



# Unthinking *Capital*: Conceptual and Terminological Landmarks

Sociology

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/0038038516658398

soc.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

In this article I take issues with some Eurocentric limits of the two contradictions of capital: capital/labour and capital/nature. These limits are exposed by elaborating on two theoretical insights from researches in critical race studies and indigenous political ecologies: respectively *thingification* and *uncommon*. These insights produce a tension between colonialism and capitalism, which calls for a post-Eurocentric process of concept formation. This reconceptualization of capital is pursued through the notion of *muri*, which the Japanese thinker Uno Kōzō deployed to designate a bold non-western pathway to reading *Capital*. The article elaborates and formulates three conceptual and terminological landmarks to unthinking capital for a global social theory.

## Keywords

accumulation, destruction, indigeneity, *muri*, slavery, thingification, uncommon, unproductive consumption

‘Many errors,’ said Mr. K., ‘arise because those who are talking are not interrupted at all or not frequently enough. Thus there easily arises a deceptive whole, which since it is whole, which no one can deny, also appears to be true in its individual parts, although in fact they are only true as parts of the whole.’ (On Systems, Brecht, 2001: 93)

## Introduction

Does capital remain a central category of sociological thinking after the crisis of legitimacy of western understanding of the world and its unilateral, parochial inability to come to terms with global, colonial and imperial pasts? This heuristic question uncovers a profound fallacy that current social theory inherited from classical sociology: they both

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neglect the colonial formation of capital from an epistemological, rather than from a historical point of view. On the one hand, the political economy of slavery, resources extraction, land grabbing, plantation system, racial hierarchization of global workforce, long-distance trade monopolies, military imperialism are all adduced to explain capitalism and the forces behind its global pervasiveness (Frank and Gills, 1990; Quijano, 2007). On the other hand, in spite of this narrative and explanatory relevance, social theory shrinks back in front of the ongoing collective effort to globalize and decolonize the categorical apparatus deployed to render the significance of these phenomena intelligible, as well as its colonial vocabulary and Eurocentric biases visible (Connell, 2015). Louis Althusser (1972: 166) extolled that Marx had discovered an entire continent: the continent of History. Unfortunately, no territorial discovery by European Man came without colonization. Franz Fanon (2004: 15) revealed that ‘the colonial subject is a man penned in; apartheid is but one method of compartmentalizing the colonial world. The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits.’ In the epistemic territory of social thought, the reiteration of the western canon with its fundamental categories is instrumental in confining colonial subjecthood together with its counter-hegemonic standpoints within the boundaries of an epistemological apartheid. To preserve the colonizer’s privileges in the realm of the production of knowledge, conceptual boundaries are tightly patrolled: what refuses to conform to dominant social thought, exceeding its horizons and questioning its authority, is rejected beyond the borders of concept formation; its theoretical constituency flattened with the compliant tone of paternalism or tinged with the caricatural palette of exoticism. In what follows, instead, I expose some of the limits inherent in the Eurocentric formation of Marx’s concept of capital and bring into consideration some radical counter-hegemonic insights about slavery and indigeneity in order to elaborate and finally formulate three conceptual and terminological landmarks to unthinking *Capital*.

Marx relentlessly affirmed that capital is not a thing; capital is a social relation. As such, it points to a twofold constitutive outside: ‘labour as not capital’ and ‘nature as not capital’. For this reason, slavery and indigeneity, as I shall argue, are necessary to de-centre and reformulate the two entangled contradictions of capital: capital/labour and capital/nature. But while the capital/labour contradiction is central in Marx’s *Capital*, the capital/nature contradiction is a more recent theoretical advancement, prompted by growing *lato sensu* ecological preoccupations (Foster, 2000; O’Connor, 1988).<sup>1</sup> Because of this syncopated genealogy, the ‘second’ contradiction has been first posited as a new category from the hints of its presence in *Capital*, and then lifted from its subordination to the ‘first’ contradiction. To contemporary social theory, the two contradictions express altogether Marx’s ‘trinity formula’ *capital–labour–land*.<sup>2</sup> Enrique Leff (1992: 110, emphases added) elucidates that:

*Capital*, as a theory of the capitalist mode of production, is based upon the contradiction between labour and capital inasmuch as capital exploits the worker, who produces more value in a work-day than he or she receives in the form of a salary for the reproduction of his or her labourpower. This basic principle of contradiction is reproduced in the realization process of the merchandise as a crisis of overproduction and underconsumption. The ‘second contradiction’ appears as the *self*-destruction of capital’s conditions of production – labourpower, space and

environment – and the *self*-production of resource scarcity and limited capital accumulation, thus generating an underproduction crisis. Marx perceived this contradiction this way: the productive forces generated by the crisis of capital combine in such a way as to exhaust the natural force of man and nature.

Bringing slavery and indigeneity back into the process of concept formation of capital as a social relation provides current social thought with a viable path to tackle specific theoretical inadequacies associated with either exploitation of labour, or *self*-destruction of value, or *self*-production of scarcity. But in front of Marx's *Capital*, the effort to construct a global and post-Eurocentric social theory looks tied to two horses pulling in opposite directions. On the heterogeneous 'post-Marxist' or 'neo-Marxist' side, new histories and retrieved evidences that dare to destabilize fundamental Marxian tenets are purged from the uncanny elements they promise to install in the sociological imagination. So, for instance, issues of race and ethnicity are systematically downplayed to be eventually domesticated as epiphenomena of the underlying transformations in class relations (Pradella, 2014); analogously, the destruction of nature is translated into soil defertilization, peasantry pauperization, dispossession and overexploitation of natural resources typical of the passage from formal to real subsumption (Bernstein, 2000; Borrás and Franco, 2012; Smith, 2007). On the non-Marxist side of radical race and indigenous studies, conversely, the downplaying of race and nature in theories of colonial and postcolonial capitalist development is responsible for a more or less declared renunciation to rethink the conceptual core of the notion of capital.<sup>3</sup> This renunciation is based on the presumption that capital enjoys a rigid conceptual integrity in se, making it a theoretical *Moloch* instrumental to covering the all-encompassing racial domain of white supremacy with a socio-economic livery (Davies, 2007; Mills, 2003); or, otherwise, this renunciation is motivated with the equally reasonable scepticism in front of the academic habit of conceiving the devastation of nature and the annihilation of indigenous understandings of nature by relying exclusively on the alien colonial vocabulary of the western social sciences (Blaser, 2014; Hale, 2006).

I design a different pathway out of this impasse. It consists in an intertwined reading of Bhambra's *connected sociologies* and de Sousa-Santos' *diatopic hermeneutics* (Bhambra, 2014; De Sousa Santos, 2007). The pathway so conceived aims at informing, deforming and transforming the concept of capital by disclosing its significance to counter-hegemonic narratives and notions that solicit the elaboration of more adequate conceptual and terminological landmarks, whose cross-cultural semantics exceeds the theoretical archive of the western social sciences. This strategy of concept formation in global social theory is part and parcel of the theoretical approach I define 'teratologic' (Ascione, 2016: 1–27). My argument is articulated in three parts. The first part addresses some of the Eurocentric constraints that the capital/labour contradiction inherits from the epistemological disavowal of slavery; these constraints are explored by means of the tension between the commodification of labour and the *thingification* of personhood. The second part addresses some of the Eurocentric constraints that the capital/nature contradiction inherits from the epistemological disavowal of indigeneity; these constraints are explored by means of the tension between the destruction of the common and the emergence of the *uncommon*. Drawing on these decolonizing interventions, the third

section deploys the concept of *muri*, by which the post-Second World War Japanese thinker Uno Kōzō read Marx's *Capital* beyond its Eurocentric horizon, to conceptualize the impossibility of the logic capital to fully unfold according to its own rationale. The article concludes formulating three entangled landmarks to unthinking *Capital*, each one corresponding to one of these three parts, and suggests mobilizing them to re-conceptualize capital and capitalist destruction, respectively beyond accumulation and the dichotomy 'capitalist versus non-capitalist relations'.

## Slavery and the 'First' Contradiction

To gauge with how many enslaved bodies would have survived each transoceanic deportation from Africa and South Asia across the Pacific, the Indian and the Atlantic routes was a usual economic practice for slave-traders (Chatterjee and Eaton, 2006; Shilliam, 2015b; Williams, 1994). Employers of enslaved people concretely modelled their measure for profit upon an average calculation of the nutritional threshold (and other associated expenditures) demarcating the necropolitical threshold between the life and death of the slave (Levy, 2014).<sup>4</sup> This practice proved so efficient for slaveholders that during the 1850s two of them, Hughes and Fitzhugh, among the early founding fathers of US sociology, came to argue that slavery was certainly more convenient, remunerative and specifically 'modern' than free labour, which conversely was considered the hallmark of capitalist modernity by their coeval European social theorists (Magubane, 2016). But in spite of the substantial centrality of slavery in the political economy of colonialism, social theory has inherited (and reproduces) from classical sociology a rooted epistemological disavowal of slavery. This disavowal is now a site of contestation for those who engage with rethinking modernity from the standpoint of its racial foundations (Bhambra, 2016; Rebaka, 2010; Robinson, 2001). Marx, James Edward Ford III (2011: 24) recalls, 'refers to the overworked Negro and to how "the consumption of his life in seven years of labour, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system" rather than an extraordinary occurrence'. Nonetheless, Marx relegated the figure of the slave to a narrow historical and theoretical locus within the analytical architecture of *Capital*.

The epistemological disavowal of slavery against its analytical and historical relevance is a by-product of Marx's own method. Marx's method aimed at establishing what the main tendencies in society were, in order to accord priority to the salient traits of industrial society (McQuarie, 1978; Wardell, 1979). Paul Sweezy (1970: 16–17) clarifies that:

[Marx] had expressed the same judgment in the *Manifesto*: 'Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes facing each other – bourgeoisie and proletariat.' This relation must form the center of investigation [in *Capital*]. 'All social relations except that between capital and labour must be provisionally assumed away, to be reintroduced, one at a time, only at a later stage of analysis.'

Marx shared with classical political economy the clear-cutting dichotomy between 'free' and 'unfree' labour. Simply put, the slave is sold to the slaveholder as an all-encompassing property, while the wage worker is 'free' to sell his workforce for a limited amount of

time.<sup>5</sup> This dichotomy, encapsulated in the teleology of the succession of the forms of labour from slavery, to serfdom, to wage, legitimized two Eurocentric, historicist and racist assumptions that Marx shared with many of his contemporaries. The first assumption consists in the belief that being their entire existence a commodified good, slaves have no agency; as such, they are worse positioned than the peasantry and even the *lumpenproletariat* in front of capital, as historical subjecthood candidate to be the antithetical opposite to the capitalist class in the dialectics between capital and labour. The second is that, historically, slavery was a residual form of labour, since the process of commodification of labour would have led to the full proletarianization of global workforce and the demise of unfree labour.<sup>6</sup>

The misleading consequences of these assumptions have been questioned by the two connected decolonizing readings of Marx's own writings elaborated by Ford on *Capital* and by Robbie Shilliam on the *Manifesto*. Marx, they agree, did not expel slavery from the 'first' contradiction of capital. Rather he transmuted the slave into the recessive underside of the proletariat. The epistemological disavowal of slavery represents the foundational act of forceful silencing that enables the appearance of the western white male wage worker on the stage of modern history, and endows this historical figure with the role of outpost of the struggle of humanity for its emancipation from the chains of the capitalist mode of production. But the chains that Marx elevated to metaphorical simulacrum of the captivity of the wage workers are in fact forged in the theoretical smithery of what Shilliam names the 'slave analogy'. Shilliam (2015a) shows that the condition of slavery provided Marx and Engels with an ineludible analytical trope since the time of their early concern with 'scientifically' unfolding the hidden logic of capital.<sup>7</sup> The *Manifesto* could not have denounced exploitation suffered by European proletarians without Marx and Engels' continuous reference to the condition of slavery in antiquity and, *a fortiori*, without the enslaved Africans and the role their descendants played in the history of the Americas.<sup>8</sup>

The narrative marginalization of the slave in the *Manifesto* is the logical pre-condition for the epistemological disavowal of slavery in *Capital*. In the *Manifesto*, the analogy between class exploitation in European factories and the command over personhood of the slave in the plantations was the most powerful rhetorical tool to mobilize workers during the 1848 Parisian riots. In fact, the slave is palpable in the way Marx and Engels denounce the most detrimental and humiliating aspects of the dehumanizing conditions of the proletariat. In *Capital*, instead, Marx is more concerned with giving formal coherence to the 'scientific' analysis of the capitalist mode of production; therefore he encodes his theory into a nomothetic formalism that, while setting the interpretative frame for his narrative of exploitation and struggles, at the same time confines the recessive slave in both *Capital's* prose and style. This is why Derrida's hermeneutical method serves Ford's purpose to rescue 'the slave' from the textual supplements, footnotes, excised notes and appendices of *Capital*, where Marx had relegated her/him. In the middle passage between the *Manifesto* and *Capital*, Marx 'whitened' the alleged universal logic of capital through a process of concept formation, which progressively sank its black foundations.<sup>9</sup> Within the Eurocentric and colonial episteme to which Marx belonged, this strategy was adequate to ground the 'iron laws of history' on the terrain of an objective theoretical construction, ethnocentrically meaningful within the ruling colonial regime of knowledge validation.

Conversely, acknowledging the way racial biases crystallize in the concept of capital and simultaneously dissolve their whiteness into method, calls for a severe critique of the labour-value theory. It suggests changing the terms of the capital/labour relation, by bringing into consideration the silenced enslaved Black African as the crucial site for any attempt to conceive social forms of labour coercion in the modern world. The unmuted slave tells histories of humiliation but also tales of liberation and redemption (rather than exploitation and emancipation) of lived enslaved humans (Shilliam, 2012). As far as slavery is concerned, it places its epistemological constituency into the core of the 'first' contradiction. In fact, analogy marks an epistemological difference from the mere metaphor, inasmuch as it does not convey a form of *representation* of a historical and social condition. Rather it refers to multiple ways of articulating a common underlying reality. When the language of the analogy is suspended, there emerges a strident dissonance between the white Eurocentric theoretical construction of the capitalist mode of production and the colonial and postcolonial worldly (dis)order experienced globally by racialized subjects. This dissonance does not pertain to an ontological irreconcilability, rather to the racial articulation of the epistemological separation and hierarchization between the figure of the slave and the figure of the wage worker. For this reason whereas Marx saw the commodification of labour in industrial society as privileged analytical locus, Aimé Césaire focused his own understanding of modern capitalism on slavery and its long-term social consequences:

The core phenomenon to be addressed is not so much the alienation of the worker from the fruits of his/her labour power but rather, as Aimé Césaire puts it, the 'thingification' (*chosification* in French) of personhood through enslavement and its lasting racial legacies. In other words, while the industrial factory system alienates labour power (and its results) from the labourer via the technology of waged work, plantation slavery alienates the entire body and labour power of the person via the technology of racialization. (Shilliam, 2015a: 197)

Thinking from, with and through the colonial Caribbean, Césaire first opposed *thingification* to commodification, in his 1955 *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire, 2007). By this term, Césaire (2007) aimed at signifying the enduring violence involved in 'the effect of colonialism upon the personhood of the colonized'. For 'colonialism did more than just exploit labour: it "emptied" entire peoples of their culture' (Shilliam, 2012: 594). Under this respect, the racialized enslaved African was not only the necessary anthropological figure that endowed the ideological toolkit of the first Portuguese and Spanish colonizers with the cultural coordinates to encode the subjugation and extermination of indigenous peoples wherever they encountered them, to paraphrase Franz Fanon (Pagden, 1986).<sup>10</sup> Achille Mbembe (2015) argues for the global relevance of thingification in the contemporary postcolonial world too: thingification is the logical premise and the primal force of global colonial capitalism as a whole. Capitalism, paradoxically, implements a very detrimental form of equality, which stands as the underside of the equality professed by the Enlightenment: humans as such, and not only their commodified workforce for a limited amount of time per day, can be legitimately transformed into things of reproduction, production and exchange.

Reconfiguring the 'first' contradiction through the conceptual and terminological lens of thingification calls for de-centring exploitation and violence from the strict connection between performed work and remuneration, to incorporate them into the multilayered entangled dimensions that are essential to govern the relation between existence and the modes of social production, reproduction and exchange on a worldly level. Fanon acutely foresaw the subversive theoretical power of unveiling the salient traits of the socio-economic configurations of power through the racial technologies in place in the colonial worlds:

The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality. Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. (Fanon, 2004: 5)

Once the colonial essence of modernity is exposed, the 'first' contradiction becomes a broader and deeper instance of capital in the global world. It embodies complex and shifting combinations of racial technologies of discrimination and control within an articulated matrix of forms of social coercion, violence and humiliation. The 'first' contradiction refers to the drive of thingification (rather than merely commodification) towards the annihilation and mortification of the human (rather than only the accumulation of capital), and the resistance that humans (rather than mainly workers) oppose to dehumanization occurring within the concrete transient social *tropoi* where the biopolitics of thingification materialize.

## Indigeneity and the 'Second' Contradiction

Thingification concerns fundamental theoretical dimensions of the detrimental effects of colonial capitalism upon human life that Marx's theory of labour-value had underplayed. Thus it inherently bridges the 'first' and the 'second' contradiction. As Escobar (2008: 93) explains, in fact, the 'second' contradiction

brings to the fore the conditions of production, insufficiently theorized by Marx but placed at the center of the inquiry by Polanyi. A condition of production is defined as those factors that are not produced as commodities, that is, according to the law of value, even if they are treated as such; this includes those aspects that Polanyi called 'fictitious commodities', such as land (nature), labour (human life), space and many general and communal conditions of production.

*Capital* is inhabited by the idiosyncratic co-existence of two seemingly contradictory assertions: 'labour is the father of wealth while land is its mother' and 'the physical properties of commodities have nothing to do with their physical nature' (Marx cit. in Coronil, 2000: 91). It follows that the materiality of commodities is inseparable from their capacity to produce and represent wealth: being the basic unit of wealth in capitalism, commodity-form embodies both its natural form and its value-form. This would suffice to recognize that the social groups involved in the production of wealth cannot be circumscribed to those involved in the dialectics capital-labour (Coronil, 2000). For the



production of subjecthood associated with the dynamics of capitalist development is extended to considering land as part of the dialectics of capital, so that social groups directly affected by the processes of dispossession, extraction, production and resistance about their own land in the colonies have to be relocated into the world historical construction of global colonial capitalism since its onset.<sup>11</sup> But this way of sociologically conceptualizing the ‘second’ contradiction finds its limitation in the fact that even though nature is not reduced to a factor of production through the metonymic concept of land, indigenous communities are partly deprived of their own subjecthood. They are conceived mainly as an ethnic, or alternatively pre-modern or non-modern, articulation of the peasantry. Indigeneity, that refers synthetically to vastly heterogeneous peoples, histories and struggles, would thus manifest limitedly to the tactic resistance opposed by indigenous communities to environmental devastation. In Marxian terms, indigeneity would connote the effort to preserve alternative use-values of which indigenous social organizations are bearers; as if the resistances against the dispossession of the commons embodied by indigeneity would be entirely determined by the power of capital as such to constantly producing social differences.

Conversely, taking seriously the potential of the irruption of indigenous subjecthood in the ‘second’ contradiction turns out to be a broader theoretical issue. It prefigures a detour from what exceeds the dialectics capital/nature to the borders of the logic of capital. For the way indigenous communities tell their own histories about the destruction of nature, as well as the way they map the devastation of the territories they inhabit or even the detrimental effects of colonialism and capitalism over non-human beings that cohabit those same territories, is at odds with existing categories of sociological thinking (Harding, 2011; Selin, 2003).<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Marisol De La Cadena (2015b: 3) recalls that colonization consisted not only in ecological devastation; rather in the annihilation of other worldviews about nature that did not conform with that of the colonizers: ‘[a] war waged against world-making practices that ignore the separation of entities into nature and culture – and the resistance to that war’. De La Cadena (2015b: 3) maintains that the indigenous resistance to annihilation is never extinguished, as its persistence over centuries proves that it exceeds destruction. Indigeneity, for her, refers to:

more-than-human assemblages, both in the usual sense (i.e., that they may include humans and nonhumans), and in the sense that these categories (human and nonhuman, and therefore species) are also inadequate to grasp such compositions, which as said above, may not become through these categories.

In order to clarify the relevance of this point for contemporary social theory, I use De La Cadena’s argument as a counterpunctual intervention that exposes some limits of sociological thinking.

In their path-breaking sociological conceptualization of commensuration, Espeland and Stevens (1998) convincingly describe the act of commensuration as an enduring form of social power in the modern world, as well as the fundamental grammar of *Capital*. For Marx, they remark, capital manifests in the first instance as a drive towards making what exists as concrete social differences (qualities) commensurable through value, money and abstract labour (quantities). For this reason, they describe radical social resistances in terms of *incommensurabilities*:



defining something as incommensurate is a special form of valuing. Incommensurables preclude trade-offs. An incommensurable category encompasses things that are defined as socially unique in a specific way. They are not to be expressed in terms of some other category of value. (Espeland and Stevens, 1998: 326)

For them the environmental struggles of the Native American Yavapai people settled in Arizona is exemplificative of this social form of resistance. When the Yavapai's ancestral land was threatened by the project of a dam, the Yavapai people opposed the project and declared their land incommensurable against state and corporate logic:

The rational decision models used by bureaucrats to evaluate the proposed dam required that the various components of the decision be made commensurate, including the cost and consequences associated with the forced resettlement of the Yavapai community. This way of representing Yavapai interests and expressing the value of their land was a contradiction of those values and of Yavapai identity. (Espeland and Stevens, 1998: 327)

De La Cadena, similarly, takes as an example the environmental conflict in the northern Andean region of Peru. Here the project of a dam raises the resistance of the indigenous community inhabiting the lagoon, which would exsiccate because of the dam. De La Cadena (2015b: 6) maintains that 'refusing to sell may also refuse the transformation of the entities into units of nature or the environment, for they are part of each other'. Differently from Espeland and Stevens, she emphasizes that indigenous people are not simply affirming that their land is incommensurable. Theirs is not a tactical response in the dialectics with capital, grounded in a traditional set of beliefs that does not allow for quantifying nature.<sup>13</sup> Instead, indigenous resistance is making visible a deeper epistemological awareness: the relation between capital and colonialism (and their agents), on the one hand, and indigeneity (and they as agent) on the other hand, irreversibly creates a new social reality that is neither entirely intelligible as commensurability that precedes the dispossession of a common, nor as the defence of nature as a sentient being; it exceeds both. This is evident when De La Cadena (2015b: 6) registers the voice of an iconic indigenous peasant woman that is one among the so-called guardians of the lagoon:

The woman's refusal would thus enact locally an ecologized nature of interdependent entities that simultaneously coincides, differs, and even exceeds – also because it includes humans – the object that the state, the mining corporation, and environmentalists seek to translate into resources, whether for exploitation or to be defended.

The resistance to environmental devastation from the perspective of indigeneity is not limited to an opposition about the uses of nature. It is not entirely intelligible as the struggle to defend the common against capital, even and importantly because it exceeds the grammar of *Capital*. It shows that the power that capital holds to reduce social realities to its own logic depends also on to what extent the relational nature of capital itself is concealed: being a social relation involving indigenous resistance, the capital/nature contradiction is deformed by indigeneity as far as the relation involving indigenous territory is concerned.

Moreover, what exceeds the grammar of *Capital* is not a dialectical synthesis that simply posits a new social reality that can be made once again transparent to social theory by means of the categories of value, common or commodification; it is rather a negative limit to knowledge: not a shared understanding, but the sharable awareness of a limit to understanding. De La Cadena (2015a: 63) designates the epistemological territory created by what resists destruction while simultaneously exceeding it, as the *uncommon*:

Differences that appeared through what we shared were intriguingly obvious, for they were part of our similarities as well. But there was also a lot that made us uncommon to each other and that could not be explained through the analytics of race, ethnicity, and class; these were markers that the Turpos and I could talk about, sometimes in agreement and other times in disagreement. Instead, what made us mutually uncommon also exceeded our comprehension of each other; the difference thus presented was also radical to both of us.<sup>14</sup>

The uncommon that emerges from the tension between indigeneity and the ‘second’ contradiction invites us to relocate conflicting understandings of nature into a more precarious, transient understanding of difference. An understanding that invokes less the ontological presence of alternative sets of assumptions about the world and more the relational contingent co-formation of knowledges about and within the world:<sup>15</sup>

What emerges through it is not a ‘mix’ of nature and human. Being composed as humans with nature – if we maintain these categories of being – makes each more. Entities emerge as materially specific to (and with!) the relation that *inherently* connects them. (De La Cadena, 2015b: 8, emphasis added)

Indigeneity interrupts the dialectics between capital and nature, to set the uncommon as a limit to what can be made fully transparent to western rationality through its own conceptual archive.

## The (Un)Thinkable Logic of Capital

As much as indigeneity places its epistemological constituency into the ‘second’ contradiction, slavery places its epistemological constituency into the ‘first’ contradiction. Their interplay calls for disclosing Marx’s trinity formula *capital–labour–land* to the relation it entails with what is ‘not capital’. Uno Kōzō’s post-Second World War analysis of the agrarian question in Japan offers a methodological route along this path.<sup>16</sup> Uno questioned the assumption of the contradictory nature of the relation between capitalist social relations and pre-existing non-capitalist social relations. Non-capitalist social relations were not always an impediment for capitalist development; in Marxian terms, they were not necessarily the notorious limits (not capital) that capital itself creates, which appear as barriers to overcome. Rather, what is considered ‘not capital’ can be analytically disarticulated into what opposes resistance to capital and what, instead, actively facilitates it:

The rural village structure which had formed the social basis of the *ancien régime* was thus seemingly dismantled through violence, yet at the same time, this was also in fact an expression of the planned balancing and harmonization of capitalist production . . . . the pastures, expanded to accommodate the goal of wool exports, offered raw materials to the domestic wool industry, and the peasantry, expelled from the land in precisely the same process, became the labouring proletariat, the force which spurred on the capitalist industrialization of the wool and other medieval industries, which were at that point still being managed and administered on the level of simple handicrafts. Thus the emerging proletariat was itself used as a powerful force of pressure in order to forcibly subordinate the existing artisans to capital. (Uno in Walker, 2012: 18)

Just as Quijano provoked a conceptual shift from the ‘colonial system’ to ‘coloniality’, Uno prefigured the possibility to not thinking in terms of the ‘feudal system’, but rather in terms of ‘feudality’ (*hōkensei*). Uno explains that:

the apparent existence of feudal relations in the countryside was not an indication that the actual full-blown feudal system remained on a partial basis, or that these relations were merely atrophied ‘remnants’ but rather it indicated something much more complex: feudal relations or feudal ‘sentiments’ were ‘maintained precisely as a sacrifice that enabled Japanese capitalism to develop without resolving the problems it itself posited’. (Walker, 2012: 29)

Non-capitalist relations provide the enabling conditions of possibility for the logic of capital to objectify itself: capital and non-capital reciprocally connect in a complex multilayered relationship of mutual necessity but reciprocal non-coincidence; yet this process remains always incomplete. The transformative violence of capitalism pertains co-extensively and originally to a violence that belongs also to the non-capitalist social relations themselves. It follows that the interactions, conflicts and negotiations between existing social relations and capital are not adequately conceived in terms of alien, mutually exclusive or ontologically irreconcilable historical formations.

But then the analytical trope of the transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production (as we know it) morphs from a theoretical problematique into a problematic barrier for sociologically conceptualizing the relation between capitalist and non-capitalist social relations beyond a teleological mindset. Why? Marx was unequivocal about the fact that:

it would be impractical and wrong to arrange the economic categories in the order in which they were the determining factors in the course of history. Their order of sequence is rather determined by the relation which they bear to each other in modern bourgeois society, and which is the exact opposite of what seems to be their natural order or the order of their historical development. (Marx in Sweezy, 1970: 16)

Nonetheless, whereas Marx thought that once the transition to the capitalist mode of production has occurred capitalist social relations irreversibly replace pre-existing social relations forever, Uno thought otherwise: capital and non-capital are inherently relational, co-constitutive, co-extensive and simultaneous.<sup>17</sup> As well as De La Cadena does, Uno also places a strong theoretical emphasis on the generative nature of relations. Walker figures out Uno’s understanding:

The 'leap' or 'inversion' is precisely what creates the two sides. By inverting, reversing, leaping, or 'passing through,' a planar surface or single topological field in extension is retroactively split into two, made to appear double, so that there becomes 'this side' and 'that side,' so that the historical process appears to be grounded on a set of uneven substances that pre-exist the moment when they are revealed. But prior to the moment of traversal, when a boundary or limit emerges that must be 'passed through,' the boundary or limit would merely be located as one moment of a single planar horizon, not something that marks the gap between two sides. (Walker, 2012: 30)

But even whereas one accepts that, in history, capitalist and non-capitalist relations reciprocally interpellate so that it becomes adequate to sociologically conceptualize them by giving priority to relations over formed entities, a problem remains: how to conceive simultaneously capital as a social relation that cannot pre-exist historically the connection it entails with what is external to it, on the one hand, and the logic of capital that, being capital's own inner integral rationality, has to necessarily pre-exist its own historical appearance, on the other hand. Uno answers this heuristic question affirming that:

the starting-point of the systematic logic of political economy must always 'presuppose' (*voraussetzen*) something purely irrational as the ground of the rationality of the historical process, which will then be 'retrojected' back onto the moment of origin in order to once again 'presuppose' it *as rational* ... the *schema* of capital must necessarily pre-exist its historical appearance. (Walker, 2012: 29, emphases in original)

Uno conceptualizes this impossibility as a *nihil* of reason, a negative limit overlapping with the epistemological territory of the uncommon. But Uno entrusts the semantic designation of this uncommon to the Japanese word *muri*. *Muri* means impossibility but also inefficiency and waste, thereby evoking both a limit to theorization of capital and its underside of irrecoverable loss.

As Walker notes, Uno 'makes a kind of *wager* on the possibility of a certain excessive formalism as the only means available to us to "express" the abstraction of the circuit process of capital' (Walker, 2012: 17, emphasis in original). Uno's critique of Marx's logic of capital takes place at the abstract level of the schema of realization. Here the concept of *muri* deforms the crucial Marxian notion of unproductive consumption.<sup>18</sup> For Marx, unproductive consumption is consumption that is not oriented towards investment for profit by capitalists; in a broader sense, consumption that does not culminate in the reproduction of the means of production. While logically the self-valorization of capital presupposes the abstraction of a society made only of two antagonist classes, with the owners of the means of production orienting their consumption to investment, and the workers consuming for their subsistence, historically – Marx concedes – the process of accumulation cannot exist if the schema of realization does not include the economic inefficiency and waste represented conceptually by unproductive consumption. Marx justified this circumstance by introducing an ad hoc hypothesis: a temporary status of exception.<sup>19</sup> But both historically and logically, this ad hoc hypothesis has proven a condition that is ineliminable and original rather than conjunctural and ancillary. Thus, the Marxian category of unproductive consumption formed a broad locus of further theoretical developments in social thought, ranging from Thorstein Veblen's conspicuous

consumption to Henryk Grossman or Tony Cliff's theories of the centrality of war in capitalism (see Cliff, 2003 [1957]; Grossmann, 1992 [1929]; Veblen, 2005 [1902]). As well as 'labour' is not reducible to wage because it also involves thingification of personhood, and 'nature' is not reducible to land as a factor of production because it involves the annihilation of other understandings of nature, the overall outcome of several sociological understandings of unproductive consumption is that destruction and waste are not reducible to the significance it enjoys in Marxian political economy. For conspicuous consumption of capital is not a zero-sum game where 'the unproductive consumption of capital replaces it on one side, annihilates it on the other' (Marx, 1993: 751); rather the habit of consuming luxury goods involves both material waste, social hierarchization, display of power and cultural hegemony.<sup>20</sup> And war is not reducible to a Keynesian variable where the production of the means of production couples with the production of the means of destruction, because it means both the destruction of value and the violent annihilation of the human.<sup>21</sup>

*Muri* exceeds unproductive consumption inasmuch as it offers a sociological conceptualization for those aspects of capitalist destruction that are not strictly confined within the destruction of value created by capital itself. Thinking with *muri* detaches destruction from the self-valorization of capital and its accumulation. It makes possible to rethink destruction with a relative theoretical autonomy from accumulation, thereby creating the conceptual locus of destruction per se. Destruction per se is not the side-effect of accumulation, because it displaces the alleged rationality of the self-contained logic of capital either from *self*-valorization through creative destruction aimed at re-establishing profitability, or from the *self*-destruction of its own material base to induce scarcity. Thus, destruction is not reducible to an ontological attribute of capital in se. Destruction per se connotes the reiterate co-formation of capital as a social relation that, for it is per se and not in se, it is actively co-formed by what is not capital. It follows that the logic of capital is unthinkable as fully rational in terms of accumulation, when its alleged rationality is subverted by the irrational drive to destruction per se. When launched beyond the epistemological barriers surrounding the theoretical core of *Capital*, Marx's motto 'Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake!' resonates with a powerful echo that Eurocentrism had silenced: *Destruction for destruction's sake!*

## Conclusion

Three conceptual and terminological landmarks to unthinking *Capital* have been elaborated so far: (1) the commodification of labour can be rethought in terms of the thingification of the human and humiliation of personhood; thingification is a condition of possibility of global colonial capitalist modernity as a whole rather than being circumscribed to the forms of 'unfree' labour; (2) the destruction of nature involves the annihilation of alternative understandings of nature. But the radical resistance these alternative understandings enact interrupts the grammar of *Capital* and displaces it into an uncommon epistemological territory: neither shared by, nor reducible to, one of the two sides of the colonial relation; (3) capital as a social relation does not connote any historical entity called 'capital'; rather it denotes the irrational dimension of violence and destruction per se that capital as social relation entails across different social formations. Whereas Marx

intended the movement from the concrete to the abstract in terms of temporary *reduction ad unum* of the conceptual complexity adequate to describe capital, the process of concept formation here proposed consists in complexifying the theoretical and semantic territory of capital, solicited by new decolonizing insights that offer alternative but not mutually exclusive views on the same processes that the concept of capital was originally designed to grasp. *Thingification*, *uncommon* and *muri* augment the heuristic power of the trinity formula but at the same time diminish the alleged ‘rationality’ of the logic of capital whereas it remains connoted prevalently in terms of accumulation. Capital–land–labour can be re-conceptualized with a hypostatic formula which makes explicit what had been disavowed: capital/*destruction* per se–labour/*slavery*–land/*indigeneity*. Whereas Marx understood hypostatization as the fallacy of reification of abstract notions, here hypostasis refers to the possibility to re-articulate in multiplex and heterogeneous forms the missing, silenced, hidden and removed epistemological dimensions of *Capital*. In this sense, capital as a social relation can be disclosed to a conception that shifts from its presumed integrity towards a plural understanding of the scattered, multiform ways through which the relations of violent annihilation and irreversible destruction reciprocally interpellate across different societal organizations, historical contexts, networks and configurations of knowledge.

### Acknowledgements

This article has benefited from comments by Gurminder Bhambra and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, as well as from hints by Sandro Mezzadra and Salvador Schazalvon.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Notes

1. The ongoing debate on Anthropocene in the social sciences inherits these preoccupations. It transposes the analysis of the modern world on the broader level of an *in fieri* geological frame where the rise and globalization of the capitalist mode of production, particularly with industrialization, is theoretically associated with the onset of a new era in the history of the planet (Capitalocene), characterized by irreversible processes of ecological devastation. See the contributions to Moore (2016).
2. In book III of *Capital* Marx (1995: 555) writes: ‘[c]apital, land, labour! However, capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character.’ And then he specifies that land is transformed into value through labour according to the fertility of the soil, since ‘alongside of this we have the land, inorganic nature as such, *rudis indigestaque moles*, [“A rude and undigested mass”, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book I, 7. — Ed] in all its primeval wildness. Value is labour. Therefore surplus-value cannot be earth’ (1995: 556).
3. Stuart Hall (2002: 258, emphases in original) admitted that ‘[w]hat has resulted from the abandonment of this deterministic economism has been, not alternative ways of thinking questions about the economic relations and their effects, as the “condition of existence” of other practices, inserting them into a “decentred” or dislocated way into our explanatory paradigms. But

instead a massive, gigantic and eloquent *disavowal*. As if, since the economic in its broadest sense, definitively does *not*, as it was once supposed to do, “determine” the real movement of history “in the last instance”, it does not exist at all!’ Mezzadra (2011: 155) denounces an analogous impasse of theory when he alerts that ‘by renouncing to a direct theoretical engagement with capitalism, many scholars working in the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies have in a way unconsciously validated the “objectivity” of its “structural” developments and laws’.

4. On the concept of *necropolitics* see Agamben (1995) and Mbembe (2003). It connotes the absolute power over human life that renders sovereignty a pure unilateral expression of the dominant social power to postulate and impose both the norm and the state of exception.
5. The distinction between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour is increasingly discredited in historiography. Claims of its conceptual inadequacy have been persistently raised in recent scholarship either in global labour histories of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial worlds (De Vito, 2013; Van Der Linden, 2008); or in European and Mediterranean histories of labour in the Middle Ages (Ehmer and Lis, 2009; Shatzmiller, 1994).
6. The persistence of slavery in global capitalism has been recurrently analysed under many respects. For a recent re-appraisal of this topic, see O’Connell Davidson (2015).
7. Already before drafting the *Manifesto*, while in Brussels in 1846–1847, Marx (2001: 94–95) affirmed in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that ‘[d]irect slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance. Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe out North America from the map of the world, and you will have anarchy – the complete decay of modern commerce and civilisation. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations. Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.’
8. The interest of Marx and Engels with non-western worlds affects their entire theoretical production. See Anderson (2016).
9. Evidences of this theoretical path emerge by bringing into consideration Marx’s *notebook V* in the *Grundrisse*. See in particular Marx (1993: 493–503).
10. ‘Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe’ (Fanon, 2004: 235).
11. The connection between the double nature of the commodity-form as Marx presents it since the very first pages of *Capital* and the spatial articulation of global colonial capitalism in its historical worldly development has been eloquently elaborated from a critical perspective that includes the role played by environmental and rural social movements in Latin America by Porto-Gonçalves (2006).
12. Walter Mignolo tackled the issue of indigeneity in terms of ontology and its relation with logic and language based on a thoughtful interpretation of Valentine Mudimbe’s path-breaking concept of *African gnosis*. See Mignolo (2000: 313–337).
13. This prejudice, to be sure, is one of the enduring heritages of the Eurocentric narrative of modern science that connotes the difference between western rationality and the ‘rest’ in terms of the drive towards the quantification of Nature, while global histories of science radically question this presumed uniqueness. See Joseph (2011).



14. Mariano and Nazario Turpo have been indigenous leaders engaged in the Andean network of environmental struggles, as well as for the recognition of indigenous rights.
15. On this point De La Cadena partly diverges from those theories that define worldviews in terms of ontology, where ontology refers to different sets of beliefs. See for instance Descola and Pálsson (1996).
16. Uno Kōzō's *opera omnia* has been published in the 1970s in 11 volumes. See Uno (1974).
17. Marx makes explicit that the transition to the capitalist mode of production is irreversible since his preliminary writings to *Capital* in the *Gründrisse* (Marx, 1993: 489–514). Some afterthoughts on the cogency of this assumption, instead, emerge only in his very last ethnological writings on non-western societies. See Krader (1974).
18. For a general introduction to the role of unproductive consumption in Marxian political economy see Becker (1977).
19. In Marx's words, '[b]ut as things actually are, the replacement of capitals invested in production depends to a large extent on the consumption capacity of the non-productive classes; while the consumption capacity of the workers is restricted partly by the laws governing wages and partly by the fact that they are employed at a profit for the capitalist class' (Marx, 1992: 530, emphasis added). Elsewhere Marx claims that '[t]he capitalist mode of production, while on the one hand, enforcing economy in each individual business, on the other hand, begets by its anarchical system of competition, the most outrageous squandering of labour power and of the social means of production, not to mention the creation of a vast number of employments, at present indispensable but in themselves are superfluous' (Marx, 1992: 667).
20. As far as conspicuous consumption is concerned, Baudrillard's critique of consumer society beyond the Marxian logic of accumulation remains essential. See Baudrillard (1993).
21. Bukharin (1982 [1920]: 52–53) wrote about destruction in the following terms: 'a cannon cannot be transformed into an element of a new productive cycle; gunpowder explodes into thin air and does not reappear during the ensuing cycle ... war is accompanied by a "distorted", regressive, negative character of the reproduction process'. As Callinicos (2009: 58–63) notes, notwithstanding that both Grossman and Bukharin grasped some key dynamics in the relation between military expenditure, capital accumulation and imperialism, their approach was discredited because its validity was tested against its (in)ability to predict the mechanisms of the fatal crisis of capitalism.

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**Date submitted** October 2015

**Date accepted** June 2016