III

REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

SØREN MAU, MUTE COMPULSION: A MARXIST THEORY OF THE ECONOMIC POWER OF CAPITAL, NEW YORK: VERSO, 2023

Damir Zejnulahović
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

Søren Mau's *Mute Compulsion: a Marxist theory of the economic power of capital* begins with a rather familiar question, namely, "how is it even possible that a social order [capitalism] so volatile and hostile to life can persist for centuries?" (3). Despite the familiar question, Mau's answer is innovative and original, based upon a theoretical grounding of a specific form of power embedded in the economic process, power wielded by capital itself, which stems from the core, essential features of the capitalist mode of production. Mau's work follows Marx doubly, as he works on the same level of abstraction as Marx but also expands on lesser-known observations Marx made in his later works. The book is divided into three parts, beginning with the examination of conditions that underpin the economic power of capital, then moves on to a discussion of the fundamental social relations which exist in the capitalist mode of production, and culminates with an exploration of the dynamics of economic power and its manifestations.

The first part of the book, simply titled *Conditions*, includes five chapters. The first two chapters are dedicated to the meaning of power as it appears in the writings of Marx, as well as other thinkers, be they Marxists or not. Mau's understanding of capital as a social logic, a constant movement of ever increasing valorisation of value, appears as a problem when trying to understand the notion of power, since it seems impossible to claim that a social logic can be viewed as a subject wielding power. Instead of conceptualising capital as a subject endowed with a conscious agency, Mau proposes we think of capital as an emergent property resulting from the organisation of parts of a wider system, thus having the possibility to impose its logic on social life, which can be defined as power. Defined as such, economic power of capital can be differentiated from the coupling of coercion and ideology, while the state, understood as the political form of capital is a necessary condition which enables mute compulsion. Chapters three and four are focused on the questions of human nature and social ontology. After revisiting, and agreeing with, Althusser's claim that Marx broke with a humanist critique of capitalism after 1845. Mau stresses that Marx's critique of political economy is underlined by a social ontology which relies upon a

notion of human nature. Human nature is then explored in terms of metabolism and needs, both of which are socially mediated. In order to fulfil those needs human beings create tools, understood by Mau as organs, but with a crucial difference, as tools are much easier to separate from the body than other organs. Thus, the human metabolism is doubly mediated, by social relations and by tools. This double mediation opens a near unlimited number of possibilities of organising the human metabolism. In chapter five, Mau shows how the social dialectically emerges from nature, giving rise to human history, understood as a possibility of different modes of production. Human capacity for surplus labour also enables a potentiality of its appropriation, and one way this extraction can take place is through separating life from its condition, or put into other terms, separating workers from their tools by means of property relations. A place for the economic power of capital is thus created as social 'relations of domination can reproduce themselves by becoming enmeshed in the reproduction of social life' (119).

Part two, *Relations*, consists of four chapters and deals with the core social relations which constitute the capitalist mode of production. Following Robert Brenner's distinction, Mau divides these relations in two groups: vertical relations between the producers and the exploiters and horizontal relations between the producers themselves and the exploiters themselves. In chapter six, class is defined as 'a relation of a group of people to the conditions of social reproduction' (129) while the proletariat is defined by the radical split between life and its condition. By entering the capital relation, proletarians become workers and are unified with the conditions of their reproduction, but under the logic of capital, thus making the reproduction of capital the condition of reproduction of life. This shows us that the power of capital, the mute compulsion, is forced upon every worker and that it has an impersonal and transcendental character. Chapter seven deals with social differences, such as oppression based on gender or race, that are often used to strengthen the power of capital. Ultimately, Mau concedes that even though it is evident that these, and other, social differences are an inherent and necessary part of the logic of capital, they fall outside the framework of the book, as it deals with an abstracted form of the capitalist mode of production. In chapters eight and nine, the focus shifts on the market as one of the mechanisms of the power of capital which determines the horizontal relations through value and competition. Value is seen, in line with the advances in value-form theory, as a specific form of coordinating production since production is done privately but at the same time all production is mutually dependent. Competition is likewise defined as a mechanism which forces individual capitalists to compete for the accumulation of capital and forces the proletarians to compete to work, to become workers. As in the case of the capital relation, we are dealing with an impersonal form of domination, but, this time, regardless of class position, the domination of the market is universal.

Part three of the book, *Dynamics*, delves into the consequences of the economic power of capital, the manifestations of it and the effects it produces. Chapters ten, eleven and twelve explore the real subsumption of labour, as well as the subsumption of nature. Real subsumption is a concept designed to capture the way in which capital continually remoulds the social and material aspects of the production process. In the case of labour, real subsumption is driven by the need of reorganizing labour processes to combat the resistance imposed by class struggle and by the power exerted by

competition. These modifications deepen the dependence of humans to capital simultaneously strengthening the power of capital, leading to a paradoxical conclusion that the 'one of the sources of the power of capital is the very exercise of this power' (226). Mau provides two concrete examples of these modifications, one concerning nature, through an encroachment of the logic of capital into agriculture, and the second through the logistics revolution. The process of real subsumption, now encroaching ever deeper and ever wider, moves capital ever closer to remoulding the whole world in its logic. Finally, chapter thirteen deals with the creation of relative surplus populations and crises, both being a cyclical result of the capitalist mode of production, and both having the potential to reaffirm the power of capital.

In summary, *Mute compulsion* succeeds in articulating a distinct theory of economic power which is 'rooted in the ability to reconfigure the material conditions of social reproduction' (5). The sheer breadth of topics explored in the book, related to different strands of Marxism can be overbearing. The structure of the book enables the reader to keep a clear focus on the main path of argumentation, but one feels that there sometimes was an attempt to say everything at once, which necessarily leads to some subjects not having enough attention put on them. Even though Mau constantly reminds us of the dangers of deriving political strategy from highly theoretical arguments, it would be a disservice to downplay the importance of a more complete understanding of the chains that stop us from plucking the living flower of a free life.