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Marx's Totalities

For better or worse, Marx's critique of political economy is often depicted in philosophical and socio-theoretical debates as a theory of social totality. Yet, the functions and meanings of the concept of "totality" are often left unclarified. The aim of my intervention is therefore to clarify these functions and meanings.

My first claim will be that Marx's concept of totality fulfils a critical as well as a positive function. On the critical level, it serves an interdisciplinary approach to the social which, opposing the division of intellectual labor, allows for an uncovering of the negative aspects of social experience which this division of labor tends to mystify and justify. On the positive level, I will more specifically argue that Marx actually articulates three distinct concepts of totality: 1) a dialectical one, which deals with the contradictory relation between the "essence" of capitalist social relations and their "appearance" at the level of social experience. 2) A systematic one, which shows how the "natural laws" of the capitalist mode of production give it the form of a closed social system endowed with a tendency to self-reproduce the conditions of its perpetuation. 3) A dynamic one, which completes the analysis of this self-reproductive tendency with an analysis of all its counter-tendencies in order to theoretically sustain the practical efforts which aim at the radical transformation of society.

I will finally argue that the reconstruction of these concepts of totality both allows for a comprehensive account of Marx's originality as a social scientist and for the overcoming of some of the dichotomies which structure the contemporary debates on Marx's *Capital*, such as the dichotomy between the critique of capitalism as a system and the critique of capitalism as a historical form of class exploitation.