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**MUTE COMPULSION:
A MARXIST THEORY
OF THE ECONOMIC POWER
OF CAPITAL**

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Why has capitalism not already collapsed? In fact, it has been strengthened, even withstanding crises that that could have threatened its dominance in the past two decades. In *Mute Compulsion*, Danish political philosopher Søren Mau treats the described problematic as a key point of departure. Focusing on capital generally and its exercise of power in particular, Mau dialectically unravels a series of historical and contemporary central contradictions in an attempt to critically reformulate Marx's ideas in a novel conceptual synthesis of *economic power* – a form of power that chiefly operates according to impersonal economic necessity rather than ideology or violence.

The idea of “mute compulsion” in the book's title is traced back to Marx's *Capital* and rigorously expanded by Mau, who seeks to explain the power dynamics of capital by showing the compulsive logic inscribed in any society where markets have become a dominant form of mediating social production. Here, *mute compulsion* takes the form of the “*silent, unremitting pressure*” of property relations, and “*does not directly address the worker*”, but instead “*addresses the material environ-*

ment of the worker, or, more specifically, the material conditions of reproduction” (p. 133). This force quietly operating in the background is enabled by the mediation of societal relations based on the logic of capital, that is, through the compulsive and unremitting “*valorisation of value*”.

Mau's core argument is presented in a dialectical fashion, relying heavily on abstraction and only later moving to the concrete. This approach is reflected in the book's structure made up of three main sections: *Conditions*, dealing with the social ontology of economic power, human nature, life and its conditions; *Relations*, displaying how economic power is materialised in sets of vertical and horizontal relations and enables the valorisation of value; and *Dynamics*, using the concept of formal and real subsumption to highlight how capital sustains itself on a global scale, by way of ‘revolutions’ in agriculture and logistics, and also via crises of overproduction and financial breakdowns.

Mau first considers power. Distinguishing himself from the Foucauldian tendency to “*ignore property relations*” (p. 36), Mau navigates the Marxist tradition of analysing power primarily through the dynamics of violence and ideology. Finding the former has been misappropriated by mechanistic, vulgar orthodoxy and the latter to be unsatisfactory following a series of humanist interpretations on one side and static (post-)Althusserian structuralism on the other, Mau sees a blind spot with regard to studies of economic power – a distinct form of power historically

linked to the capitalist mode of production.

Mau claims that economic power emerged not with the appearance of surplus labour *per se*, but with the emergence of classes. While tracing the origins of class, Mau turns to human labour as a natural process in which human beings are differentiated from animals by their capacity to produce their means of subsistence beyond the immediate needs of the individual. The *possibility* of class thus arises from humans' natural capacity to produce surplus labour, thus making the question of class domination one of *separating life from its conditions*; namely, forming a bare life (proletariat), separate from the means of production of surplus labour, that then produces for a dominant class. Mau demonstrates how this possibility led to the historical dispossession of humans' own bodies. If tools are, as Mau argues (via Joseph Fracchia), extensions of the human body and parts of its metabolism – that is to say, they (from the hammer to the machine) represent the *possibility* of surplus labour, producing beyond one's needs – the private accumulation of tools inserts itself directly into the gap between *human life and its conditions*. Rather than the leash of violence or the lies of ideology, it is this ontological gap that is the fundamental territory of economic power, which weaves itself into the very fabric of the human metabolism.

Mau then faces the task of showing how this form of power is deeply embedded in societal relations. The fact that its impersonal and anonymous character stems directly from capital –

which as an emergent property¹ of social relations, *is* value, maintained and perpetuated in and through circulation – leads Mau to logically shift his gaze to value-form theorists and the *Wertkritik* school (Moishe Postone; Michael Heinrich; *Neue Marx Lektüre*). Mau critically intervenes in the interpretation of the value-form of impersonal power in capitalism, which claims such power relies on ensuring that value and valorisation dominate everything and everyone. Not satisfied with this level of abstraction, Mau convincingly demonstrates how value-form theorists by and large ignore the very constitution of conditions that give rise to the possibility of valorisation and commodity circulation itself; namely, the constitution of class and competition.

By demonstrating the criticality of both vertical and horizontal sets of relations within capitalism, Mau begins to unfold the materialisation of mute compulsion: it is *class* which, based on labour being the only commodity capable of generating value when *used*, facilitates the circulation of value in the famous formula *M-C-M'*; and it is competition between *many capitals* that executes the logic of *capital* in general; as in, the logic of valorisation. When coupled together, these two mechanisms represent Mau's elegant conceptualisation of economic power. Since it is the logic of *capital in general*, rather than many capitals, that competition

¹ Here, Mau relies heavily on Andreas Malm's critique of Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and other 'new materialists' by employing a distinction between subjects and their emergent properties, which allows him to ascribe power to capital as a 'social logic', rather than as a social actor or a Hegelian subject.

executes, it becomes reductive to speak of personal domination and despotism akin to slave-ownership or feudalism; and as value presupposes class rather than vice-versa, it becomes clear how the domination of *everything and everyone* to value is merely a secondary expression of the vertical class domination required for capitalist exchange (rather than the *bad, infinite process* of simple circulation) to exist in the first place.

In this process of unfolding, another core problematic appears: if the separation of life from its conditions of reproduction is a necessity for capital, how and where does societal *reproduction* take place? The question of reproduction is unambiguously crucial for capital – but while many emotional and caregiving aspects of reproduction have indeed been thoroughly commodified, childcare and birth-giving remain left outside its immediate influence. Mau draws heavily on Marxist feminism (Lise Vogel, Michele Barrett, Cinzia Arruza) to emphasise capital's reliance on there always being a structural dependence of those who have children on those who do not – yet crucially, capital cares not for the identity of the said groups. Moving beyond essentialist determinations of women and 'the patriarchy', Mau describes how the oppression of women is a historically specific phenomenon more than a general tendency of capitalism; based on this vital insight, the essentialism of racism and capital's supposed structural dependence on its historically particular forms are also dispelled. Mau underlines how both racism and sexism are necessary for capital; yet cautions against the

popular interpretation that it is capital which *spawned*, rather than *intensified and re-purposed*, them in a historically specific manner in the pursuit of the valorisation of value.

Working through the division of labour, deskilling, and the technical organisation of production, Mau shows how mute compulsion plays a critical role not only in domination, but in the capitalist drive to development, namely, the optimisation of extraction of surplus value. From water to steam, steam to oil and oil to electricity, Mau argues that mute compulsion has a valuable role in explaining how capital's pathways of optimisation have sometimes taken the path of *most*, rather than *least*, resistance; breaking strikes, separating itself from the confines of nature, driving entire branches of production into bankruptcy and increasing the technical composition of labour in costly processes that are not necessarily 'more productive', but instead are more appropriate for guaranteeing a more consistent inflow of surplus value. Mau concludes his analysis by presenting a brief overview of formal and real subsumption based on examples of the logistics revolution, the 'green revolution' and capitalism's proneness to crisis.

Mute Compulsion achieves its goal of formulating a concept of economic power of capital beyond the violence-ideology couplet. In his book, Mau provides robust and meticulous arguments that cut through several established schools and strains of Marxist thought, filling the very real gap of conceptualising power materialistically. Still, given its otherwise grand con-

ceptual scope, the somewhat striking omission of imperialism and its particular manifestations of contemporary geopolitical hierarchies of unequal exchange slightly tarnishes the final chapters on the *Dynamics* of economic power around the world.

Nevertheless, by meticulously unveiling his dialectical argument, Mau shows precisely how capital has a circular structure – in other words, it “*posits its own presuppositions*” through the *very exercise* of its own power (p. 295).

“*No one is in control, and there is no centre from which power radiates; instead, capitalist society is ruled by social relations morphed into real abstractions whose opaque movements we call ‘the economy’*” (p. 314). In the end, capital has not collapsed precisely because crises are not simply a threat but, as Mau demonstrates, are at the same time an essential source of its own power.

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