

Marx's Conception of Dialectical Contradiction in Commodity

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Abstract

In this paper, I clarify the structure of dialectical contradiction in Marx in order to show how it is influenced by Hegel. To this aim, I focus on the only place where Marx systematically develops the concept of dialectical contradiction, namely, in his analysis of commodity in the first chapter of *Capital*. Here Marx claims that the commodity is the contradictory unity of use-value and exchange-value. To make this claim intelligible, I first discuss Hegel's conception of 'the thing' [*Das Ding*] in the *Science of Logic* and demonstrate how for Hegel 'the thing' is the contradictory unity of matter and form. With this Hegelian machinery, then, I turn to Marx to show how use-value and exchange-value constitute the matter and the form of commodity, and argue how they contradict each other.

I. A typology of contradictions in Marx

Perhaps *the* central difference between analytical and Hegelian readings of Marx is concerned with the concept of dialectical contradiction. The analytical readings either deny that there is such a concept as dialectical contradiction in Marx, or hold that, even if there is such a concept, it is a remnant of Hegel's confused and obscurantist heritage and thus must be discarded.¹ By contrast, the Hegelians believe that at foundational level what is distinctive about Marx's way of thought is dialectics, that dialectical contradiction constitutes the kernel of Marx's dialectics, and, finally, that Marx's conception of dialectical contradiction is heavily influenced by Hegel.

The concept of contradiction in Marx is polysemic, and the first step towards understanding the nature of dialectical contradiction is to distinguish it from two other types of contradiction that can be found in his work, what I call 'theoretical' and 'practical' contradiction.² By the former, I mean inconsistency in a theory. Most often, the inconsistency at issue is not explicit; it rather obtains between unstated presuppositions of the theory and its explicit claims. Because Marx is

occasionally presented as an irrational thinker, I need to emphasize the obvious point that Marx is fully committed to theoretical consistency. Indeed, one of the major methods that Marx uses to criticize other political economists is to show how their theories suffer from contradiction. To illustrate, in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx criticizes John Stuart Mill for presupposing Ricardo's theory of profit, according to which the source of profit is *exclusively* labour. And yet, Mill claims that profit partly originates from the abstinence of the capitalist in spending his capital. Therefore, according to Marx, Mill commits a theoretical contradiction in that he, Mill, at the same time accepts and rejects Ricardo's theory of profit. Interestingly in this case, Marx emphatically distinguishes Hegel's (and his own) dialectical contradiction from the contradiction that amounts to sheer incoherence in Mill, and writes that Mill 'is as much at home with absurd and flat contradictions as he is at sea with the Hegelian contradiction, which is the source of all dialectics' [*So fremd ihm der Hegelsche Widerspruch, die Springquelle aller Dialektik, so heimisch ist er in platten Widersprüchen*] (C: 744/K: 623).³

While the first type of contradiction occurs in theories and makes them inconsistent, the second, practical type is the attribute of *counterproductive actions* or *dysfunctional systems*. More specifically, practical contradiction obtains when there is a tension or an antagonism between the goal of an action or a system, and the very means which are used to achieve such a goal. According to Marx, capitalism is burdened with practical contradictions, to the extent that it is constantly prone to crises that would undermine its viability as a whole. To illustrate Marx's conception of practical contradiction, let us consider the following passage from the second volume of *Capital*:

Contradiction in the capitalist mode of production. The workers are important for the market as buyers of commodities. But as sellers of their commodity—labor-power – capitalist society has the tendency to restrict them to their minimum price. Further contradiction: the periods in which capitalist production exerts all its forces regularly show themselves to be periods of over-production; because the limit to the application of the productive powers is not simply the production of value, but also its realization. However the sale of commodities, the realization of commodity capital, and thus of surplus-value as well, is restricted not by the consumer needs of society in general, but by the consumer needs of a society in which the great majority are always poor and must always remain poor. (C II: 391/K II: 318)

According to Marx, capitalist production tends to reduce the wage of workers to a minimum, and yet at the same time requires workers' purchasing power to realize

the value of commodities produced. Here there is a practical contradiction in capitalism: the accumulation of capital necessarily requires minimization of the wage of workers, which leads to the reduction of the effective demand, and that in turn halts the process of accumulation of capital. In other words, the very means (the reduction of wages) that capital necessarily deploys to achieve its goal (the attainment of surplus-value) undermines that goal.

While it is easier to at least initially grasp what theoretical and practical contradictions are, in the case of dialectical contradiction, we are immediately faced with difficulties. Hegel is particularly clear that the dialectical contradiction is ontological and obtains in reality. In the *Science of Logic*, he famously writes, ‘everything is inherently contradictory’ [*Alle Dinge sind an sich selbst widersprechend.*] (SL: 439/WL II: 74). But what could it possibly mean that ‘things’—rather than theories or actions—are contradictory? Faced with this question, the analytical readings of Marx throw the baby out with the bathwater and maintain that the dialectical contradiction is ‘nonsense’ and that theoretical and practical contradiction⁴ exhaust Marx’s legitimate usage of the concept of contradiction.⁵ Resisting the analytical readings, my aim in this paper is to give support to the camp of Hegelians. Namely, I will show that there is a distinct type of contradiction in Marx that cannot be reduced to the other two, and that Marx’s conception of dialectical contradiction is legitimate and rational.⁶

Although Marx promised in his letters to Engels to write a general treatise on dialectics, he never actually found time to do so.⁷ This leaves interpreters the difficult task of reconstructing the general theory of dialectical contradiction in Marx. This is not, however, the task I pursue in this paper. My aim is more modest. Namely, I solely focus on Marx’s analysis of commodity-form in the first chapter of *Capital* and carve out the structure of dialectical contradiction *in commodity*. Such a focus is justified on the ground that the analysis of commodity-form is the *only* place in Marx’s entire oeuvre where he systematically deploys and develops the concept of dialectical contradiction. It is noteworthy that Marx in the first edition of *Capital* concludes his analysis of commodity-form with an explicit reference to the notion of dialectical contradiction:

The commodity is the *immediate unity of use-value and exchange-value*, thus of two opposed entities. Thus it is an immediate *contradiction*. [*Die Waare ist unmittelbare Einheit von Gebrauchswerth und Tauschwerth, also zweier Entgegengesetzten. Sie ist daher ein unmittelbarer Widerspruch.*] (MEGA II/5: 51, original emphases).

Although Marx omits this statement in later editions of *Capital*, the statement, I believe, remains central to his analysis even in the later editions.⁸ In order to make sense of this statement, I begin with Hegel’s *Logic*. Like my limited focus

on Marx, I eschew delving into Hegel's (much-discussed, yet still not well-understood) general theory of dialectical contradiction.⁹ Rather, I focus on the contradiction of the 'thing' [*Das Ding*] in Hegel's *Logic*, and show how grasping the contradiction of the 'thing' for Hegel clarifies the contradiction of the commodity for Marx. As we will learn, Hegel conceives of the thing as the contradictory unity of form and matter. Likewise, commodity in Marx can be understood as the contradictory unity of form and matter, while the form of commodity for Marx can be taken as exchange-value and its matter as use-value. Tracking this route will show us how for Marx commodity is the contradictory unity of exchange-value and use-value, rendering the above mentioned programmatic statement of Marx intelligible.

II. The dialectical contradiction of the 'thing' in Hegel

In one place in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel describes his project in the 'objective logic' to be concerned with 'investigating the nature of *ens* in general' (*SL*: 63/*WL* I: 61). Accordingly, in this section, I reconstruct the objective logic on the basis of Hegel's conception of *ens* or object. Corresponding to the two parts of the objective logic, Hegel conceives of object in two different ways: one, according to the 'logic of being' and with the category of 'something' [*Etwas*]; two, according to the 'logic of essence' and with the category of 'thing' [*Das Ding*].¹⁰

We can take Hegel in the logic of being to be explaining and criticizing traditional ontology which is at the same time the ontology that underpins our everyday common-sense experience of the world. Traditional ontology is characterized by atomism, in this context namely the view that objects are ultimately subsistent on their own, and exist, and can be conceived, independently of other objects. This is not to deny that objects, according to traditional ontology, have some sort of relation with each other, but it is to say that the relation remains 'external' to what makes the objects what they are. That is, according to traditional ontology, the relation of an object with other objects is not constitutive of the object.

In traditional ontology, originating in Aristotle's *Categories*, such an atomist conception of objects is captured through the notion of substance conceived as 'substratum'. The object in traditional ontology has certain qualities and quantities, but what gives the object a unity and makes it identifiable and distinguishable from other objects is a substratum that underlies those qualities and quantities. Since the substratum itself, as distinct from the qualities and quantities that are superimposed on it, does not have any determination, it remains a contentless, 'bare substratum'.

In the logic of being, Hegel uses the category of 'something' to capture the conception of the object according to traditional ontology. At the same time, he

stresses the affinity of ‘something’ with our common-sense ontology. He thus writes, ‘In our ordinary way of thinking, *something* rightly carries the connotation of *reality*’, and immediately continues, ‘however, something is still a very superficial determination’ (*SL*: 115/*WL* I: 123). Something is a very superficial determination for Hegel, because it remains a bare substratum that cannot be further determined.¹¹ To be more precise, the conceptual structure of something, for Hegel, consists of two moments that are externally added to each other: the moment of ‘being-in-itself’ that is the substratum devoid of any determination, and the moment of ‘being-for-another’, namely, the qualities and quantities that something harbours. The qualities and quantities can be called the being-for-another of something, since they are determinate in virtue of their relation with the qualities and quantities that other somethings have (*SL*: 119/*WL* I: 128).

We can further elucidate the conceptual structure of something by looking at the operator of ‘negation’ in the logic of being through which something is generated. Hegel conceives of qualities and quantities generically as ‘determinacies’ [*Bestimmtheiten*], and, following Spinoza maintains that ‘determinacy is negation’ (*SL*: 536/*WL* II: 195). The concept of negation for Hegel is tied up with the concept of contrastive exclusion. To say that something is brown is to say that its determinacy (brownness) excludes other relevant determinacies (redness, whiteness, blackness, etc.). According to Hegel, although such a conception of negation as exclusion of the other specifies the determinacies of something (in so far as it shows that the brown object is not red, or white, or black), it nonetheless falls short of the determination of something itself, since it leaves something as a positively given, as a bare substratum that does not have any determination. Thus, although Hegel praises Spinoza for the discovery of the principle ‘determinacy is negation’, he criticizes Spinoza for his failure to grasp the full implications of the principle that ‘*all* determinations are negation’, including the determination of substance itself (*SL*: 113/*WL* I: 121, my emphasis). Hegel writes:

Determinacy is negation is the absolute principle of Spinoza’s philosophy; this true and simple insight establishes the absolute unity of substance. But Spinoza stops short at *negation* as *determinacy* or quality; he does not advance to a cognition of negation as absolute, that is, *self-negating, negation* [absoluter, d. h. sich negirender Negation]. (*SL*: 536/*WL* II: 195)

Here Hegel distinguishes two types of negation: one, negation (or exclusion) of the other; two, self-negation (or self-exclusion).¹² Spinoza, operating solely with the first type of negation, falls short of the determination of substance, and conceives of substance as a positive given that underlies determinacies but does not itself have any determination. Hegel, by contrast, maintains that negation can also be applied to itself, engendering ‘self-negating negation’. In contrast to the negation

of the other, which is characteristic of the logic of being, self-negation is characteristic of the logic of essence, and it is the operator through which Hegel manages to overturn the traditional ontology of bare substratum.

We can now come to realize that in so far as the logic of being is concerned there is no contradiction in something. Something excludes other somethings, and, as it were, remains a harmonious ensemble of qualities and quantities. (That a brown person excludes a white person does not make the brown person contradictory.) The contradiction obtains when we go one level deeper, to the essence of objects, and realize that the object essentially not only excludes other objects but also excludes its very own self. Hegel uses a host of expressions to express the contradictory structure of the object in the logic of essence. The object, for Hegel, is essentially ‘self-repellent’ [*sich abstoßend*], ‘opposite of itself’ [*Gegenteil seiner selbst*], ‘the other of its own self’ [*das Andere seiner selbst*] and is characterized by ‘incompatibility with itself’ [*Unverträglichkeit mit sich*].¹³

To elucidate in what sense the object is contradictory, we need first to become familiar with Hegel’s general strategy in the logic of essence. Indeed, the transition from the logic of being to the logic of essence must be captured in terms of a total paradigm shift. It must be captured as a transition from an atomistic ontology that Hegel rejects to a relational ontology that Hegel endorses. To put the issue differently, it is a transition from the logic of externality of relation (where the relation of an object to another object is not constitutive of it) to the logic of internality of relations (where the relation of an object to another object is constitutive of it.) In order to develop his relational ontology, Hegel first introduces the notion of ‘determinations of reflection’ [*Reflexionsbestimmungen*], and he discusses contradiction within this context.

Reflection, to which the term ‘determinations of reflection’ refers, is not for Hegel a subjective activity of thinking that reflects upon an externally given object; it is rather the objective relation that constitutes the very relata of the relation.¹⁴ Correspondingly, the determinations of reflection are dyadic relational determinations that are constituted in and through their interrelation. Throughout the logic of essence, Hegel describes the various determinations of reflection that make the inner constitution of things. Such categories include, among others: cause and effect, essence and appearance, ground and grounded, force and expression, and (relevant to my discussion here) form and matter. The difference of these categories of essence from ‘something’ and ‘other’ something in the logic of being is obvious. Whereas ‘something’ and ‘other’ something stand on their own independently from each other, form and matter are what they are *solely* through their relation.

Hegel argues that once we conceive of the determinations of reflection as being internally related to each other—rather than being merely externally compared or related—we realize that the coupled determinations of reflection in

fact contradict each other. The argument is that, according to Hegel, each of the determinations of reflection is a self-subsistent unity that obtains its self-subsistence through inclusion of its other (in so far as it is what it is only through relation to its other), and yet is self-subsistent through excluding its other (in so far as it is a distinct unity from its other). Hegel calls this structure of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of its own other ‘contradiction’:

The self-subsistent determination of reflection that contains the opposite determination, and is self-subsistent in virtue of this inclusion, at the same time also excludes it; in its self-subsistence, therefore, it excludes from itself its own self-subsistence [*so schließt sie in ihrer Selbständigkeit ihre eigene Selbständigkeit aus sich aus*]. For this consists in containing within itself its opposite determination—through which alone it is not a relation to something external—but no less immediately in the fact that it is itself, and also excludes from itself the determination that is negative to it. It is thus *contradiction*. (SL: 431/WL II: 65)

Here Hegel states that each of the pair of the determinations of reflection excludes from itself what gives unity to it. That is to say, the determination of reflection negates what makes its own selfhood and is thus constituted by a ‘self-negating negation’. The cause (say) is internally related to the effect, and thus the effect is constitutive of the cause. And yet, the cause is a distinct entity from the effect, and obtains its distinctness from the effect through excluding the effect. Therefore, the cause becomes what it is through negating or excluding the effect, which is at the same time included in the definition of the cause.¹⁵

It is by defining the structure of the object *solely* through determinations of reflection that Hegel aims to overturn traditional ontology. According to Hegel, the object is not a ‘positive unity’, that is to say, it is not a bare substratum upon which qualities and quantities are externally added. Rather, the object, according to its essential constitution, is a ‘negative unity’ of form and matter, namely, a contradictory totality that *solely* obtains through the interrelation of form and matter:

The thing as this totality is the contradiction of being (according to its negative unity) the *form* in which the matter is determined and degraded into *properties* ... and *consisting* at the same time of *matters* – which within the inward reflection of the thing are both self-subsistent and negated at the same time. (*Enz*: §130)¹⁶

In describing the structure of the thing as consisting of the relation of form and matter, Hegel adopts Aristotle’s doctrine of hylomorphism, namely, the view

that, ontologically speaking, form does not exist independently of matter but is realized *in* matter. Although I cannot defend this thesis here, I have to mention that Hegel believes that a consistent and thorough development of Aristotle's doctrine of hylomorphism proves that the structure of the thing is contradictory.¹⁷ In the above passage, Hegel, while maintaining that it is the totality of the thing that is contradictory, simultaneously explains this contradiction in terms of the contradiction of matter. According to Hegel, within the totality of the thing, matter is 'both self-subsistent and negated at the same time'. Matter is to be conceived as independent of form, since form consists *of* matter, and yet at the same time, matter is to be determined as a 'property' of form, and thus as dependent on form.

The contradiction of matter can be further specified in the following way. According to Hegel, form is a relational category; the form of a human being obtains solely through its relation with other human beings. As form is a relational category that is equally shared by all the things which have the same form, it cannot individuate the thing. The individuation of the thing obtains through its matter, which isolates the thing from other things. As matter grasps the thing in isolation from other things, it is unrelational. And yet, this is only one side of the story. Matter at the same time is relational, since form for Hegel is not a pre-made, neo-Platonic, category that exists independently of matter. Rather, form obtains only through the interrelation of matters, and in this sense matter is relational. Therefore, in the structure of the thing, the relatedness and unrelatedness of matter completely interpenetrate, and such interpenetration makes the structure of the thing contradictory.¹⁸ In Hegel's own words, 'the object is the absolute *contradiction* of the complete independence of the manifold [i.e. of unrelatedness of matters] and of their equally complete dependency [i.e. of their relatedness]' (*Enz*: §194, original emphasis).¹⁹

III. The dialectical contradiction of commodity in Marx

In his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Friedrich Engels distinguishes dialectics from what he calls 'the so-called metaphysical mode of reasoning'. While for the metaphysical mode of reasoning, 'things ... are isolated, are to be considered one after the other and apart from each other', dialectical thought 'comprehends things ... in their essential connection' (*MECW* 24: 298–301/*MEW* 19: 202–5). It is evident now that the former corresponds to the atomistic, traditional ontology Hegel criticizes in the logic of being, and the latter to the relational ontology Hegel affirms in the logic of essence. We have learned that, for Hegel, when objects are conceived atomistically, i.e., as substrata bearing qualities and quantities, there is no contradiction in the object. The object becomes contradictory when we conceive of it relationally, namely, as a negative unity of form and matter. In this section, my aim is to

use this Hegelian framework to clarify Marx's conception of commodity as the contradictory unity of use-value and exchange-value.

The first step is to explain what Marx means by use-value and exchange-value. The use-value of a commodity is its capacity to satisfy certain human needs or desires. Marx maintains that such capacity is directly tied up with the physicality and corporeality of the commodity, that is to say, with its 'matter'. Thus, the use-value of wheat is the capacity of wheat to satisfy hunger, and that capacity is tied up with the natural characteristic of wheat, with what makes wheat the natural thing that it is. Exchange-value, by contrast, is the capacity of the commodity to be exchanged with other commodities.²⁰ In contrast to use-value, exchange-value is a social status that is attached to the physicality of the wheat and makes it the *commodity* wheat. The exchange-value thus is the 'form' which natural products of labour take on within a social system of commodity production.²¹

The Hegelian framework discussed so far can help us to reconstruct what Marx is doing in the first chapter of *Capital*. Thus, in the first section of the chapter, entitled 'The two factors of commodity: use-value and value', we can take Marx to be analysing commodity as a substratum bearing two properties of use-value and exchange-value that are externally added to each other. By contrast, in the third section, entitled 'the form of value [*Wertform*] or exchange-value' we can take Marx to be conceiving of exchange-value and use-value as form and matter of commodity.²² Such a conception indicates that exchange-value and use-value are internally interrelated, and thus, as we will see, constitute a contradictory unity.²³ In another work, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx himself states such a shift of analysis:

So far two aspects of the commodity—use value and exchange value—have been examined, but each time one-sidedly. The commodity, however, is the immediate *unity* of use-value and exchange value, and at the same time it is a commodity only in relation to other commodities. (*MECW* 29: 282/*MEW* 13: 28, underline added)

According to Marx, so far as we conceive commodity atomistically, namely, as a substratum bearing two properties of use-value and exchange-value, the two properties 'fall apart from each other' (*MEGA* II/5: 31). It is only through the relation of commodity with other commodities that the inward unity of commodity obtains. But when we conceive of commodity in relation to other commodities, we are in effect analysing the commodity from the point of view of its *form*, and this analysis is exactly what Marx undertakes in the third section of the first chapter of *Capital*.

Marx's analysis of the form of value is replete with subtleties, and I will only give a simplified account.²⁴ As discussed, Marx maintains that the 'form of value

only exists in relation of commodity to commodity' (*MEGA* II/5: 31). And he explicates that 'the actual relation that exists between commodities is their *exchange process*' (*MECW* 29: 282/*MEW* 13: 28). Thus, he begins his analysis by focusing on the very basic relation of exchange that exists between two commodities, what he calls 'the simple form of value': 'x Commodity A = y Commodity B; or: x commodity A is worth y commodity B' (*C*: 139/*K*: 63).

As Marx's concern at this point is to analyse the *form* of value, he disregards the quantitative relation that exists between the two commodities (between x and y). Obviously, when the owner of commodity A exchanges it with commodity B, she is interested in the use-value of B. Thus, Marx maintains, the use-value or the matter of commodity B functions as the 'sensuous form of appearance' [*sinnliche Erscheinungsform*], as the 'body of value' [*Wertkörper*], as the 'material shape' [*dingliche Gestalt*] of exchange-value of A. (I have some linen, but I am hungry, and need some bread. Thus, I exchange linen with bread, and therefore, the exchange-value of linen is expressed in the use-value or the body of bread).

Through the simple form of value, commodity A is not yet inwardly constituted as a commodity, since the exchange value of commodity A is not expressed in its own use-value, but in the use-value of commodity B. Marx's desideratum is to show how it is the case that commodity A is constituted as *one* thing in which its own use-value and exchange-value cohere with each other. In order to do so, Marx maintains that the simple form of value is subject to a dialectical development. In the first step, Marx argues that if the exchange-value of A can be expressed in use-value or physicality of B, it can be expressed in the use-value or physicality of *any* other commodity (such as commodity C, D, E, etc.). But with such an expansion of the form of value to an endless number of commodities, the value of commodity A gets dispersed in a 'motley mosaic of disparate and unconnected' commodities, and thus no 'unified form of appearance' or expression of value for it obtains (*C*: 157/*K*: 79). The solution to such deficiency in expression of value is eventually the exclusion of one single commodity, the commodity of money, which functions as *the* universal equivalent, in which *all* commodities express their value in it. With the formation of money as *the* universal equivalent, the commodity A does not need to express its value in the physicality of other commodities, but already as an instance of such universality, it can express its value in its own use-value, i.e., in its own physicality. In a quite helpful analogy, Marx writes:

In a certain sense, a man is in the same situation as a commodity. As he neither enters into the world in possession of a mirror nor as a Fichtean philosopher who can say 'I am I', a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man. Peter *only* [*erst*] relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, as

his alike. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species man. (C: 144/K: 67, emphasis added)

In this passage, Marx explains that there is no pre-made universal or form of human being of which the particular individuals are instantiations. Rather, a particular human being becomes a human being through a process of interrelation with other individuals, and such interrelations generate the universal or the form of human being. Thus a human being becomes a human being not immediately through their own body, but in their relating to other human beings, through which their own body ‘retroactively’ [*rückbezüglich*] becomes the instantiation of the species human being. In the case of commodity, Marx writes:

By equating the *other* commodity to itself as *value*, it relates itself to itself as *value*. By relating itself to itself as *value*, it *distinguishes* itself from itself as *use-value* at the same time [...] By revealing itself in this manner as a thing which is differentiated within itself, it reveals itself for the first time really as a *commodity* – a useful thing which is at the same time *value*. (MEGA II/5: 29, original emphases)²⁵

This passage is particularly noteworthy, since it clearly states the order of Marx’s derivation of the inward constitution of commodity. *First*, the value of commodity is expressed in the use-value of another commodity, not in itself. *Second*, through the dialectic of value and the formation of money, the value of commodity is expressed in the use-value of itself. This means, *third*, that eventually commodity becomes a totality that has *both and at the same time* use-value and value.

I have argued that the totality or the inward constitution of commodity obtains through its relation with other commodities. But why is such inward constitution contradictory? In order to explain this, let us focus, one more time, on the simple form of value, namely, the relation between two commodities.²⁶ Recall that when commodity A is exchanged with commodity B, the exchange-value of A is expressed in the use-value or the body of B. In order to explain the relation between the exchange-value of A and the use-value of B, Marx explicitly uses Hegel’s terminology. The two, Marx writes, constitute a pair of ‘determinations of reflection’ (C: 149/K: 72).²⁷ And then, similar to Hegel’s conception of determinations of reflection, Marx holds that the use-value of A and the exchange-value of B ‘are two inseparable moments, which belong to and mutually condition each other; but at the same time, they are mutually exclusive or opposed extremes’ [*zu einander gehörige, sich wechselseitig bedingende, unzertrennliche Momente, aber zugleich einander ausschließende oder entgegengesetzte Extreme*] (C: 139–40/K: 63).²⁸ As this formulation clearly indicates, the simple form of value, for Marx, is constituted by a

contradiction; since, first, the exchange-value of A is contained in the use-value of B, and yet, since the two commodities are necessarily two distinct things, the exchange-value of A is excluded by the use-value of B. The relation is contradictory, since it is composed of two moments that contain, and yet exclude, each other. To further explicate, Marx considers the relation between the exchange-value of A and the use-value of B to be an ‘external opposition’. With the dialectic of value and the formation of the universality of money, the external opposition between exchange-value A and use-value B transforms into an ‘internal opposition’ within commodity A, between its exchange-value and its own use-value (*MEGA II/5*: 639). It is exactly the internalization of the relation with other commodities that makes commodity A the inwardly contradictory thing that it is.

Alternatively, we may describe the contradiction of commodity by referring to Marx’s conception of money. We can understand Marx’s conception of money better if we contrast it with the conception of money according to Enlightenment thinkers. For the latter, Marx reports, money is a ‘mere symbol’ that is ‘invented by the universal consent of mankind’ in order to facilitate the circulation of commodities. That is to say, for Enlightenment thinkers, money is the ‘arbitrary product of human reflection’, and thus bears no constitutive relation to commodities. By contrast, for Marx money inherently obtains through ‘the relation between all commodities’ (*C*: 184–86/*K*: 105–6) and retroactively makes commodities what they are. The formation of money is contradictory as money is the *result* of the interrelation or exchange of commodities. And yet money exists *from the beginning* in commodities, making the commodities exchangeable with each other in the first place.

In the previous section, I reconstructed the internal contradiction of the thing in Hegel by focusing on the contradiction of matter. I argued that matter is both unrelational and relational. Matter is unrelational, in so far it isolates the thing from other things that share the same form. And yet matter is relational, since it is the very interrelation of matters that first constitute the form. Here we can observe the same Hegelian structure in commodity. The commodity is initially a natural or physical thing, which is unrelated to other commodities. And yet the same commodity is exchanged with other commodities. In this latter sense, the commodity embodies money, and therefore is related to other commodities. The commodity is contradictory, since it is both related and unrelated to other commodities. That is to say, the commodity is composed of two mutually incompatible moments, which are nonetheless internally related: the moment of being physical and thus ‘sensuous’; and the moment of being social or relational, and thus ‘oversensuous’. And Marx in fact does not hesitate to use the two adjectives in one single phrase to further emphasize the internal contradiction of commodity: He characterizes commodities as ‘sensuously oversensuous ... things’ [*sinnlich übersinnliche ... Dinge*].²⁹

In conclusion of this section, I would like to underscore the difference between Marx and Hegel on the issue of the relation of form and matter. I have

explained that, for both, form is not a premade neo-Platonic category which exists beyond matter. Rather, for both, form obtains through the interrelation of matters. The difference between the two thinkers consists in the following point. In Marx, the form of the commodities, i.e., their exchange-value, though resulting from the interrelation of commodities, is ultimately *reified* in a separate commodity from all other commodities: namely, money. Marx writes:

It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which make when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families, etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire kingdom. Such an individual, which contains within itself all really present kinds of the same thing, is a *universal* (like, *animal, god, etc.*). (*MEGA* II/5: 37)

Arguably, it is such reification of the universal or the form in Marx—a reification that does not have any counterpart in Hegel—that gives Marx’s analysis an essentially critical bent. I cannot pursue the implications of this point in any detail here, but I would like to briefly indicate that, from an ontological point of view, the reification of the form of products of labour in money underpins Marx’s famous discussion of the fetishism of commodities, a critical doctrine which is meant to express the systematic suppression of use-value to exchange-value in capitalism. For our present concern, it is worth noting that the reification of form in a separate commodity makes the contradiction of the commodity more explicit than the contradiction of the thing in Hegel since, for Marx, money is a recognizably separate commodity which inheres in all other commodities, and thus all other commodities include the very form which they actively exclude.

And more generally, the difference between Marx and Hegel on the issue of the contradiction of the thing consists in the fact that while for Hegel ‘everything’, including natural things, ‘is inherently contradictory’; for Marx the contradiction of commodity is a specifically *social* phenomenon that obtains in capitalism. For Marx, it is not the case that any product of labour in any conceivable mode of production is contradictory, rather the product of labour becomes contradictory only within a system of generalized commodity production, where *all* products of labour are produced for the sake of getting exchanged with, and are thereby related to, other products of labour. It is exactly such an irreducibly relational character of commodity in capitalism that makes it contradictory, a feature that the products of labour in pre-capitalist modes of production do not have.³⁰

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that the commodity, according to Marx, is a contradictory unity of form and matter in that form and matter include, and yet exclude, each other. It is now obvious that the contradiction of commodity is dialectical, and neither theoretical nor practical. *First*, it is not theoretical, because, the contradiction of the commodity is not about arguments or theories, but is objective and inheres in reality. ‘It goes without saying’, Marx writes, ‘that the paradox of reality is also reflected in paradoxes of speech’, and continues, ‘the contradictions which arise ... on the basis of commodity production ... lie in the thing itself, not in the linguistic expression of the thing’ [*diese Widersprüche liegen in der Sache, nicht in dem sprachliche Ausdruck der Sache*] (*MECW* 32: 324/*MEW* 26.3: 134). *Second*, the contradiction of the commodity is not practical, since it is not concerned with a dysfunctionality, nor with a tension between an end and the means to achieve that end. Rather, this contradiction is constitutive of the structure of commodity and makes each commodity the thing that it is.³¹

As dialectical contradiction and practical contradiction both obtain in reality, the question remains as to how the two relate. There is no space to discuss this point in any detail, and I content myself with claiming that, for Marx, following Hegel, dialectical contradiction is the basis and the ground of practical contradiction. In other words, dialectical contradiction makes practical contradiction possible. While I cannot argue for this point here, I would like to illustrate it by indicating how dialectical contradiction in the case of commodity provides a ‘framework’ (Marx’s word) in which crises might obtain (*MECW* 32: 140). As discussed, dialectical contradiction in the commodity obtains because use-value and exchange-value necessarily cohere and yet exclude each other. The source of this contradiction is money: each commodity entails money (in the form of exchange-value) and yet excludes it (as money is itself a distinct commodity). As money is a distinct commodity existing in its own right, there is always a possibility that produced commodities cannot be sold and converted into money. If that possibility gets realized on a global scale, a crisis of overproduction obtains, where there are commodities produced, but not a corresponding effective demand to purchase them. Of course, there needs to be a host of other factors in order for a crisis of overproduction to obtain, but the mutual cohesion and separation of use-value and exchange-value, i.e., the dialectical contradiction of commodity, provides the very structure in which all these other factors could add up to produce such a crisis.^{32,33}

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Notes

¹ See Elster who claims that the dialectical, Hegelian contradiction in Marx is ‘a source of confusion’ (1985: 43), and that dialectics is ‘near non-sense’ (ibid.: 4), and G. A. Cohen who regards his own work to be ‘non-bullshit Marxism’ implying that dialectical readings of Marx are bullshit (1978: xxv).

² I am following Höslé’s typology of contradictions in Hegel (1998: 56ff) and I apply this typology to Marx. According to Höslé, there are three types of contradiction in Hegel: (1) ‘argumentational-logical’, (2) ‘pragmatic’, and (3) ‘dialectical’. I substitute (1) and (2) with the terms ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’.

³ I have modified translations to make them appropriate to the current context. The following abbreviations and translations are used:

Marx:

MECW = *Marx–Engels Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975ff)/*MEW* = *Marx–Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1957ff).

C = *Capital: Volume One*, trans. B. Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977)/*K* = *Das Kapital, Band I*, *MEW* 23.

C II = *Capital: Volume Two*, trans. D. Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)/*K II* = *Das Kapital, Band II*, *MEW* 24.

MEGA II/5 = *Das Kapital, erster Band, erste Auflage*, in *Marx–Engels Gesamtausgabe* [*MEGA*] (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1992ff)/*The Commodity. Chapter One, Capital: Volume One, First Edition*, in D. Albert (trans.), *Value: Studies By Karl Marx* (London: New Park Publications, 1976).

The Value-Form: Appendix to the 1st German edition of Capital, Volume 1, 1867, trans. R. Mike and S. Wal, in *Capital and Class*, 1978:4: 130–50.

Hegel:

SL = *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen & Unwin: 1969)/*WL I, II* = *Wissenschaft der Logik*: Band I & II, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*,

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ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1969ff).

Enz = *Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991) / *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I: Logik in Werke in zwanzig Bänden*.

⁴ For Cohen, the central contradiction in Marx's historical materialism, namely, between 'relations of production' and 'forces of production', is an instance of what I called practical contradiction: 'A *contradiction* obtains when a society's economic organization frustrates the optimal use and development of its accumulated productive power, when prospects opened by its productive forces are closed by its production relations. The term is taken from the 1859 Preface, and no connection is intended between our use of it and the meaning it has in logic' (Cohen 1978: 297). See also Elster's helpful discussion about various sorts of what I called practical contradiction in Marx (1985: 44–48).

⁵ The attack on Hegel and on dialectical contradiction is not restricted to analytical readings of Marx. In the continental tradition, see especially Colletti (1975), who accuses dialectical readings of conflating 'dialectical contradiction' and 'real opposition'. According to Colletti, while dialectical contradiction is a Hegelian concept and occurs in the realm of ideas, real opposition is a Kantian concept and occurs in the realm of objects, specifically, between the objects that exert force on each other in a counter-posing manner. Quoting passages from the early Marx, Colletti initially maintains that Marx is concerned with real oppositions and not dialectical contradictions, but eventually he concedes that the later Marx accepts the existence of dialectical contradictions in capitalism.

⁶ For a general critique of analytical readings of Marx, see Bensaïd 2002, Part II.

⁷ 'If ever the time comes when such work is again possible, I should very much like to write 2 or 3 sheets making accessible to the common reader the *rational* aspect of the method [i.e. dialectic] which Hegel not only discovered but also mystified' (*MECW* 40: 249/*MEW* 29: 260).

⁸ The dialectical underpinning of Marx's analysis of commodity-form is more explicit in the first edition of *Capital* (1867). Marx makes some changes to the second edition—such changes that are retained in the third and the commonly used fourth edition—and reduces the intensity of the dialectical exposition. He does not explain why he does so, and that leaves room for speculation. According to Smith (1990), although Marx's argument does not essentially change, for the sake of popularity of his work, he simplifies his argument in the later editions. By contrast, according to Göhler (1980) and Rosenthal (1998), Marx eventually realized that dialectical thought is doomed to failure. In this debate, I side with Smith. For this reason, I do not treat the first edition as a document that has only a historical significance, and use it whenever it clarifies Marx's position.

⁹ For an excellent treatment of Hegel's notion of dialectical contradiction, see Wolff's book (1981) and his shorter essay (1986). For recent, helpful, articles see de Boer (2010) and Bordignon (2012).

¹⁰ In this paper, I am using the word ‘object’ non-technically, as a generic word encompassing both Hegel’s ‘something’ and ‘thing’.

¹¹ See also Theunissen, who stresses the affinity of Hegel’s conception of ‘something’ and Aristotle’s conception of substratum (*hypokeimenon*) (1978: 230).

¹² See Dieter Henrich (1989), who helpfully distinguishes the two types of negation thus specified, although he does so without reference to Spinoza.

¹³ According to Brandom, difference of determinacies for Hegel is of two types: ‘mere difference’, where the two determinacies are compatible with each other, such as red and square, and ‘exclusive difference’, where the two determinacies are incompatible with each other, such as square and circle. In Brandom’s view, it is the exclusive difference—what he also calls ‘material incompatibility’—that captures Hegel’s conception of negation (Brandom 2002: 179–80). Brandom’s characterization of negation in Hegel is correct, but only in so far as the logic of being is concerned. Brandom falls short of the peculiarly Hegelian negation, i.e., negation of the logic of essence, which is concerned not so much with negation of other determinacies as with self-negation. For this reason, Brandom does not realize that for Hegel self-negation (and the contradiction that ensues from it) constitutes the essence of objects. For an excellent critique of Brandom, see Bordignon (2012), who associates Brandom’s position with Spinoza’s and argues that Hegel’s critique of Spinoza is equally applicable to Brandom. Also, in the context of discussing Perception in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Houlgate criticizes Brandom for his failure to grasp that for Hegel, the object is ‘irreducibly self-contradictory’ (2009: 39).

¹⁴ Here is not the place to enter into the highly controversial issue of ‘reflection’ in the *Science of Logic*. Suffice to say that in claiming that reflection is the objective process of relationality and not merely a subjective activity, I am following Jaeschke (1978) and Houlgate (2016).

¹⁵ According to Hegel, each of the determinations of reflection is a ‘unity of different and differentiated moments, which through determinate, essential difference pass over into contradictory moments’ (*SL*: 442/*WL* II: 79, emphasis omitted).

¹⁶ ‘Das Ding als diese Totalität ist der Widerspruch, nach seiner negative Einheit die *Form* zu sein, in der die Materie bestimmt und zu *Eigenschaften* herabgesetzt ist ... und zugleich aus *Materien* zu *bestehen*, die in der Reflexion des Dings in sich zugleich ebenso selbständige als negierte sind’. (*Enz*: §130))

¹⁷ Thus, my contention that I cannot defend here is: while Hegel departs from Aristotle’s definition of substance in the *Categories*, his own position must be conceived as the development of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. See also Nikolai Hartmann, who claims that Hegel’s Logic in general is a thorough development of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1923: 252, quoted by Hösele 1998: 186).

¹⁸ ‘Matter is inherently contradictory [*in sich selbst widersprechend*], because as indeterminate self-identity, it is also absolute negativity; it therefore sublates itself within, and its identity disintegrates in its negativity and the latter obtains from the former its subsistence’ (*SL*: 353/*WL* II: 92). As this passage indicates, for Hegel the relatedness of matter (its ‘absolute negativity’) coincides and obtains through its unrelatedness (through its ‘indeterminate self-identity’).

¹⁹ ‘Das Objekt ist daher der absolute *Widerspruch* der vollkommenen Selbständigkeit des Mannigfaltigen und der ebenso vollkommenen Unselbständigkeit der Unterschiedenen’. (*Enz*: §194).

²⁰ Marx’s distinction between exchange-value and value is not very clear. He initially defines value as an intrinsic quality of commodities whose ‘form of appearance’ is exchange-value. He believes that value is determined through the labour time which is socially necessary for production of the commodity, and that exchange-value is the way that the value thus produced appears in relation to other commodities. However, the distinction between exchange-value and value is not easily sustainable, as the socially necessary labour time itself is not simply an intrinsic quality of commodity, but one that obtains through the relation of exchange of the commodity with other commodities. Having realized the difficulty of distinguishing value and exchange-value, Marx on the third page of the first chapter writes, ‘when, in future, we use the word “value” without further determination, it is always about “exchange-value”’ (*MEGA II/5*: 19). In this essay, I use the terms value and exchange-value interchangeably, as Marx himself does in the rest of *Capital*.

²¹ Compare with the following statement: ‘The analysis of the *commodity* has shown that it is something *twofold*, use-value *and* value. Hence in order for a thing to possess *commodity-form*, it must possess a *twofold form*, the form of a use-value and the form of value. The *form of use-value* is the form of the commodity’s *body* [*Warenkörpers*] itself, iron, linen, etc., its tangible, sensible form of existence [*handgreiflich sinnliche Daseinsform*]. This is the natural form [*Naturalform*] of the commodity. As opposed to this the value-form of the commodity is its *social form* [*gesellschaftliche Form*]’ (*MEGA II/5*: 626).

²² I am referring here to the common, fourth, edition of *Capital*.

²³ It is arguably this shift of analysis—from a conception of commodity as an ensemble of two properties of use-value and exchange-value to a conception of commodity as consisting of matter (use-value) and form (exchange-value)—that makes the decisive difference of Marx from the classical political economy. According to Marx, the failure of classical political economy in analysing the form of commodity is not simply an innocent intellectual shortcoming. Rather, by ignoring the question of the (social) form of commodity, the classical political economy, in effect, treats commodity production as the ‘eternal natural form of social production’. Marx writes, ‘It is one of the chief failings of classical political economy that it has never succeeded by means of its analysis of commodities, and in particular of their value, in discovering the *form of value* which in fact turns value into exchange-value. Even its best representatives, Adam Smith and Ricardo, treat the *form of value* as something of indifference, something external to the nature of commodity itself. The explanation for this is not simply that their attention is entirely absorbed by the analysis of the magnitude of value. It lies deeper. The value-form of the product of labor is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production; by that fact it stamps the bourgeois mode of production as particular kind of social production of historical and transitory character’ (*C*: 174/*K*: 95).

²⁴ For a close and helpful commentary, see Heinrich 2009: 104–62.

²⁵ 'Indem sie die *andre* Waare sich *als Werth gleichsetzt*, *bezieht sie sich auf sich selbst als Werth*. Indem sie sich auf sich selbst *als Werth* bezieht, *unterscheidet* sie sich zugleich *von sich selbst als Gebrauchswerth* [...] Indem sie sich so als ein in sich selbst Differenzirtes darstellt, stellt sie sich erst wirklich *als Waare* dar – nützliches Ding, das zugleich Werth ist'.

²⁶ And in fact, Marx regards the analysis of the simple form of value as the main issue. 'The whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this simple form. Our real difficulty, therefore, is to analyze it' (C: 139/K: 63).

²⁷ Marx gives the example of 'king' and 'subjects' to express the interrelation of the exchange-value of commodity A and the use-value of commodity B. It is only as relational categories that the king and subjects can exist. The two implicate each other, and yet exclude each other. ('Determinations of reflection of this kind are altogether very curious. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the other hand, believe that they are subjects, because he is king' (C: 149/K: 72).)

²⁸ In another place, Marx writes that the two, the exchange-value of A and the use-value of B, are 'mutually presupposing' and 'mutually repelling' [*sich wechselseitig voraussetzend ... und wechselseitig abstoßend*] (MEGA II/5: 40).

²⁹ In the literature on Marx's dialectics in *Capital*, the concept of contradiction in commodity is usually addressed at a very general level, and it is not explicated in what precise sense use-value and exchange-value contradict each other. Referring to the contradiction in the commodity, Smith writes: 'In general, there are two standard types of dialectical contradictions. The first occurs when something (either a category or a material reality) is asserted to be a simple unity, but upon closer inspection is seen to include implicitly a moment of difference that is not unified. The second occurs when a category or material reality is asserted to involve difference only, and then upon closer inspection an underlying unity is seen to be implicit' (1990: 227–28). And according to Sekine, 'the contradiction between value and use-values ... means that the abstract-general (infinite) principle of capital represented by value and the concrete-specific (finite) reality of human economic life represented by use-values do not mix naturally' (1997: 9). While both Smith's and Sekine's characterizations are correct, they remain too general. Bell (2009) explains the contradiction of the commodity with reference to the dialectic of being, nothing and becoming in the beginning of the *Science of Logic*. There is some truth in Bell's assertion, in so far as the dialectic of being, nothing and becoming sets the stage for the whole of Hegel's *Logic*, for all the categories that come later. But I should mention that being, nothing and becoming are the most abstract categories of the *Logic*, and cannot be applied directly to objects that have much more determinate character.

³⁰ I need to briefly dispel one common misunderstanding that exists in certain readings of Marx, namely that contradiction in Hegel obtains in the realm of thought, while for Marx contradiction is real and objective. This misunderstanding is a specific case of a more general misunderstanding regarding the relation of Marx's so-called materialism to Hegel's so-called idealism. I believe conceiving of the relation of Marx to Hegel in terms of materialism vs. idealism is more misleading than clarifying, but that is the subject of another essay. Here I would like only to mention that, for Hegel, the determinations of thought expounded in the *Logic* are at the very same time the

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determinations of being (*SL*: 49/*WL* I: 43). Thus, for Hegel, in my view, the categories of the *Logic* are at the same time ontological categories. Correspondingly, the contradiction discussed in this essay obtains—both and at the same time—in the thing as a logical category and in the thing as existing in reality. (In conceiving of the contradiction of thing as being both logical and real for Hegel, I find myself to be against de Boer, who maintains that contradiction for Hegel is not to be attributed to ‘things’, but must primarily be conceived as belonging to the ‘forms of thought’ (2010: 357).)

³¹ Here I am silent regarding the question as to whether Marx’s dialectical contradiction denies or affirms the logical principle of non-contradiction. While many readers of Marx—perhaps in order to accommodate their critics such as Popper (1940)—hold that Marx’s (or Hegel’s) dialectic does not refute the principle of non-contradiction, there is a strong, burgeoning trend in analytic philosophy, dialetheism, that argues that the principle of non-contradiction is wrong, in that there are some contradictions in thought and reality that can be rationally defended. See especially Priest and his discussion of Hegel and Marx (1990, 2002). See also Bordignon (2017) and Ficara (2012) for helpful discussions regarding the relation between Hegel and dialetheism.

³² ‘There is an immanent opposition in the commodity, between use-value and value. [...] The antithetical phases of the metamorphosis of the commodity [i.e. purchase and sale through money] are the developed forms of motion of this immanent contradiction. These forms therefore imply the possibility of crisis, though no more than the possibility. For the development of this possibility into a reality a whole series of conditions is required’ (*C*: 209/*K*: 128). See also *Theories of Surplus Value* (*MECW* 32: 138ff./*MEW* 26.2: 508ff): ‘We have said that this *form* [i.e. the form of commodity] contains the *possibility* of crisis, that is to say, the possibility that elements which are correlated, which are inseparable, are separated and consequently are forcibly reunited, their coherence is violently asserted against their mutual independence’ (*MECW* 32: 139–40/*MEW* 26.2: 510).

³³ I am thankful to Dean Moyar, Tony Smith, Alexander Englert, Yitzhak Melamed and two anonymous referees for the *Hegel Bulletin* for helpful comments on the earlier drafts of this paper. I presented an earlier version of this paper at the colloquium of the philosophy department at the Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM), and I am thankful to the audience for their helpful feedback.

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