

‘inexact’ for a party whose goal is ‘not merely socialist in general, but downright communist’.

Why do these past debates matter? The new translation is described by Hudis as an intervention in present day struggles that are often characterised by an ethos of anti-capitalism without having an ‘adequate conception of our goal’. Rising hopes captured by Syriza, Podemos and Corbynism (among others) in Europe produced the real prospect of left governments between 2014 and 2017; correspondingly a spate of predominantly left accelerationist writings on what a post-capitalist society might look like were published. Whether influenced by the early work of Nick Land or a specific reading of the Operaismo tradition, the work of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Antonio Negri and Michel Hardt (prior to the publication of *Assembly*) have focussed on linking technological shifts in contemporary capitalism to the development of a communist future. The destructive aspects of class struggle are neglected in this approach, while the line between the future use of technology under communism and a celebration of current productive practices are frequently blurred. The weakness of these approaches, regardless of intention, is that they have given agency to technological advances over the struggles of the exploited and oppressed.

The defeat of radical left electoral projects and the continued rise of the far right and fascism have led to a renewed theoretical emphasis on defining capitalism itself. Yanis Varoufakis has repurposed for the radical left

the originally conservative concept of ‘techno-feudalism’ coined by Glen Wely and Eric Posner, Cedric Robinson’s conception of ‘racial capitalism’ is increasingly discussed and deployed, Maurizio Lazzarato’s concept of ‘political capitalism’ has restated the role of violence and state repression in the continued reproduction of capitalism. Maintaining a link between adequately defining capitalism and an orientation towards existing struggles is vital.

Hudis points out that Marx in *Critique of the Gotha Program* puts the emphasis on the self-activity of workers in creating a communist society. Marx criticises the Gotha program for demanding that the state fund cooperative societies. He declares that the ‘only’ value of cooperative societies is if they are the ‘independent creations of the workers’, not protégés of the capitalist state. If Lenin once described socialism as Soviets plus electricity, the emphasis needs to swing back towards the Soviet pole of that formulation. Peter Linbaugh in the afterword to *Critique of the Gotha Program* concisely declares Marx does not ‘paint pictures’, he takes ‘photographs’. Marx generalises his theoretical concepts by learning from workers struggles rather than abstract model building. Hudis correctly points out that discussing and understanding what we are fighting for is crucial to guiding the struggles of today. What requires further elaboration is the missing link between ongoing struggles and a future communist society: that is, strategy.

Chris Newlove

## Spectres of value

Christopher J. Arthur *The Spectre of Capital: Idea and Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 2022). 449pp., £148.00 hb., 978 9 00451 517 8

Christopher J. Arthur’s latest, perhaps most significant book to date, *The Spectre of Capital: Idea and Reality*, presents his distinctive approach to value form theory and Hegelian Marxism. The culmination of a career in Marxian philosophy, *The Spectre of Capital* recapitulates earlier theoretical innovations – the dialectics of sociation, dissociation and association, a renewed articulation of the labour theory of value, Arthur’s ‘homology’ thesis – within a more comprehensive theory, the system-

aticity of which derives from a newly foregrounded proposition: capital should be conceived as ‘spectre’. (See also his earlier essay, ‘The Spectral Ontology of Value’, in *RP* 107 (2001).) *The Spectre of Capital* is a systematically dialectical reconstruction of Marx’s *Capital*, expounding a dualistic method to grasp the reality of economic form. Capital, Arthur argues, ought to be elucidated in relation to a concrete other that retains an unsystematisable ontology. Here, value forms are understood as ‘simply

logical' and the ontology of capital as Idea. History, in this account, has engendered a bleak idealism of pure forms, whereby Hegel is inverted and capital is not being but nothingness. The truth, for Arthur, is not in the whole; the whole is emphatically false. *The Spectre of Capital* considers the dominance of abstract social forms in a manner that is irreducible to the arguments of either Hegel or Marx. Exceeding the writings of both, the book is neither a philological exercise nor a contribution to intellectual history. Arthur instead formulates a distinctive theory of capitalist modernity that demands to be read on its own terms. But what is Arthurism? And what politics does it possess?

Spanning nearly 400 pages – including instructive appendices that outline the relation of Hegel's logic to the logic of the value forms (establishing technical details of Arthur's own architectonic, as well as clarifying terminology) and including tables outlining logical categories – *The Spectre of Capital* offers a detailed and overarching overview of Arthur's value form theory. Echoing the *Communist Manifesto*'s 'spectre of communism', the term 'spectre' is used to illuminate the dialectical reality of capital: a social form that inverts the concrete communist movement. The play on the manifesto highlights Arthur's construal of capital's identity as both spectral yet ever-present in form and real in social power – hence the subtitle of the book: *Idea and Reality*.

The thesis that capital is a 'spectre' requires a thoroughgoing critique to explicate its genesis. Arthur sets about doing so through a unique presentation of the value form's dialectical development. This book length presentation is separated into two parts. *Part 1: Object and Method* provides a justification for the value theoretical approach to the critique of political economy. *Part 2: The Ideal Constitution of Capital* (which encapsulates the bulk of the book) systematically presents the dialectical ontology of capital's forms. Within these pages, Arthur identifies various shortcomings in Marx and Hegel to which, he claims, theory is obliged to respond.

Arthur judges Hegel's logic as incapable of approaching ontological truth but as sufficient for reflecting the logic of modernity's social form: capital's abstraction. Hegelianism, in this regard, is able to depict an inverted false ontology of pure form only. Dialectical innovations in *The Spectre of Capital* stem from Arthur's insistence

that the relevance of Hegelian logic to the concept of capital is not based on method; rather, Hegel's systematic logic of categories underpins the false ontology of capital, where value-forms gain priority over their material bearers. The philosophical upshot is that the absolute should be considered a false totality. The result of Arthur's reckoning with Hegel is a conclusion that the Idea of capital is determined by a logical tendency toward completion through immanent development. Capital posits its own presupposition, making the concept of capital self-grounding, self-determining and – most politically stifling – self-reproducing.

The (re)reading of Hegelian systemic dialectic feeds into a reworking of corresponding inadequacies perceived in Marx. Arthur's analysis thus departs from Marx on a number of key theoretical points, four of which will be identified here. The first is that the sequential development of value-forms is re-ordered. The second follows: the discussion of the labour theory of value does not take place until a general form of capital is established. Building from this, in a third deviation, Arthur provides a political theory of the source of value in labour. The fourth is Arthur's solution to the transformation problem termed the 'transformation procedure.'



The deficiencies Arthur locates in Marx stem from the presentational order of the commodity form's development. Arthur's insistence is that labour, or production for that matter, should not appear within the presentation of *Capital* until the logic of commodity exchange

has acquired immanent self-sufficiency as a general form of capital; that is, until it can self-reproduce. While production based on the commodification of labour – generalised commodity production – is necessary for the systematic generalisation of commodity exchange, the category of labour is not logically necessary to depict exchange's logic. Arthur insists that incorporating labour and production into the presentation too early inhibits comprehension of the logic of exchange in terms of pure social form exercising a determinative power over its material bearer. Arthur's claim is that capitalist form determines its content. The strong sense in which this is meant cannot be gleaned from Marx's *Capital*, where labour is presented as that which all commodities have in common. And the precedence given to labour in Marx leads to the misrecognition of the political possibilities that lie within labour, which is dictated by pure formal abstraction, despite its role as a basis for value forms. Arthur, here, revises Marx further: the capital relation is not a capital-labour relation, he argues, but instead 'the capital relation', which then *develops into* a class relation. For Arthur, waged labour, in yielding value and surplus value, negates itself: it is internal to capital's concept and is a category of capital. Building from this, Arthur intuits 'a political theory of the source of value.' Arthur's systemic dialectic does not dispute that living labour is both in and against capital. However, for Arthur, until history realises a 'consciously organised anti-systemic movement', capital merely atomises the working class and labour. A counter subject, in this regard, remains merely 'virtual.'

The final section of the book's second half, *Division III: The System of Capital*, offers a glimpse into the more concrete implications of the theory, with capital's social forms considered in relation to circulation, production and social reproduction. Here, Arthur departs from a narrower focus on systematic presentation and situates the ideal movement of capital within the realm of material process. The move establishes the basis for Arthur's own 'transformation procedure', worked out in Chapter 14: The Dual Ontology of Capital. The dual ontology is in reference to the ontological distinction between the material and ideal 'levels of reality'. Far from an affirmation of conventionally dualistic philosophy, this ontological dualism is symptomatic of capitalist modernity, where the idealist ontology of capital as a pure

social form is the synthetic result of historical process. Giving the transformation of values into prices an ontological base, rather than one based on quantity – that in effect results in a naturalisation of the value form – enables Arthur to abandon a quagmire of traditional Marxist debate. The distinction between value and price, for Arthur, is the distinction between two distinct ontological realms: that of the ideal movement of capital and that of material process. What Arthur refers to as the 'transformation procedure' requires comprehension of these two opposed systems of determination. So undertaken, there is no 'problem' as such. Instead, it becomes clear that price can only be derived through looking at the reproduction of capital as a system – which includes both capitalist and non-capitalist social relations – that in turn distorts the abstract capital relation.

The dual ontology of Arthur's systematic dialectic is where the potential to undermine the political limits of Hegelian logical forms can be found. This is where Arthur departs from other value-form theorists, such as Moishe Postone. However, despite recognising the necessary double ontology required to grasp the mediation between the abstract and the concrete, it is not clear how Arthur might conceive the concrete as a distinct ontology. While this exclusion enables what is perhaps the most robust study of the concept of capital within Hegelian Marxism to date, neglecting scrutiny of the ontological basis for non-capitalist objects, or 'capital's other', renders the form of power exercised by capital obscure. What philosophy of nature, life and the material can illuminate the 'other' upon which capital acts?

Perhaps these are challenges with which the reader and future scholarship is intended to grapple. The necessity of doing so is negatively manifest in a book as intentionally limited in focus as Arthur's. Collective scholarship that integrates the systematicity of pure form with concrete epistemology – giving philosophical meaning to non-capitalist materiality – is needed not only to piece together the enormity of global capitalism but to interpret where room for capital's counter-subject can be affirmed. Without so doing, theory risks disregarding the impartial, uneven (and political) ways that value forms determine concrete life. While we need a robust concept of capital to delineate the specific abstract power unique to the capitalist mode of production, we also need something akin to Marx's unsystematic address thereof. This is because the

concrete ‘other’ of capital, which functions as its conditions of possibility and medium of reproduction, contains distinct ontological compulsions of its own, resisting and morphing value’s forms of appearance. Extensions to the Arthurist project should turn their attention this way.

While Arthur’s analysis eschews ‘application’ to the empirical and historical contexts of abstract forms and their concrete bearers, Arthur does point to where possibility lies within the dynamic of the self-reproduction of the pure forms of capital. Arthur’s philosophically systematic theory of ‘pure form’ could be construed as the insistence that we must fully understand the social form of capital if we are to achieve conscious understanding of the historical material realm and act strategically. For Arthur, doing so necessitates that one interprets capital as a social ontology, where abstract social forms mediate the concrete world asymmetrically to pursue their own self-reproduction at the expense of life and the natural world.

*The Spectre of Capital* provides scholarship with a philosophical lens adequate to capital’s abstract forms.

Self-restricted to ‘pure theory’, Arthur addresses the principles of capital’s social form in abstraction from their empirical history. What results, however, offers up an epistemic resource for historically informed empirical study. So framed, ‘Arthurism’ might enable analysis to grasp the underpinning form of power behind historical development all the better. In this sense, the theoretical basis Arthur ventures establishes the groundwork for a political analysis and practice more fully aware of its opponent, granting insight into capital’s compulsions, determinations and preconditions. Without better understanding capital’s reproduction of social forms – and, correlatively, the question of why human agents continue to act as personifications of capital – actors, theoretical and practical, will fail to see the stakes of particular actions. Empirical analysis, as such, requires a robust understanding of abstract logical forms both to grasp the present and to envisage social life’s reproduction without capital. *The Spectre of Capital* is an imperative contribution to this ongoing project.

Rebecca Carson

## Exiled sounds

Sam Dolbear and Esther Leslie, *Dissonant Waves: Ernst Schoen and Experimental Sound in the 20th century* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2023). 320pp. £32.00 hb., 978 1 91338 056 4

Sam Dolbear and Esther Leslie’s book on the life and work of Ernst Schoen confronts two not dissimilar problems of memory and writing. How to write about radio, a form not reducible to denotation? And, how to depict a life of which the record is limited and partial?

As far as an analysis of Schoen’s main medium is concerned, Dolbear and Leslie’s task is aided by the fact that Schoen’s unpublished manuscript *Broadcasting: How It Came About* has been preserved along with magazines and programmes from the station that employed him, even if recordings for so many of the programmes he produced have not.

As for the second problem concerning limited biographical source material, this may be addressed through the use of conjecture and supposition. But there are manifold risks to such an endeavour; the biographer is pulled

between loyalty to the presentation of experience in all its erratic messiness and the neat linearity of narrative. These dilemmas are all the more likely to confront those who document people and events at the fringes of official history. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, her account of black feminist rebellions in New York and Philadelphia in the early twentieth century, Sadiya Hartman insists that studies of those made marginal to history must confront the boundaries of the archive and exclusivity of documentary records. The historian must, Hartman argues, press ‘at the limits of the case file and the document, speculate about what might have been, imagined things whispered in dark bedrooms and amplified moments of withholding, escape and possibility.’

In their study of Schoen, Dolbear and Leslie opt for a different biographical strategy, which they call,