

The Automatic Subject and its Discontents

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This paper seeks to deepen an understanding of why Marx dubs capital, in chapter 4 of Volume I of *Capital*, an “automatic subject.” It does so by close reading his discussion of machinic automation in chapters 14 and 15 of the same volume. The notion of automation that Marx develops in these chapters, I argue, is key to understanding one of the ways in which individuals in capital are subjectivated to its fantasies, rather than free to develop their own. As an automatic subject, capital ‘fills up’ the gap where the (human) subject might otherwise exist. This subject of human freedom in Marx can only be conceived as the rupture, limit, and fundamental instability of language and logic as such; and it can only be conceived by acknowledging capitalism’s fundamental suturing of the space in which it might otherwise appear.

The factory is the historical example that Marx gives of such an automatic and self-suturing system in *Capital*. The subjective principle of the division of labour, a relation between people, is mystified in large-scale industry, which presents itself as an “objective organism” (Marx 1992, 517). In this organism, the automaton replaces the worker as the dominant subject (Marx 1992, 544), and as such the distinction between worker and machine is objectively obscured.

My contention is that reading the status of the subject by way of automation’s attempted erasure of it provides not only one possible reading of Marx’s enigmatic reference to the ‘automatic subject’, but also establishes a framework for reckoning with the structure of automation more generally in Marx’s *Capital*. This framework sees Marx’s project in *Capital* as one which resists collapsing the distinction between human and machine: an insight that challenges the many post-Marxist accounts of technology, computational capitalism, and so on, that seek to do away with core aspects of Marx’s theory of production under the aegis of ‘updating’ Marx for a contemporary world.

Bibliography

Marx, Karl. 1992. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. Penguin Classics.
