and Marxists in a way that was formative for their thought. These two aspects—taking up and critically confronting Marx—are captured by "with Marx" and "against Marx" in our title and they are shared by numerous influential political theorists. As instigator, Marxist politics is integral to these engagements with ancient Greek political thought and Marx and therefore part of the terms in which they should be understood.

Third and most crucially, politics is a *concept* by which theorists want to delimit a specific activity they call *praxis*. What does that mean? To adopt a widely-used strategy in political theory, we can trace *praxis'* etymology. *Praxis* is formed from the Greek verb *prassō*, which means "to act." Within political theory, *praxis* simply denotes a transformative intervention in the present.[4] But some theorists identify *praxis as politics itself* in order to redefine politics in the present. However, to prepare their readers for this redefinition, the theorists need to *estrange* their readers from politics' assumed, complacently familiar, meaning.[5] To be estranged, one needs to encounter an alternative. Everything hangs on this estrangement and encounter, but it is not simple to achieve. If there is a human tendency to accept the *given* meaning of particular words and their referents, then there is also a latent resistance to the strangeness of alternatives. And so, the task of the theorist is to seduce the reader into this encounter and to make the alternative vivid in whatever way is possible. This is achieved by what we call a "deictic manoeuvre."

"Deictic" derives from the Greek *deiknumi*, which means to "show" or "point out."[6] The pointing out involved in deictic manoeuvres is a central strategy among political theorists using ancient Greek political thought with and against Marx and in Marx himself. They engage ancient Greek political thought in order to *point to* politics *in its historical alterity*. But the success of this pointing to—and encounter with—alterity hangs on the *way* the theorist does it. One way is through storytelling. Hannah Arendt and others such as Walter Benjamin employ storytelling to reorient the reader to the meaning of politics by narrating its changing fortunes from antiquity to modernity.[7]

Deictic manoeuvres, therefore, constitute these works' main intervention. When successful, they shift the terms and framework for our thinking about the present. For

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everyone (Nippel, 2018) believes that antiquity played a salient role. For a counter view, Bradshaw and Brown, Forthcoming 2.

[3] There is not a straight line between Marx and the communist states of the twentieth century. The relationship between Marx, his thought, and his influence on politics is complex, mediated through numerous interpreters, from Friedrich Engels to Mao Zedong and the party and extra-party operations that go along with them. Terrel Carver's scholarship on Engels has done the most to explain the role Engels played in establishing a Marxist orthodoxy. See Carver 1984, etc. On the party, see McAdams 2017.

[4] Cf. Cassin, 2014, s.v. Praxis.

[5] Self-estrangment in Brill, 2016.

[6] LSJ s.v. A V. 2.

[7] See esp. Benhabib.

many of these authors, that means focusing on praxis in a way that is leveraged against the present. Furthermore, they see this very undertaking as an instance of praxis. Such efforts were central to various articulations of politics that have shaped the landscape of contemporary political theory, Marxist and non-Marxist alike.

Work on these thinkers and their relationship to antiquity has recently proliferated,[8] yet one aspect of that history has been unacknowledged: it is bound to a particular political context, dominated by Marxist politics, that is no longer our own. That political theory is effectively working with and against Marx*ism*, rather than Marx.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, numerous responses to this fact are evident. Classicists, for example, seem all too aware of the changing context of their work and they have responded by abandoning Marx, especially following what could be called the "decolonial impetus" within the academy.

For others, however, the changing context has renewed efforts to read Marx apart from Marxism. We believe this is also an opportunity for classicists to think anew about what it is to read ancient Greek political thought with and against Marx himself. In the following, we set an example of reading Marx in a way that theorizes the new context in which we are placed, standing on the shoulders of recent scholarship on Marx.

In Part I, we discuss the current conjuncture of classical studies and how it has configured two main responses to Marx. In Part II, we turn to Marx to delineate two ways that he uses ancient materials, including ancient Greek political thought. Here the standout figure is Aristotle, but we see Marx mutating and repurposing Aristotle's concepts for a much more ambitious rethinking of ancient worlds in contrast to, and therefore useful for understanding, the present. In Part III, we conclude by thinking about how the turn to Marx we have employed can serve a new political project in the present, what we call "critical antiquities."

Part I – Marx and Contemporary Classical Studies

We are in a different set of political and social circumstances from those of the twentieth century, circumstances in which Marx has an ambivalent place. The twentieth century's Marxist politics has receded from the social and political landscape, meaning the political instigators for contemporary theorists will also be rather different. Our different circumstances demand that we seriously reconsider what our own instigations are (political or other), how Marx may factor in them and indeed in our response to them, and what these mean for using ancient Greek political thought in the present.

Most salient in the present context for addressing our opening question is the sensitivity around the use of classics (studies of ancient Greece and Rome, and by extension, ancient Greek political thought) in contemporary educational and cultural contexts. Classicists have begun to respond to pressures to address alleged cultural presuppositions in their curricula in response to wider decolonial shifts in the social consciousness.[9] For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is significant that the move to decolonise classics has generally omitted Marx. Instead, recent projects have

[8] Kasimis, 2015; Atack; Villa; Vatter.

[9] Landmarks in decolonial thought, e.g. Spivak; Bernal, 1987; Lefkowitz 1997; Most 2001; Porter 2000a; 2000b; 2006, Settis (2007), Whitmarsh (2013), Vasunia (2013), Zuckerberg, Padilla Peralta, Formisano, PCisms.

turned to other theorists (such as Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, Said, Butler) to address different questions and, in turn, have sought to instigate a new politics for the twenty-first century, one more attuned to ethnicity, race, sexuality, and subalternality, and less to class, labour, and capital. The causes of this abandonment of Marx are many and complex, but an explanation of it is not our goal here. Rather, we wish instead to ask: does Marx still have something to offer the current conjuncture of classics and political theory, bearing in mind the background of today's social consciousness? We say, "yes," because Marx's reading of ancient Greek political thought is one that emphasizes the difference between the ancient and the contemporary, which allows for an appreciation of each in their particularity rather than in terms of a shared exceptionalism. Moreover, Marx shows us that the concepts of ancient Greek political thought are fecund for thinking about our political present when we creatively interpret and repurpose them, especially once we have appreciated their historical specificity.

Our answer differs markedly from other classicists' today. Classicists speaking in a decolonial mode have become wary of Marx and classics alike for being vectors of colonialism. Here the common concern is the way that inherited epistemologies that played into colonial politics in the past continue to play out in neo-colonial forces and consequent social ills today. Both Marx and Marxist critique, the thought goes, seem unable to escape the terms of its nineteenth century classicism, which sets Greek thought apart as the special touchstone of enlightenment knowledge. Marx's high regard for Greek thinkers such as Aristotle is taken as proof of his entanglement with a European project of imperialism and colonisation.[10] From this perspective, Marx is an outdated thinker long past his best-before date.[11]

But this is a hasty assumption. The social, and especially *economic,* crises of the twenty-first century have prompted a return to Marx without the revolutionary or authoritarian (Soviet) politics of the 20th century. Contemporary interest in Marx centres more on what his work may offer to an intellectual diagnosis of crises rather than a cure dogmatically pursued through the application of a political program. It is therefore important that contemporary engagements with Marx are qualitatively different than those of the past.[12] Contemporary readings are of a decidedly scholarly character governed by philology, historicist reconstruction, and historical

[10] References to decolonial thinkers. Reference to the classicists that are wary of Marx: Brooke's response to Bradshaw and Brown lecture; CAWS. Easily the most explicit critics of classicism are those in the Postclassicisms Collective, both in their co-authored book *Postclassicisms* and in the works of the individual members.

[11] We can see more evidence for this response, by omission, in some of the dominant strands of socio-economic history among classicists today, especially the "Stanford school" of ancient historians who have unabashedly employed New Institutional Economics, informed by neoclassical economics, to explain and characterize ancient societies in terms of present ones. If the decolonial thinkers are overtly opposed to Marx, this latter group simply ignores him. The assumption for both groups is that Marx = Marxism, such that whatever Marx had to say about historical social formations became irrelevant at the moment Marxist politics became discredited with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR. It appears that in both cases, while the world around him has changed, Marx is assumed to stand for the same thing today that he did for Arendt and Rancière: a Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. See the distinction Jappe (2003) draws between the "exoteric" and "esoteric" Marx.

[12] It is also noteworthy that the most prominent contemporary works of critical theory that have attempted to renew praxis (Von Redecker, Harcourt, Jaeggi) largely omit Marx.

contextualization.[13] The proliferation of new editions of Marx's works and accompanying readings are an index of a new era and a new Marx is emerging. Perhaps only now we are able to read Marx clearly for the first time.

Yet this scholarship lays bare the failure of Marxists and non-Marxists alike to grasp how Marx's project enlisted ancient pasts for a critique of the present. Thus, the marginalization of Marx—which fixates on the inapplicability of his critique of capitalism to antiquity, his empirical naivety with respect to ancient cultures, and on his uncritical acceptance of Greek thought—can be shown to rest on a misreading of his work. This has implications for how we encounter ancient Greek political thought via Marx that have yet to be properly explored.

Still other classicists have invoked Marx to defend classics in the face of the decolonial turn by representing ancient Greece and Rome as compatible with, and even enabling, radical politics.[14] That Marx wrote his PhD dissertation on two ancient Greek philosophers is taken as a sign that classics doesn't rule out radical politics. In doing so, however, they have neglected to establish what the relationship between classics and radical politics and thought is. This leaves readers in the dark and unable to evaluate on their own terms whether that relationship is valuable for Marx and continues for our time and projects.[15] Part of the reason for this is a persistent failure to treat Marx's thought independently of the questions posed by Marxism in the century after his death. In the anglophone world, for example, scholars overly dwelled on how to fit classical antiquity into a Procrustean historical materialism without ever reflecting on how classical antiquity first figured in Marx's thought.[16] Especially owing to the scholarly turn to Marx, one can now remedy this situation. We have already sought to do so under the auspices of "critical antiquities," with an edited volume in preparation on the relationship between antiquities, Marx, and his reception. In the remainder of this chapter, we read Marx in this scholarly mode to understand the role of ancient worlds in his work. We schematize two ways that Marx uses the ancient past for his critical project. In the final section, we will expand on the way that critical antiquities, as we envisage it, uses Marx for a political agenda in the present—and thereby how critical antiquities, in addition to Marx, provides one more answer to the question, "can, how, and should ancient Greek political thought be used in the present?"

Part II - Marx's Strategy of Estrangement

In order to schematize Marx's use of classics in his work, we might get our bearings by asking, what is Marx's project? In one sense, this is an unanswerable question, for Marx had many projects, each occasioned by different causes, questions, and aims.[17] But if we focus our attention on the major works published in his lifetime—*The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, and *Capital: A*

[13] Especially in the wake of the new critical edition of Marx's and Engels' works (MEGA 2), philology (Bellofiore et al), historicist reconstruction (Heinrich, Marcello Musto), and historical contextualization (Roberts). Cf. new edition and translation of *Capital,* Marx 2024.
[14] Beard, 2020.
[15] Something that critics have identified–e.g. Holmes 2022.
[16] Ste.Croix 1981, et al. cf Bradshaw and Brown, Forthcoming 2.
[17] MEGA 2 stands to be 110 volumes when it is completed (check). On the editorial principles behind it, see Heinrich biography of Marx and footnote.

Critique of Political Economy, Volume I (i.e., *Capital,* Volume I)—then we could say that Marx's project is an examination of the way capitalism works (and therefore what it *is*). More specifically, however, Marx recurrently names his examination a "critique," as is clear from the titles above. There are debates over what this entails and we cannot do justice to them here[18]. In keeping with the purpose of this chapter, we will instead focus on one strategy that is part of Marx's critique: *to make capitalism foreign and strange*.[19] This we call Marx's "strategy of estrangement." This strategy becomes especially clear when we focus on what Marx calls the "mystification" of everyday life when we encounter commodities in capitalism. We argue that Marx mobilizes ancient materials, including ancient Greek political thought, for this project in two modes: a synchronic (formal) and a diachronic (historical) mode of analysis.

Both of these modes are evident in Marx's redescription of the commodity. Marx does so by creatively repurposing Aristotle's analysis of objects in society. Crucially, however, in the synchronic mode Aristotle's historical status does not explicitly inform the analysis. The diachronic mode, by contrast, involves pointing to ancient life and thought in their specifically *historical* character. Marx employs the diachronic mode to debunk political economists—who tend to see capitalist phenomena as natural and therefore universal[20]—and to ground in a historical process the redescription offered in the synchronic mode. Both modes, in their own ways, make us aware of the contingent qualities of capitalism, an awareness that reconstitutes our relationship to it though insufficiently for capitalism's ultimate transformation.

To display these two modes of analysis within Marx's strategy of estrangement, we examine two places where Marx calls on antiquities. The first is Marx's famous examination of the commodity, first articulated in the 1859 CCPE, then modified for the publication of *Capital*, Volume I, eight years later. There we see Marx's synchronic mode of analysis and are beckoned to undertake the diachronic one. The second text is Marx's close and relatively under-examined engagement with pre-capitalist, including ancient, societies in the notebooks published posthumously as *Grundrisse* (German for "notebooks"). There Marx models the diachronic mode of analysis as he attempts to explain the process through which ancient social forms gave way to modern ones.

The "Mystification" of Commodity Fetishism

In order to see Marx's two modes of analysis in his use of ancient Greek political thought, let's first turn to the strategy of estrangement. We get a good sense of it by looking at what Marx calls the "mystification" that we experience in capitalism. The "conventions of our everyday life," he says, "make it appear commonplace and ordinary that social relations of production should assume the shape of things, so that the relations into which people enter in the course of their work appear as the relations of things to one another and of things to people."[21] This "mystification" is all about "the commodity," a term he has just defined with Aristotle as something that has both "use-

[18] See Roberts end of chapter 2 on literature on Marx's notion of critique.
[19] Note that capitalism is usually referred to by Marx as "bourgeois society" or "civil society" (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft)*, which one could informally dub "town society."
[20] Insofar as political economists articulate what happens in capitalism itself, this naturalizing and universalizing tendency is one that comes from the social relations of production.
[21] CCPE p. 34

value" and "exchange-value." Before delving into the meaning of these terms, we can simply say that the mystification pertains to the way that objects ("things)" and humans relate in society, a relationship that appears *ordinary* to us. Moreover, Marx says that this mystification is relatively simple, meaning it doesn't require any great effort from the reader to see it. As Marx writes,

> "Everybody understands more or less clearly that the relations of commodities as exchange-values are really the relations of people to the productive activities of one another."[22]

Here Marx makes the substantive claim that is known as "commodity fetishism." He is also, however, making a subtle claim about the way that people live with and experience it. That is, objects work in a way that we're aware of but that we're not likely to consider in any great depth or to appreciate for its strangeness. This Marx wants to reverse with his strategy of estrangement. But given its quotidian and simple nature, he need only redescribe commodity fetishism to estrange it from our everyday lives.

To see how Marx attempts this, let's start at the beginning of CCPE:

> "The wealth of bourgeois society, at first sight, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities, its unit being a single commodity. Every commodity, however, has a twofold aspect—*use-value* and *exchange-value*."

Many commentators have dwelled on the starting point of Marx's critique of political economy, prompted by Marx's own meta-commentary on his method.[23] Typically, they have pointed to G. W. F. Hegel and especially his method of "dialectics."[24] Notwithstanding Hegel's influence, it is from Aristotle that Marx derives "use-value" and "exchange-value." So much is made clear in Marx's elaboration of these terms in the following pages, too.

Before we examine this, the more general strategy of estrangement is already discernible here. Marx takes "wealth" as his initial topic, specifically that of "bourgeois society."[25] Although these terms seem to be semi-technical, Marx draws the reader's attention to the "immense accumulation of commodities" as what appears "at first sight" to the reader. In other words, Marx begins his critique with what he takes to be *obvious* about capitalism. As we have seen, he later says that these commodities are part of the "conventions of our everyday life."[26]

But having begun with this easily identifiable and relatable feature of life, Marx then demands something of the reader. Rather than address the spectacle of those commodities all at once, Marx draws the reader's attention to just one commodity. Moreover, he defines it in a particular way. The commodity has a "twofold aspect":

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[22] CCPE pp. 34-35

[23] Marx commented on the crucial distinction between *Vorstellung* and the *Darstellung*, and this is one of the reasons why so much attention is paid to the starting point of Marx's presentation. And see his preface to the fist German edition about his "abtraction" of the cell form.

[24] Banaji, 2015.

[25] Scholarship discussing the term "bourgeois society," especially in terms of historical periodization?

[26] CCPE p. 34

"use-value" and "exchange-value." Why does Marx narrow the focus to one commodity, and why does he give it this definition?

As the following pages of CCPE make clear, the answer to the first question is that Marx wants to know how and why commodities *come to relate to one another in exchange*. He thinks we need to be led to do so, first, because we are so used to seeing these commodities already in relation in the capitalist market. They appear "commonplace and ordinary,"[27] which is integral to the mystification they produce insofar as they preclude deeper reflection. In other words, the market and our dependence on it distract us from the complex and utterly unique operations involved in the way objects come to be exchanged in bourgeois society, which Marx tries to unpack with his neologisms "exchange-value" and "simple labour" (and its equivalents).[28]

There is one central feature that allows Marx to elicit these complex and unique operations: specifically in capitalism, labour—which produces objects—is undertaken by humans *in isolation from other humans*.[29] This is historically unique, and it has some unusual consequences. Principally, it is *only through the exchange of objects* that human labourers acquire a social identity. Because human labour under capitalism is performed in isolation, what *kind* of labour it is *in social (i.e., interpersonal) terms*—what kind of labourer one is, even—can only be understood *after* the objects it has produced have become social through exchange. That means labour has no *interpersonal meaning* until its objects come to market and are successfully exchanged. Moreover, they are only exchanged because someone has deemed them useful, which is not guaranteed. At the point of exchange alone is the labour one undertook in isolation proven to have a social quality and quantified as a social quality.[30] This is the core of "mystification," where "social relations of production…assume the shape of things, so that the relations into which people enter in the course of their work appears as the relations of things to one another and of things to people."[31] Marx's analysis picks out this aspect of the commodity and, insofar as it is dwells on what is usually unreflectively lived with, displays what is familiar in a new light. His means for doing so involves showing how object relations come into being such that a new, socially meaningful, dimension to them emerges that also

[27] CCPE p. 34

[28] E.g., "abstract general labour" (CCPE p. 29), "uniform, homogeneous, simple labour" (CCPE p. 30), "human labour in general" (CCPE p. 31). We say "distract" rather than "mask" for two main reasons. First, Marx will go on to say that "[e]verybody understands more or less clearly that the relations of commodities as exchange-values are really the relations of people to the productive activities of one another," meaning people are able to see what is going on in market societies, they are merely precluded from paying attention to them by habituation and individual interest. The second reason goes to the nature of Marx's critical theory. We agree with commentators such as Samuel Chambers who discern in Marx a more subtle form of critical theory than the "demystification" paradigm (see Chambers, 2009; 2014; 2019). Cf. Sohn-Rethel 1978 on "real abstraction."

[29] This is closely related to what is widely known in Marxist scholarship as "commodity fetishism." Our interpretation is informed by Roberts' (2016) reading of commodity fetishism, but note that Roberts is solely focused on *Capital*, volume 1 as are almost all discussions of commodity fetishism. As we will see, in *Capital* Aristotle's role is less prominent. Yet we believe that the key elements of Roberts' interpretation is borne out by the text of CCPE.

[30] CCPE p. ___; cf. Grundrisse, p. 471.

[31] CCPE p. 34.

makes them strange. If that is Marx's goal, why does he define it with reference to Aristotle?

In the following, we seek to show the ways that Aristotle is configured in this account but it is of the highest importance to emphasize that *Marx does not draw attention to the relationship he has to Aristotle in the process of using him*. Marx merely borrows and mutates Aristotle's terms. This is what we call the "pragmatic" use of Aristotle because Marx is concerned with the *efficacy* of these concepts in their use for the goal of estrangement. He is not writing a scholarly piece on ancient philosophy, so accounting for Aristotle is beside the point. But since *we* are interested in the ways that Marx uses ancient Greek political thought, we will account for how Marx borrows from and mutates Aristotle. In the process, we'll be able to give a fuller account of Marx's own project and claims with respect to commodity fetishism.[32]

Marx and Aristotle on Use-Value

To see how Aristotle figures in this, let's consider the Aristotle quotation that Marx references at the end of the first paragraph, which Marx translates from Greek into German and we translate in turn:

> "For the use of every good is twofold … The one is proper to the thing as such—like a sandal, to serve as a shoe and to be wearable [i.e., consumption]—the other [i.e., exchange] is not. Both are use-values of the sandal, for even he who exchanges the sandal for what he lacks, e.g. food, uses the sandal. But not in its natural use. For it is not there for the sake of exchange. The same is true of the other goods."[33]

From this short passage, we discern several things about Aristotle's approach to use and exchange. Aristotle focuses on the "proper" use of objects, which amounts to an ethical approach. That is, for Aristotle, the examination of objects proceeds like this:

> Proper human want → object(s) that satisfy the want → Goals of object and human being achieved (*telos* fulfilled)

Central to this schema is a *judgment* about an object's purpose (a sandal is for wearing), which reduces to a judgment about the want it serves (covering feet).[34] An object may be used for exchange, then, but if so it is not a *proper* use, though insofar as it allows for the satisfaction of wants *indirectly* (I exchange sandals for olives that I eat) it is still an "intrinsic use" of the object.[35] But there is also a form of exchange that exists

[32] For a more focused and extensive account of commodity fetishism, see Rubin. For a heterogeneous and yet compelling account, see Roberts 2016.

[33] Aristotle, *Politics*, I.9.___. Marx cites Bekker's Greek text of 1837. Note that this is our translation of Marx's German, which we have not attempted to correct in light of the Greek text, but rather to convey what Marx saw in Aristotle and wanted to convey to his readers in his own translation.

[34] Aristotle underscores the moral connection between objects and use linguistically: the function of a shoe (*hupodēma*) is "to shoe (*hupodesis*)" (*Politics* I.9 1257a9).

[35] The phrase translated "intrinsic" is *kath'auto* (*Politics* 1257a7-8). "Proper" is the translation of *oikeia (oikeion),* which in very suggestive ways echoes Marx's word for "mystery," including that of the commodity: "*Geheimnis*", cognate with "home (*Heim*)," as *oikeion* is to *oikos* (home). Politics I.9. For an

for the sake of money acquisition as an end in itself. This fails to conform to the ethical form of use because a goal without an end is not a proper goal, according to Aristotle's ethics. But on the basis of what Marx says about labour in capitalism, we can see that this approach will not do. For if labour is undertaken in isolation, then a possibility arises that Aristotle does not consider: a product that no one deems useful, meaning it is *neither* consumed *nor* exchanged.[36] Since this possibility arises out of a different set of *social relations*—where people labour in isolation—Marx needs to mutate Aristotle's terms accordingly if they are to be used at all and, if used, then the approach must too, for this phenomenon is not an ethical problem. Marx displays that in place of an ethics, what is needed is a description of the capitalist conditions under which labour, use, and exchange are undertaken. This is what he calls the "social relations of production." "Use-value" is very limited in what it can provide this goal. So much is made clear when Marx identifies the limitations of talking about use-value:

> "Although use-values serve social needs and therefore exist within the social framework, they do not express the social relations of production."[37]

Why don't they express them? With this, Marx is condensing something he explores at greater length in another text, the 1857 Introduction. Consumption is the final and necessary step in the process of production. It is where the goal of the producer—to make something that will be acquired because it satisfies a want—is realized. But Marx is interested in the whole process of production, and considered in isolation consumption does not tell you anything about it. One could eat a burger patty grown in a lab or made by a neighbour from a cow that was reared in his backyard. There is little in the eating that could reveal those very different processes of production.[38]

How, then, does one get to the rest of the process that led to the moment of consumption? In the case of capitalist social relations of production, one needs to look where objects are exchanged for that is where sociality is realised. To see this, one has to let go of the supposedly proper or improper uses of an object and consider *all* of the objects that have been consumed, whatever the motivation of the producer or consumer may have been (maybe someone wants a sandal as an *objet d'art*, or to eat it—the hoped-for use is inconsequential, all that matters is it results in exchange).[39] For Marx takes it as self-evident that being "a use-value is…a necessary prerequisite of the commodity"[40]; i.e., something has to be deemed useful to be exchanged. Marx is evidently more concerned to identify the fact that objects are *acquired* to be used rather than evaluate possible uses based on an object's purpose. It leads Marx to stipulate that use-value is the property an object has when it contributes to *any* human want

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elaboration on what "intrinsic" means in Aristotle, see Reeve's note to this passage in the Hackett translation.

[36] Marx raises this very point right after his second (and last) explicit reference to Aristotle, CCPE p. 42.

[37] CCPE p. 28

[38] Or, Marx's example: "From the taste of wheat it is not possible to tell who produced it, a Russian serf, a French peasant or an English capitalist." CCPE p. 28

[39] This is clearer in the case of a diamond, which is Marx's example: "…let us take as a use-value a commodity such as a diamond…Where it serves as an aesthetic or mechanical use-value, on the neck of a courtesan or in the hand of a glass-cutter, it is a diamond and not a commodity [a commodity by definition has both use-value *and* exchange-value]." CCPE p. 28

[40] CCPE p. 28

satisfaction, not solely (as in Aristotle) when an object is properly used for proper human wants.[41] Citing unnamed "English political economists", Marx affirms that these wants are extremely capacious, since the object that has use-value is "any thing necessary, useful, or pleasant in life."[42] And, as we saw earlier, whether or not a physical object in fact has use-value in any of these senses is only *verified in its consumption*. With that mutation of Aristotle complete, Marx then turns to exchange-value, for that is how one understands the commodity in terms of social relations of production.

Marx, Aristotle, and Exchange-Value

In turning to exchange-value, Marx begins with an apparent puzzle when it comes to thinking about the relationship an object has to other objects, one that builds upon his claims about use-value. While Marx is indifferent to the hoped-for use an object has, it is nevertheless true that "the extent of [an object's] possible applications is limited by its existence as an object with distinct properties"[43] that significantly determine its use-value. That means it will be distinctive and therefore heterogenous compared to other objects. So, a sandal may be useful for wearing, for displaying, or even eating but certainly not for writing. That may seem obvious, but Marx wants us to consider the difficulty this presents when it comes to *relating* these objects through exchange. The immediate difficulty does not seem to lie in understanding *why* they come to be related through exchange. The broad answer is human wants and a lack of self-sufficiency.[44] The immediate difficulty is understanding what determines the *quantities* at which these items will be exchanged. We're all used to the fact that you can equate in one way or another two heterogeneous objects. But Marx is again trying to estrange us from this habituated thinking about objects. Considered through this puzzle, Marx posits that the exchanged objects must have an additional property, something shared and in terms of which objects are made commensurable.

What Marx then proposes as an answer is, to forewarn the reader, rather obscure. For the reader of ancient Greek political thought, however, it is worth becoming acquainted with it. For Marx makes numerous efforts to make commodity fetishism clearer (which means to make the estrangement more effective and therefore make commodity fetishism stranger), and in each case we see Marx doing his most distinctive work with ancient materials, including ancient Greek political thought. We first give the barest account of Marx's answer to the commensurability problem and then adumbrate the numerous ways he deploys antiquity to illuminate it.

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[41] As Marx will go on to argue, there is in capitalism *a separation* (temporal, spatial, and therefore relational) between production and social needs in a way that seldom or never existed in the ancient context (*Grundrisse*). On this see Meikle (1995) and Millet (1993) who both demonstrate the lack of commercial credit in classical antiquity. With Marx's analysis, we understand why there was a lack of need for commercial credit. One could also leverage this against approaches to the ancient world as practiced by the Stanford School of ancient history.

[42] CCPE p. 27. To see how this is underpinned by a modern conception of property exclusivity of use, see Loick 2016.

[43] CCPE p. 27

[44] Two things that we see at the beginning of the "city in speech" in Plato's *Republic* and in Aristotle's aetiology of the polis in *Politics* I.2 among other places (e.g., NE V.6 1134a25). Though how we understand these things matters a great deal, as do the methods devised to address them. See Bradshaw, 2021, especially chapters 2 and 3.

Marx's key move in answering the commensurability problem is to cease thinking about exchange in *quantitative* terms and think about commodities *qualitatively* again but now in a new way. It must be new because Marx's discussion of use-value is already a qualitative analysis, and although this sense of use-value (usability) is a common property of exchanged objects, it is always going to bring us back to heterogeneity and incommensurability, leaving us no better off thinking about what it is that makes objects commensurable. As we have seen, commodities in capitalism are produced by isolated labourers that are only brought together into social relations by exchange. In that context, Marx posits that objects have a universally shared "substance" insofar as they are all results of the specific kind of human "social activity" undertaken in capitalism (production followed by, and for the sake of, exchange).[45] Marx has numerous names for this activity but mostly uses "simple labour,"[46] that is, labour understood as participating in this process. Marx claims that this labour becomes "embodied in exchange-value"[47] in accordance with the amount of time (what he calls "labour-time") that goes into the production of commodities. This is contingent on the level of social (technological, skilful, material) development in any given society. In Marx's words: "The labour-time of the individual is thus, in fact, the labour-time required by society to produce a particular use-value, that is to satisfy a particular want. But," Marx emphasizes and this is the key point, "what matters here is only *the specific manner* in which the social character of labour is established."[48] Again, labour is made social through exchange and, rather than remain unaffected, the commodities exchanged effectively take on this quality. Thus, Marx's discovery of labour-time is the discovery of something unique to capitalism. If labour can be described as a concrete activity that produces things out of natural materials for the sake of use (labour's natural and universal meaning), it is, in capitalism, *also* a reduction and abstraction in the social process of commodity production. It is the latter that allows us to understand how objects are valued in capitalist exchange.[49]

With that barest stipulation of Marx's answer in the bag, we can now consider the ways that Marx draws on antiquity to make it clearer. First, we can turn to *Capital*. For what Marx does not disclose in CCPE but makes explicit in his revision of that text for *Capital* is that the problem of commensurability is lifted directly from another of Aristotle's texts: the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the context of his discussion of justice, Aristotle turns to the issue of objects that exchange and at what quantities they do so. Like Marx,[50] Aristotle begins with the incommensurability of goods, based on their qualitative differences in use, and then posits that equalization is necessary for exchange to take place. Marx thus hails Aristotle as "the first to analyse the value-form, like so many other forms of thought, society and nature."[51]

Despite Marx's debt to Aristotle for the problem, Marx gives a very different answer than Aristotle, and the contrast helps illuminate what Marx is doing and saying. Aristotle's answer to the commensurability problem appears to be eminently simple,

[45] CCPE p. 29
[46] See n. 18 above.
[47] CCPE p. 29
[48] CCPE p. 32, our emphasis.
[49] CCPE p. 30. Marx makes these two concepts of labour explicit on p. 36.
[50] NE V.5. The discussion in *Capital* is on p. 151 (Fowkes).
[51] *Capital* p. 151

saying that it is "need (*chreia*)" that effectively equates objects. As we have seen, however, Marx claims that it is "simple labour" and "labour-time" that equates objects. Why the different answers? One could respond to this in at least three different ways. First, one could focus on why Marx says it is labour and why Aristotle does not. Second, one could focus on why Aristotle says it is need and why Marx does not. Or, one could do both together. Arguably the clearest would be the third, but Marx does not do that in *any one* text. Rather, in *Capital*, Marx undertakes the first and only mentions in passing Aristotle's answer that he translates somewhat misleadingly as "a makeshift for practical purposes."[52] The debate over the meaning of Marx's discussion of Aristotle is testimony to the incomplete explanation he offers there. We venture that Marx's answer—labour—is a lot clearer once one considers why Aristotle says it is need and Marx does not. For that, however, one needs to examine pre-capitalist societies, which Marx does in his discussion of the commodity in CCPE but not in *Capital*. In CCPE, just after he emphasizes that what matters in examining the commodity is "the specific manner in which the social character of labour is established,"[53] Marx contrasts the capitalist form with numerous pre-capitalist societies. Key here is the main contrast they represent viz. capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies there are *communal* presuppositions that determine labour and exchange so they "bear the social imprint" of their context, meaning *personal* relations determine social conduct. In these contexts—Marx cites the "rural patriarchal system of production" of Rome, the early Celts and Germans, medieval Europe, Russia, and ancient India—neither the labour involved in production nor its products are *separated* from a social relationship that subsequently need to *become* social as in capitalism. The social relationship is personal, is there from the outset, and is determining.

With that in mind, we are better ancient Greek political thought to explain why need is Aristotle's answer to the commensurability problem. For Aristotle, production only takes place because the need for it has already been socially expressed, given that it is embedded within a personal and communal process of reproduction. Ultimately, this means he can refer to "need (*chreia*)" as the practical thing in terms of which objects are commensurable, and the reason that the problem of objects without use is entirely foreign to Aristotle's *polis*. It is also why we venture there is no sign of *capitalistic* behaviour *per se* in antiquity since socially determined need governs production even when it is also for the sake of monetary accumulation through exchange. But Marx, situated in the context of capitalism, cannot say that need makes objects commensurable because he sees that commodities are not the same thing for us as they are for Aristotle owing to the differing social relations of production that precede them. Objects exchange for different reasons and in a fundamentally different way, which means that answers to the problem of commensurability will also be different.

Now we can return to *Capital* and Marx's critique of Aristotle. Marx says that his own solution (in terms of labour and labour-time) is a function of capitalism's particular social relations of production. In accordance with what we have already seen, Marx describes these as a "society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the

[52] *Capital* p. 151, quoting Aristotle NE V.5 1133b20. So misleading is Marx's translation, where he also fails to provide the Greek unlike the two previous quotations of Aristotle, that Gallagher (2014) could mistakenly claim that Marx failed to mention Aristotle's solution at all.
[53] CCPE p. 33

product of labour, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities."[54] In this social form, "the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion" and consequently allowed Marx to make the leap to the idea of equal labour, or labour that was equally undertaken by all. By contrast, the ancient Greek polis was a society "founded on the labour of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the *inequality* of men and of their labour-powers," which meant "the historical *limitation* inherent in the society in which [Aristotle] lived prevented him from finding out what 'in reality' this relation of equality consisted of."[55] But if that is Marx's explanation for the absence of "labour" in Aristotle's answer, it is easier to understand Aristotle's proposed solution by recalling that there is no separation between producers and consumers in his context.

Having seen the way that ancient materials are explicitly configured in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism and the problem of value, we can now synthesize this into the different ways that they are being used. We must not forget that in CCPE Marx has deployed Aristotle's terms, albeit in a mutated form, for his strategy of estrangement. Thus, Marx's whole account of commodity fetishism and the value-form, both in CCPE and then in the revised version in *Capital*, is a direct extension of ancient Greek political thought.

But the discussion in *Capital* is significant for what it can reveal about the *kind* of use of Aristotle Marx employs in CCPE. In *Capital,* Marx *explicitly* historicizes Aristotle and his approach to exchange whereas in CCPE he does not. This allows us to appreciate two crucial points. First, Marx shows us that his use of Aristotle in CCPE does not hinge on Aristotle's historical status as such because difference in social form need not be about history. Like comparing a scroll and a codex—or, an e-book and a hardcopy—in synchronic terms, one can describe each social form in terms of how they work, what their advantages and disadvantages are, and so on *without* identifying historical features like when they emerged, their prevalence across time, or explaining why either were used in different situations. As with the "rural patriarchal condition" Marx references, Marx's point about Aristotle is arguably more anthropological (*avant la lettre*) in that he is attempting to delineate different social forms rather than relate them in a historical relationship. This confirms that his use of ancient Greek political thought is *synchronic*.

Second, Marx also shows us that in CCPE he is not interested in providing commentary on Aristotle but rather using him for the purpose of estrangement. That is why it is *pragmatic*. Although, in *Capital*, Marx does historicize to make "still…clearer" the claims he has made about capitalism and the peculiarities involved as the commodity mediates social relations between humans.[56] But these cases prompt another mode of analysis, where a historical relationship between the pre-capitalist and the capitalist is introduced. This is what takes place in what we call the diachronic mode of analysis.

Marx's diachronic strategy of estrangement

[54] *Capital*, p. 152.
[55] *Capital*, p. 152. Emphasis added.
[56] *Capital* p. 151

In the foregoing, we have seen the way that Marx invokes historical figures (e.g. Aristotle) and historical societies (e.g. the Greek *polis*) in ways that do not explicitly depend upon their historical status. In this section, we turn to identify the ways that these and other phenomena are invoked in a way that makes their historical status essential. In sum, there are two elements of Marx's strategy of estrangement that make the historical status of certain phenomena necessary.

The first is Marx's attempt to debunk any claims to the universality of capitalist social relations. Marx deems this necessary because there is a tendency among economists to make universalizing claims about their subject. For example, there are the so-called "Robinsonades" that economists invoke that imply isolated existence is the natural and universal precondition of human life.[57] Insofar as Marx's goal is to display the historical specificity of capitalist social relations of production, the actual historical existence of other social relations of production matters.

The second element of the diachronic mode arises from the first. If it is true that capitalism involves social relations of production that are historically unique, and that this uniqueness lies in the fact that labour is undertaken individually instead of communally, then it is also true there is a process by which labour goes from being communal to being individuated.

The first of these aspects is apparent in CCPE. For instance, Marx addresses economists' attempt to explain value in terms of labour and charges them with confusing the natural and seemingly universal aspect of labour with labour in its social specificity.[58] The second of them, however, is not explicitly apparent. Insofar as it arises out of the first, however, one can still see the usefulness of Aristotle's concepts operating at the diachronic level, though this is not something that Marx pursues in a sustained way in that text. Rather, both aspects are displayed in his analysis of pre-capitalist societies in *Grundrisse*, a set of notebooks Marx composed in 1858. Almost two whole notebooks are devoted to pre-capitalist societies and are referred to as the *Formen*.[59] There we see the way that the Aristotelian analysis has informed Marx's entire thinking about pre-capitalist social relations of production. In the *Formen*, Marx is interested in understanding capitalism in its relationship to the past, with capitalism's qualitative differences being juxtaposed against the historical social formations preceding it.[60] As we relay in the following discussion, we can see how *Grundrisse* displays the two functions of the diachronic and also allows us to provide a Marxian account of ancient Greek political thought.

[57] This term comes from the 1857 Introduction.

[58] CCPE p. 38

[59] Marx 1973, 471-514. After the phrase *Formen, die der kapitalistichen Produktion vorhergehen,* "The Forms that Precede Capitalist Production," (from manuscript Notebooks IV: 50-53 – V: 1-15).

[60] On the *Formen* see Hobsbawm 1964, Godelier 1970, Anderson 1974, Hindess and Hirst 1975 (with Cook 1977), Carandini 1979, Lefort 1978, Wood 1981, 2008, Wickham 1984, Jappe 2003 [2023], Finelli 2009 (Re-Reading) Basso 2013, Tomba 2013 (In Marx's Laboratory), da Graca and Zingarelli 2015. Here we can only touch briefly on one aspect of the importance of Marx's preliminary notes. For the question of causation, the characterization of the 'ancient economy' and how Marx intended this investigation should inform the analysis of the history of the commodity, see the preface to the collection of texts by Godelier 1970, 13-142, the excellent introduction by Carandini 1979, 3-29, and the *status quaestionis* presented by Wood 2008 and the introduction to the essays edited by da Graca and Zingarelli 2015

The Formen

As we identified earlier, in CCPE a distinctive feature of bourgeois society (capitalism) is that "labour which manifests itself in exchange-value appears to be the labour of an *isolated* individual".[61] This 'dot-like isolation,' however, is not a metaphysical condition of humanity despite the commonplace atomized experience of the modern subject's de-socialized individuality, nor is it the de-historicized starting point for the 'Robinsonades' of classical political economy.[62] On the contrary, the past abundantly testifies that the labour of human beings could be organized in *other* ways. While these pre-modern forms of social organization are derided by economists as primitive or 'stalled' stages in the realization of the liberated (bourgeois) individual, Marx insisted that this individual was not a pre-condition for human production and exchange *in general* but rather the outcome of a *specific historical process* which he refers to as a *separation*: "a presupposition [sc. of wage-labour] is the *separation* of free labour from the objective conditions of its realization—from the means of labour and the material for labour".[63] Exploring the emergence of the isolated individual as the *historical separation of labour from the objective conditions of its realization*—pre-eminently, land as "the great workshop of mankind"—is thus the necessary detour that will enable our return to a capitalism now estranged precisely by being *historicized*.[64] This diachronic estrangement is therefore the next step toward the explication of capitalism and stripping it of any transhistorical claims to universality. Nevertheless, this is not performed gratuitously. Foregrounding the foreignness of capitalism is, as we have said, a hermeneutic strategy in preparation for a further demonstration, namely, to show that capitalism is not merely different from what precedes it, but radically so, representing a truly revolutionary social transformation.

Marx locates this difference in the outcome of historical processes by which human beings become individuated from a communal social unity which, he asserts, formed the determining presupposition of the historical human subject's relationship to the world and each other. In these early societies the goal of production was the reproduction of that communal unity. This unity determined the circumstances under which production took place, providing both real and abstract legitimacy for land use and occupation as well as setting limits by collectively enforcing the proper destination of its production. Wealth, for example, could have no meaning outside this unity: to be wealthy meant no more than being able to locate oneself more firmly within the communal group, just as freedom did not signify freedom *from* the social but rather signified only one's complete membership of the communal group.[65] In other words, no antagonism or tension between the human subject and society intervened against which an abstract wealth or freedom might be leveraged. So how do we account for individuation?

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[61] CCPE p.34, emphasis added

[62] Grundrisse 1973, 485 *Punktualität*.

[63] Grundrisse 1973, 471

[64] nb. The romantic manoeuvre this entails: capitalism is shown to be, in the words of Ranke, 'intimate to God'

[65] The institution of the *Choregia* is a case in point. See Wilson (2000). Also Vernant on peasant uses of surplus for the sake of citizenship. cf. the cognate relationship between *eleutheros* and *Leute*, and the origin of the terminology of (alienated) slave labour in concepts of the alien/foreigner.

Marx traces various contingent scenarios in which a posited prior communal unity is eroded to a point where subjectively its inhabitants begin to experience a tension between self and society.[66] This emerging 'individual' begins to posit a selfhood not only disinterred from the communal unity but *antagonistic to it*. On the one hand, the communal unity is experienced as a limitation on the development of an individual; on the other hand, the individual begins to be perceived as the liberation of man's authentic nature.[67] The chief part in this account is played by a concrete *spatial and practical separation* in the formation of *urban spaces*. These are carved out specifically for practices and activities differentiated from those connected to direct rural production. Marx maintains that the stronger the communal unity in a given historical society the more urban developments are contained and determined by the demands of agricultural production. Towns served as the location of exchange (markets), leisure (conspicuous consumption), and symbolic authority (politics, religion, ruler residences), but as long as communal unity was expressed as a direct relation between land appropriation and land-use, towns were always subject to the countryside.

The classic examples, supplied to Marx by his rich knowledge of antiquity, are the cities of the Graeco-Roman world. For Marx the history of these quintessentially city-cultures was explained by the way land ownership and production were mediated by political belonging and vice versa.[68] The warrior citizen may have expressed his membership of the communal group by a leisured life lived in an urban space, but this life was wholly predicated on his proprietorship of that parcel of agricultural land granted to him by such membership. Indeed, his proprietorship legally and symbolically presupposed the larger proprietorship of the communal group (*ager publicus*) to which he belonged. Thus, as a holder of land it was expected that its surplus be used to reproduce his civic identity. The urban space was thus symbiotically a reflex of the organization of production in the countryside, "the ruralization of the city" as Marx put it.[69]

Marx sees the city as decisive in the story because it is the concrete location of activities self-consciously differentiated from direct agricultural production. Ironically, even when directed toward the reproduction of their communality, citizens in antiquity disrupted the limits set by the presuppositions of their unity by virtue of the separation of city from rural production.[70] Across the course of European history, the part played by cities in the "abolition of limits" was a symptom of the city as a site where necessary but ultimately fatal supplements made their appearance—money, slavery, concentration of wealth, erosion of status, market exchange, etc.—all of which, to a greater or lesser extent, would gnaw away at the historical human subject's communal expression of selfhood founded on mutual relations in a community of landed proprietors.

Over the horizon of these societies, the individualized subjects of capitalism, both bourgeois and proletarian, can be seen retrospectively to have arisen alongside and within the long historical development of the city (the shadow of the medieval city—in Old English, *burh*—looms over *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). Capitalism, in other words,

[66] assumed to some extent as the original human state CCPE 33; cf. Grundrisse 489.

[67] Marx's critiques of the Robinsonades in the 1857 Intro.

[68] "The history of classical antiquity is the history of cities, but of cities founded on landed property and agriculture" (1973, 479)

[69] *Verländlichung der Stadt*, 1973, 479.

[70] See, for example, Pecirka 1971.

bears the implicit mark of the separation of the city from the countryside. Though Marx is wary of pinpointing the moment, the transformation takes place when the ends of agricultural production are no longer determined by the consumption of producers but by the *market exchanges* taking place in cities. Modernity proper begins with the "urbanization of the countryside,"[71] that is, the subsumption of the world of labour for direct consumption to the impersonal rationality of the market, or, put differently, the subordination of use-value to exchange-value.[72] At the same time the town is also where a precise activity accompanied the emergence of a process aiming solely at the production of exchange-values, namely, "simple labour." This abstraction is closely tied to the emergence of cities because these are the sites where the autonomization of labour from the communal activities in which it was once embedded takes place most obviously. For example, proletarianization—the process by which human beings lose direct access and control over the means of production—takes place predominantly in the post-medieval migration of rural populations to towns. When these dispossessed rural workers appear in cities they do so as embodied simple labour able to be bought for the purpose of any kind of non-specific labouring activity, rather than for concretely determined uses. It is thus in cities that the simple worker first appears and enters into brand new and qualitatively different social relations. With it, necessarily, arises the commodity that must produce the social relations of these workers and their products. It is in cities that the commodity first proliferates and takes the place of an *explicit* social relation (between master-slave, lord-serf, etc). In this way, the worker seems to confront objects rather than people. The possibility of the commodity therefore requires first the disintegration of the explicit social and symbolic relations which once bound human beings together. This includes the explicit coercive relations of personal domination that defined pre-capitalist societies and the rise of an impersonal economic domination.

Political fetishism vs commodity fetishism

Marx's notes on pre-capitalist societies can be helpfully illuminated by looking at a footnote from Capital where he responds to a review of the preface to the CCPE.[73] The review objects that the outline of historical materialism Marx offered, in which being determines consciousness, is all "very true for our own times, in which material interests preponderate, but not for the Middle Ages, in which Catholicism, nor for

[71] 1973, 479.

[72] The domination of the town over the countryside parallels the historical prioritization of exchange-values over use-values. Thus, the definition of modernity in Marx's elegant formulation here (479) can be seen as the historical reversal of the priorities expressed in the key passage of Aristotle cited by Marx in CCPE. There Aristotle asserts the 'native' (*oikeia [khrēsis]*) use of a thing is its direct consumption in its 'thingness' in contrast to its improper use (*ouk oikeia*), the exchange of the thing for another thing (*Pol*. I.9 1257a9). Under capitalism (bourgeois society) the inverse is asserted, that the natural use of an object is in exchange in relation to which use-value is merely incidental: "exchange-value thus appears as the social *natural* determinacy of use-values, as *a determinacy which belongs to them as things*, and as a result of which they replace each other in the process of exchange in determinate quantitative relationships, forming equivalents, just as simple chemical substances combine in certain quantitative proportions, forming chemical equivalents." (1971, 22). Compare CCPE p.28: "Use-value as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic form [i.e., exchange-value], lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy."

[73] *Capital*, I, 175-6, n.35. All the following quotations come from this reference.

Athens and Rome, where politics reigned supreme." In the mind of the reviewer, politics "reigned supreme" in antiquity because it was through the *polis* that the Greeks discovered and realised themselves as free men. Material interests, then, were either held in contempt or entirely subordinated to the regime of citizen self-expression. Thus, "the economic structure of society" is only for *us* the "real foundation… to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" because we have discovered the economy and made sense of it. In the reviewer's mind, our consciousness—science and enlightenment—, have moved past politics and religion to a more advanced understanding of society.[74] Yet, this method, the review concludes, cannot be a useful way to tackle the ancient and medieval past because they *thought* differently then.

Of course, replies Marx, is this not the standard modern view: to see society as a reflex of ideas developing toward a definite end, namely liberalism?[75] But, Marx retorts, one cannot *eat* ideas—ideas are preceded by a *mode of life*: "[t]his much, however, is clear, that the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics." For Marx it is true that politics did indeed "reign supreme" in antiquity and the Greek city did oppose the living well of its citizens to the world ancient Greek political thought by those merely living, but it is "[o]n the contrary, *the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part*." So, the "chief part," Marx is saying, is rather the *subjective* form of social relations that emerge as a function of concrete relations of *production*, "the mode in which they gained a livelihood". Politics (or Catholicism) is therefore the practical, institutional, and ideational form in which underlying social relations of production are given full expression by its agents as a form of everyday life. Politics is not the principle which applies itself in the first instance to the organization of society but rather its result. Politics, we can conclude, was the form of *political* society that arose out of a specifically *political* mode of living.[76] As Marx continues to explain in the footnote: "it requires but a slight acquaintance with the history of the Roman republic, for example, to be aware that its secret history is the history of its landed property."

We must listen carefully what Marx is saying here. He is giving full weight to politics as the "chief part" because the way historical agents *imagine* their activity is nevertheless the *real plane* of human life through which a given society expresses, acts upon, and reacts to the effects of the mode by which they "gain a livelihood"—that is, through language, culture, ethics, normative practice, customs, tradition, and so on. Reconsidering the preface of CCPE in this light we can see that Marx is saying the mode of life—for example, the division of labour by which agricultural surplus is produced, appropriated, distributed, and consumed—lays down *objective* conditions upon which is founded, and from which rises, a scaffold of human *subjectivity* that is catalyzed out of the energies and antagonisms immanent to the mode of life.

[74] "Hence the pre-bourgeois forms of the social organization of production are treated by political economy in much the same way as the Fathers of the Church treated pre-Christian religions" (175).

[75] "In the first place it strikes one as an odd thing for anyone to suppose that these well-worn phrases about the Middle Ages and the ancient world are unknown to anyone else." 176, n.35 con'd.

[76] Marx rounded off his retort by indicating that only a fool would attempt to force the round block of specific historical forms of society into the square hole of a general historical materialism: "[o]n the other hand, Don Quixote long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society."

It is helpful here to return to Marx's observations about the commodity. Commodity consumption in the capitalist mode of production completes the "valorisation process" generated by the social relations between humans through which the commodity was produced. But the success of commodity exchange in reproducing those social relations and circumstances for future exchange takes place precisely because the object appears *apart from those relations* and seems to act independently of us in its relationship with other objects in the market. The contradiction between the reality of value (that it derives from social relations of production) and its apparent autonomy is fundamental to its successful valorization. Far from being a mere mystification of reality from which we could escape once we became aware of it, fetishism neatly describes the necessary attenuation between the commodity's *objective* conditions (production) and *subjective* conditions (the way commodities appear and circulate).[77] One major effect of this attenuation is the reproduction of a moral universe populated by social artefacts that, while appearing autonomous from society, are nevertheless deployed and exchanged in normative ways. In capitalism this is called *economics*: on the one hand, a seemingly natural environment (like the weather) described by a scientific discourse and, on the other, a terrain of human action prescribed (and proscribed) by ethics, morality, and culture. Thus, the *products of labour* which circulate within it as vectors of value have that value determined by both objective and subjective circumstances of their production, both of which in capitalism are mysterious, as opposed to pre-capitalist societies where the relation between production and appropriation is clearer.[78] Thus, following Marx, we might say then that the "chief part" *for us* is economics, which is to say, that the mode of capitalist production determines how we think and act in our social lives.

As Etienne Balibar points out, however, fetishism is by no means limited to the commodity or to capitalism even if it seems especially necessary to each. In his exegesis of the footnote discussed above, Balibar notes: "Marx's thesis does not mean that in modes of production other than capitalism the structure of the social relations is *transparent to the agents*. 'Fetishism' is not absent from them, but *displaced* (onto Catholicism, politics, etc.)."[79] When a mode of production is the "basis of community", Marx says in the *Formen*, two things occur: firstly "only insofar as the individual is a member of the community does he regard himself as a possessor"; secondly, "real appropriation by means of the process of labour takes place under these pre-conditions [i.e. being a member of the community]". In other words, the products of the labour *appear as a function of these pre-conditions not as a function of a generalized process of labour*. Marx's precise observations here (and later in his discussion of the polis) allow us to see why, to take a specific historical example, it was impossible for a Spartan citizen to imagine his expropriation of helot surplus *negatively* as a function of

[77] Aristotle's critique of money gets itself tied in knots for this reason: for him money is conventional and arbitrary ('a mere sham') and makes incommensurable things commensurable only for day-to-day practicalities and not in reality. And yet wealth magically resides in it. The critique of money must begin with the way it functions as a 'real abstraction' (Sohn-Rethel 1978). Bourdieu (1994) shows differently how an economic analysis of gift exchange disenchants the gift and cannot grasp how misrecognition works to ensure the proper discharge of 'generosity'; one might say that the gift depends on a 'symbolic fetishism' for its success.

[78] See, for example, Marx's observations about 'primitive' community in the *Grundrisse* and Balibar's commentary, 244-5.

[79] Althusser and Balibar 244, emphasis in the original.

some generalized direct extra-economic coercion but rather *positively* as simply the latest iteration of the history of the Spartan *polis* itself, a present event (expropriation) stemming directly from a past one, that of the historical coming-to-be of a community of warriors (re-)founding a city after defeating a population, distributing their land, and binding them to the soil in a permanent relation of dependence.[80] Ritualised humiliation, the terminology of captivity (*heilotai*), the annual declaration of war on the helots, precise customary dues and rents—as well as the destination of these products as contributions to the common dining halls—these were not just efforts at sustaining a generalised ideology of superiority. Rather, they were a necessary and inextricable part of the *mode of appropriation*, the pre-conditions by which the products of the countryside did not appear *as products of (helot) labour as such* but appeared instead as *the consequence of Sparta's political organization and its origin,* i.e., as the ongoing historical reproduction of their community's founding relation. For their part the helots were no less enmeshed in the fetishism at work since they, like all pre-capitalist direct producers, were caught up in the legitimacy of their domination given that the only standpoint from which their subjectivity could be articulated was that of the *polis*. If they resisted at all, the struggle appears not to have been inchoately directed against their domination in general, but rather it was a fight to retain, and protect from encroachment, the minimal place they were accorded within the unity of the civic community, that is, the obligations they were owed by the Spartiates.[81]

The diachronic task Marx sets for himself is not to ignore forms of thought and institution as though they are epiphenomenal in historical explanation. Rather, these play a crucial role, yet that role is assigned by the mode of production of a particular set of social relations. In that sense, the mode of production determines, yet does so somewhat indirectly. In the end, the mode of production is still fundamental to explaining why politics and political thought play the "chief part."[82] The *polis*, for example, was a mode of surplus expropriation upon which the leisure of the warrior-citizen and his political life not only rested, but the mode by which ancient liberty was determined and given its specific content, that is, as *opposed to the domination and coercion he exercised*. By defining freedom in relation to production as *freedom <u>from</u> the sphere of production*, the *polis* and politics defined what we now call the "economy" as the work of the non-citizen. Politics—the practice by which the ancient city reproduced itself subjectively and objectively—thus relegates the productive sphere altogether, not only polarising the entire moral universe of its activity in opposition to it but marginalising and excluding those engaged in it—direct producers, artisans, metic traders, and so on. Labour was not only coerced but became the *mark of submission to coercion* and thus the antithesis of a citizen's life which could only be conceived as completely freed from necessary activities. In the world of the polis, our morally neutral and abstract general concepts of "labour" and "work" (onto which no Greek word easily

[80] Compare also the way Simonides ties the victory at Plataia back to the presence of Sparta's founding warrior heroes and as an instance of epic continuity with Achaian warrior action.

[81] For example, the most prominent event taken as an instance of ongoing generalized class struggle by the helots, the revolt of 464 BCE, was triggered by the violation of a helot sacral *entitlement*, the use of Poseidon's sanctuary at Tainaron as a place of asylum (Thuc. 1.128.1). The fact that the Spartans themselves interpreted the great earthquake as the god's punishment for this transgression suggests the degree of reciprocal obligation entangled in what we often take to be a case of simple domination and coercion. See Talbert (1989) and Cartledge (1990).

[82] Althusser and Balibar 246. Cf. Marx 1973, 106-7.

maps) automatically signified compulsion to another, an aspect of the human condition in opposition to which the community of warriors defined themselves.[83]

It is in this context that it is possible historically to oppose political to economic fetishism. If the commodity attains part of its character by being the objective embodiment of the separation of labour from the communal presuppositions of its realization, ancient production incarnated the entanglement of labour and its communal presuppositions only too well, sometimes positively (on the land, the proper place of direct production and consumption), but mostly negatively.[84]

Because war was the political mode of appropriation for the Greek city it was on the level of war that historical transformation would take place—or, put differently, changes to the mode of appropriation interfered with the concept of politics and hence wrought irreversible changes to the *polis* itself. The historical transformation of the ancient city was not brought about on the level of productive forces but on the level of the appropriation of the product of those forces.[85]

Is all this to be subsumed under what has been called the "slave mode of production"?[86] Slavery in the ancient world is a topic too vast to be tackled here. It must suffice to say at this point that slavery properly understood—that is, the reduction of another to alienable property—emerges alongside the historical process by which citizenship became inaccessible and thus as communities who defined themselves by proscribing any possibility of coercion and domination within the body politic. While we see spectrums of dependency and obligation as far back as our evidence permits, we do not see chattel slavery as the fully developed dominant form of unfreedom until the 6th century BCE, i.e., in the wake of, for example, the Solonian reforms. The slave, therefore, is a *consequence* rather than a *pre-condition* of political community.

This point has lasting importance for how we can think about ancient Greek political thought in its ongoing value for the present.[87] One cannot, for example, out of a concern to decolonize our life and thought simply dismiss ancient Greek political thought as inextricably bound to slavery. In fact, slavery, as Marx suggested, was clearly *not* a presupposition of ancient political community. It was rather an effect of the city's continual efforts to *reproduce its own presuppositions*: "In all these forms, the *reproduction of presupposed relations*… are the foundation of development, which are from the outset *limited*, but which signify decay, decline and fall once the limit is abolished".[88] These limitations—which are the social rules (ethics, morality, codes of conduct, traditions, *mos maiorum* etc) which bind the individual to the commune (i.e., they are the presuppositions upon which this relationship depended)—are therefore abolished *by the very efforts to sustain them*. Here Marx introduces an almost tragic

[83] Aristotle's *Politics* on the Thessalians. For a famous discussion, see Arendt 1998.

[84] On the determinate subordination of *poiesis* (production) to *praxis* (that which production enables), and their opposition, see both opening chapters of Plutarch's *Pericles* (ch.1-2).

[85] Marx states clearly that "[w]ar is therefore the great comprehensive task, the great *communal* labour which is required either to occupy the objective conditions of being there alive, or to protect and *perpetuate* the conditions" (1973, 474, emphasis added, cf. also 491); but he will later suggest that conquest, essential to the reproduction of the presupposed relations within the warrior commune, will be (in the case of Rome) the source of the very 'abuses' (*Mißbräuche*), such as slavery, that will rupture the ancient communal form of life (1973, 487).

[86] See Anderson and Ste. Croix.

[87] cf. Marx, *Capital* Vol. III, 958-9.

[88] 1973, 487, emphasis in the original.

irony secreted in the fates of pre-capitalist societies that also points us to an explanation for historical change: "the alteration of this economic presupposition [is] *brought about by its own dialectic*… In particular, the influence of warfare and of conquest, which, e.g., in Rome belonged to the essential conditions of the commune itself, *abolishes the real bond on which it rests*."[89] Rome is undone by its own drive to conquer; slavery is a consequence of this activity, and hence of the efforts of Mediterranean cities to reproduce the presuppositions of their own communities. And, adds Marx, "up to a certain point it seemed compatible, with the foundation"—until the contradictions became unsupportable. Slavery, Marx seems to be saying, was both necessary and fatal to the ancient city. In the wake of such analysis perhaps we are invited to consider what, in our own mode of social relations, plays the same role.

Part III – Critical Antiquities with and against Marx

We have endeavoured to show that Marx does two things. Put simply, Marx first helps us elicit the alterity of the past. Marx then demonstrates that this past, including ancient Greek political thought, is fecund for thinking about our political present when we creatively interpret and repurpose it, especially once we have appreciated its and our historical specificity.

These two moves complement the Critical Antiquities agenda as we have articulated it. From the outset this agenda has been concerned with the alterity of the past and the way it can disclose the possibilities and limitations of our present. It does so by utilizing and repurposing antiquity's thought, institutions, and practices. But just as we need to historicize the ancient past to identify its alterity, we also need to historicize Marx to see his alterity. As with antiquity, this improves our ability to identify the particularity of our situation. It is especially apt in the case of Marx, however. For there is a risk, owing to the political history with which we opened this chapter, that by invoking Marx one is labelled as a straight-up Marx*ist*. But as should have been clear from our employment of the scholarly approach to Marx, we are not reading Marx as devoted Marxists. One consequence is that we are not precious about Marx's claims. We are rather pragmatic in our approach to Marx much as we have argued Marx was with Aristotle.

In that spirit, we admit that Marx was studying antiquity with a set of ancient artefacts and interpretive tools that pale in comparison with those of the present. We now have more empirical findings and better tools with which to study the past. That said, while the *content* of the *Formen* has been expanded, the *form* of Marx's account of pre-capitalist societies remains powerful and compelling.[90] But this claim is not a doctrine of faith. It must only stand in the face of a continual testing of Marx's claims through the evidence and tools we now have.[91]

To translate this into the terms we have favoured elsewhere, we could say that Marx exemplifies the use of the past as a standpoint from which to understand the present in its particularity and treat the present as an object of critique. Conversely, the present is our (arguably inescapable) standpoint, from which we are able to identify the past's particularity and treat it as an object of critique for the sake of our ultimate goal,

[89] 1973, 487, emphasis added.
[90] As Ellen Meiksins Wood has rightly argued.
[91] Springborg 1986.

human flourishing. As we pursue this, we see a certain convergence with the concept of praxis, another ancient Greek concept, prominent in Aristotle, that was mutated by Marx in his famous eleventh *Theses on Feuerbach*: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[92] Marxist movements across the world have incessantly invoked this and loaded "praxis" to denote revolutionary change or social transformation. The terminological proximity between Critical Antiquities and Marxism, then, warrants some caution. If we wish to demarcate a difference between Marx and Marxism—or what Anselm Jappe has called the exoteric and the esoteric Marx[93]—then we ought to specify what the relationship is between Marx as he is understood through the scholarly approach (the esoteric Marx) as distinct from Marx as he is understood through twentieth-century Marxism (the exoteric Marx), all while specifying the way this informs our approach to antiquities. What remains to be done, then, is to ask what Marx's esoteric writings have to offer praxis as we understand it in our new context and with Critical Antiquities' particular interests?

In the dialectical movement between antiquities and the present, we seek the creation of *another* standpoint. It is an outcome of the ancient coming into contact with the present. But unlike a threshold figure (e.g., Agamben, or Deleuzian event as singularity) or a dialectical synthesis a la Hegel, we can remain agnostic about its novelty and simply submit that we seek a standpoint that we can claim as our own, that we can identify with, that we have chosen and that we can subject to ongoing scrutiny. In this, praxis means to *think, act, and become otherwise*, which proceeds out of the activity that pervades this treatment of antiquity and our present lives. And it crucially involves evaluation, judgment, and enactment.

While it may be true that the present is always our standpoint, we attempt to use available methods—and are open to those yet to be invented—to try and other it and do it consciously. In all of this we are self-reflexive about our own subjectivity in its situated state.[94] It is both the identities and differences between ancient and present lives that inform the Critical Antiquities approach.

Perhaps here we can hone the question we began with. Rather than, "can, how, and should ancient Greek political thought be used in the present?", we can ask, "what does ancient Greek political thought do for contemporary critique?" We have offered here a brief illustration of two modes by which Marx tackled that question. And like Marx we argue that the resources of antiquity must be subordinated to a project of general social criticism.

If a critical antiquities project were in any way concerned with the future relevance of ancient Greek political thought as a field of investigation, then it would be to confront the failure of contemporary classical studies to be a vector of a general social criticism *beyond itself as a discipline*. It is not simply, then, a matter of bringing classical studies up to date with respect to the critical work being done in other fields, such as decolonial studies, which Critical Antiquities regards as a parallel project insofar as it seeks to dismantle domination and enable human flourishing.

Marx, among others, shows us that antiquity can be the site of a compelling detour which we take on the way to a critique of our present situation. We can consider

[92] Cassin 2016, s.v. "praxis."

[93] Jappe 2003, pp. 6-7. On Marx's political activism, see Thomas 1991.

[94] By situated, we mean the complex combination of subjects in their environments as, again, John Dewey understands the term.

one more place where Marx presented such a view. At the end of his methodologically important 1857 Introduction, Marx argued that a critical account of Greek art and literature could simply be satisfied with the observation that its character demands a *contextual* explanation, that is, culture emerges out of historically specific social conditions. But, Marx continued, the more compelling question is why Greek art and literature *continues to charm us now* out of its context and well beyond the circumstances of its historical emergence. His conclusion is that what charms and seduces us in Greek art and literature is twofold: first, it preserves across the ruins of the past the childlike naiveté of the truths Greek culture grasped in its discrete moment. Secondly, however, —and this is crucial for any critical project—we are simultaneously aware that this discrete moment is not *our* moment and can never be recuperated:

> "A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does not the naiveté of a child delight him, and must he not himself strive to reproduce its truth again at a higher level? Does not the character of every epoch revive true to its nature in the nature of the child? Why should not the historical childhood of mankind, where mankind is displayed at its most beautiful, exercise an eternal charm as a never-recurring stage?" (1975, 86-7, trans. Carver)

Here one could be diverted by Marx's embrace of an outdated Philhellenism. But we submit that it is possible to discern real value in the relationship between past and present Marx posits here and the guidance it offers for how an interpretation of the artefacts of the ancient past can acquire contemporary relevance. In this spirit, then, how could ancient Greek political thought inform a present critical project? It can prepare the disciplinary activities that are routinely undertaken for the larger critical project that always lies over the horizon, doing so without seeking to guarantee a privileged place for ancient thought by ideologically indemnifying it from external criticism. This is how we interpret Marx's use of Aristotle, which elegantly and succinctly explains how the use of ancient Greek political thought must find its end not in a romantic nostalgia for, e.g., the Greek city—"we cannot become children again"—, but in an emergent critical philosophy that "strives to reproduce its truth again at a higher level"—in addition to truth wherever we find it. In sum, we seek in antiquities help to articulate and realize a different future.