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The Emergence of Marx's Concept of Subsumption

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Abstract: In Marx's posthumously published manuscripts from 1857–1863, we find a systematic exposition of his concept of subsumption. Though much has been written about it, significant interpretative gaps persist. In this article, I begin filling these gaps by examining the emergence of Marx's concept of subsumption. I will argue that in the *Grundrisse* Marx brings together distinct but complementary elements from Hegel's theories of judgment and teleology to coin two new and well delineated concepts of subsumption that prefigure his later concepts of formal and real subsumption. These two concepts may be defined as: (a) the process of acquiring the social relational property of being a means to an end; (b) the process by which changes in non-relational properties occur in something due to this acquisition – and occur to better suit said end.

Keywords: Marx, subsumption, Hegel, teleology, judgment

1 Introduction

In the posthumously published “Chapter Six” of the first volume of Marx's *Capital*,¹ as well as in his manuscripts from 1861–1863,² we find a systematic exposition of Marx's conception of the subsumption of labor under capital.³ In this exposition, Marx distinguishes two types of subsumption: formal and real. Formal subsumption of labor under capital is the process of turning workers into wage-laborers working for capitalists. Real subsumption is the process by which changes occur in their labor process to better suit this new position. Notably, these changes include mechanization. In past decades, the concept of subsumption played a key

1 Marx 1976, 1019–1038 (MEGA II/4.1, 91–108).

2 MECW 34, 93–121 (MEGA II/3.6, 2126–2159).

3 The term also appears briefly in the published versions of the first volume of *Capital*. See Marx 1976, 645 (MEGA II/5, 415).

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In the posthumously published “Chapter Six” of the first volume of *Capital*,¹ as well as in his manuscripts from 1861–1863,² we find a systematic exposition of Marx's conception of the subsumption of labor under capital, which also appears briefly in the published versions of the first volume of *Capital*.³ Marx distinguishes there between two types of subsumption – formal and real. Formal subsumption of labor under capital is described as the process of turning workers into wage-laborers working for capitalists. Real subsumption is described as the process in which changes occur in their labor process to better suit this new position. Notably, these changes include mechanization. In past decades, the concept of subsumption played a key role in Marxist theory. Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri,⁴ Étienne Balibar⁵ and Moishe Postone⁶ built theories around it. Scholars insisted on its significance,⁷ attempted to explain its meaning⁸ and traced its origins back to classic German philosophy.⁹ Even so, we still lack (a) a reconstruction of its origins in Hegel's philosophy; (b) a clear definition of the concept; and (c) a comprehensive evaluation of its evolution and role in Marx's theory of history.

In this article, I intend to begin filling these lacunae by examining the emergence of Marx's concept of subsumption in the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx

¹ Marx 1976, 1019–1038 (MEGA II/4.1, 91–108).

² MECW 34, 93–121 (MEGA II/3.6, 2126–2159).

³ Marx 1976, 645 (MEGA II/5, 415).

⁴ Negri 2005, 51–117. Hardt and Negri 2000.

⁵ Althusser and Balibar, 2009. 339–344; Balibar 2019, 36–57.

⁶ Postone, 1993.

⁷ Arthur, 2009, 148–162.

⁸ Murray 2016; Read 2003, 103–113.

⁹ Sicilia 2016.

did not yet explicitly distinguish between formal and real subsumption. I will argue that in the *Grundrisse* Marx brings together distinct but complementary elements from Hegel's theory of judgment and from his theory of teleology to coin two new and well delineated concepts of subsumption that prefigure his later concepts of formal and real subsumption and may be defined as: (a) the process of acquiring the social relational property of being a means to an end; (b) the process in which changes in non-relational properties occur in something resulting from its acquisition of the social relational property of being a means to an end – and occur to better suit this end.

In the following pages, I will accordingly proceed to discuss: (1) subsumption in pre-Hegelian philosophy; (2) three relevant uses of subsumption in Hegel's philosophy; (3) Marx's concept of subsumption in his early writings and principally in the *Grundrisse*. I will then (4) identify the Hegelian elements incorporated in Marx's concept of subsumption and begin to evaluate their theoretical import.

1 Subsumption Prior to Hegel

Before turning to Marx's writings, a discussion of pre-Marxian concepts of subsumption is in order. Since I argue that the origins of Marx's concept of subsumption are found in Hegel, his theories will be considered in greater detail than those of other relevant philosophers such as the medieval logicians, Christian Wolff or Immanuel Kant. Nonetheless, beginning with these philosophers is imperative if we wish to grasp how a traditional logical concept is transformed into a critical socio-economic one. Though Marx was not directly influenced by pre-Hegelian concepts of subsumption, he retained – via Hegel – the pre-Hegelian idea that subsumption enables correct predication. For Marx, as we will later see, saying that labor is subsumed under capital means that labor has become capitalistic.

The Latin phrasal verb *sumere sub* (literally, to take under), alongside the corresponding noun, *subsumptio*, first appeared in medieval logical treatises. In the terms of William of Ockham, Jean Buridan and Roger Bacon, claiming that something is subsumed under something else is claiming that whatever is true of

the latter is necessarily true of the former.¹⁰ Notably, this is the case of classes and their sub-classes as well as classes and the individuals which belong to them. The notion of subsumption was thus strongly associated with the taxonomic hierarchies that make logical inference possible. Since whatever is true of humans is also true of Greeks, namely since Greeks are subsumed under humans, the following syllogism is valid – humans are mortal, Greeks are human, therefore Greeks are mortal. Since whatever is true of Greeks is also true of Socrates, namely since Socrates is subsumed under Greeks, the following syllogism is also valid – Greeks are mortal, Socrates is Greek, therefore Socrates is mortal.

In early modern philosophy, we find *subsumere*, alongside *subsumptio* and *subsumtio*, in the works of Christian Wolff. In his Latin *Logic*, we find a definition of subsumption: the “minor proposition is said to be *subsumed* under the major, if this [the major] is put in the first place”. Wolff also gave an example: no man is wise in all things, my interlocutor is a man, therefore my interlocutor is not wise in all things. In this case, the second proposition (the minor: my interlocutor is a man) is subsumed under the first (the major: no man is wise in all things). Wolff’s point is that in well-ordered syllogisms, the second proposition (the minor) is subsumed under the first (the major).¹¹ In conceiving of the relation between the major and the minor in this way, Wolff posited subsumption as the principle of syllogistic inference.¹²

Wolff’s follower, Alexander Baumgarten, added a legal sense to the traditional logical one. In his discussion of the imputation of deeds, Baumgarten equated “the application of a law to a deed” with “the subsumption of a deed under

¹⁰ In all these authors the notion of subsumption is strongly associated with the Aristotelian principle known as the *dictum de omni et de nullo*, according to which whatever is valid for all is valid for each. For instance, Jean Buridan noted in *Quaestiones in duos libros Aristotelis Priorum Analyticorum* that “Aristotle gives such an interpretation, saying *dici de omni* is when there is nothing to take under [*sumere sub*] the subject of which the predicate is not predicated, and *dici de nullo* is when there is nothing to take under the subject from which the predicate is not removed”. See: Buridan’s *Quaestiones* (I, 17), William of Ockham’s *Summa Logicae* (III, 2) and Roger Bacon’s *Summulae Dialectices* (III, 1).

¹¹ Wolff 1728, 300–301, §362. In the point in question, Wolff emphasized that in syllogisms which are not well-ordered, the first proposition is not necessarily synonymous with the major. An example of a syllogism which is not well-ordered: a particular person is a man, no man is wise in all things, therefore he is not wise in all things. In this case, the first proposition (a particular person is a man) is not the major and hence not *subsumed* under the second (no man is wise in all things). In Wolff’s terms, it is simply *assumed* (Wolff 1728, 301, §363).

¹² Wolff made this point explicitly when he said that “every syllogism depends on the maxim of the all and the none” (Wolff 1728, 297, §353).

a law”.¹³ He used this legal sense abundantly and throughout his practical philosophy. Although Baumgarten assumed that the valid subsumption of a deed under a law must be inferred from a corresponding syllogism,¹⁴ his legal use of subsumption associated it with predication more than with inference. With Baumgarten’s legal sense of the term, subsumption became associated with judgments more than with syllogisms.

In Kant’s philosophy, the German *subsumieren* and *Subsumption* are more explicitly linked with judgments. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defined the faculty of judgment as “the faculty of *subsuming* under rules, i.e., of determining whether something stands under a given rule.”¹⁵ Here too, however, Kant assumed a syllogism whose conclusion is the asserted judgment.¹⁶ In addition, subsumption acquired a derivative sense that plays a key role in Kant’s transcendental conception of the constitution of objects. In Kant’s view, the constitution of objects involves the application of the pure concepts of the understanding (or the categories) to empirical intuitions. This application, accomplished by means of the transcendental schemata, is labeled transcendental subsumption. But in this case, Kant’s use of the term subsumption is only analogous. Kant drew an analogy between the subsumption of minor propositions (e.g. all Greeks are humans) under major propositions (e.g. all humans are mortal) by means of middle terms (namely, the term both propositions have in common, e.g. humans) and, on the other hand, the application of the pure concepts of the understanding to empirical intuitions by means of transcendental schemata. The purpose of this analogy is to highlight that the application of pure concepts to intuitions, just like the subsumption of minor propositions under major propositions, is mediated by a “third thing”.¹⁷

Thus, in medieval logical treatises, as well as in pre-Hegelian German philosophy, subsumption is regarded as a predicative relation between class and sub-class, or between class and individual, such that all properties that belong to

¹³ “Imputation broadly considered is (1) the judgement according to which one is judged to be the author of a certain deed, (2) the application of a law to a deed, or the subsumption of a deed under a law” (Baumgarten 2020, 97 [AA 19, 61]).

¹⁴ “Somebody who subsumes a deed reasons to this by the imputation of law (§125). The reasoning of imputation that is declared (§103) is called an imputational syllogism” (Baumgarten 2020 118 [AA 19, 79]).

¹⁵ Kant 1998, 268 (B171).

¹⁶ Longuenesse 2001, 95.

¹⁷ Kant 1998, 272 (B177). Compare: Allison 1981, 64; de Boer 2020, 170–174.

the former necessarily belong to the latter as well. In both cases, the image that accompanies subsumption is that of a class or individual that is placed under another class. Though it is only an image in the case of the aforementioned philosophers, it plays a key philosophical role in Hegel's concept of subsumption.

2 Subsumption in Hegel's Philosophy

Hegel used *subsumieren* and *Subsumtion* on multiple occasions. He did so in the traditional logical sense,¹⁸ in the derivative legal sense¹⁹ and in various analogous senses.²⁰ Only three of Hegel's uses are directly relevant to his influence on Marx: (1) Hegel's discussion of judgments of subsumption; (2) Hegel's discussion of the subsumption of means to ends; (3) Hegel's remark on the subsumptive function of the executive power. Though (3) is not without interest, since Marx mentions it in his early writings, I hold that only (1) and (2) are key to Marx's own concept of subsumption.

2.1 Hegel's Judgments of Subsumption

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel used the term subsumption most notably in his discussion of judgments. In this context, he defined a particular type of judgments – judgements with relational predicates – as “judgments of subsumption”. This point, well-known in Hegel scholarship,²¹ has hitherto been ignored in discussions of Marx's concept of subsumption.²² It is nonetheless key to grasping Hegel's influence on Marx in this context.

¹⁸ Hegel 2010a, 555 (GW 12, 58).

¹⁹ “Since he [the judge] is the organ of the law, the case must be prepared for him to enable it to be subsumed” (Hegel 1991, 255 [GW 14.1, 185]).

²⁰ Feeling is “the subsumption of concept under intuition” (Hegel 1979, 103 [GW 5, 281]). Hegel used the term subsumption extensively in his *System of Ethical Life*. H.S. Harris discusses this use – which is not directly related Marx's use of the term – as well as its relation to Schelling's concept of subsumption (Hegel 1979, 17–20).

²¹ Compare Longuenesse, for instance, who notes that, for Hegel, judgments of subsumption attribute to a subject (or to a plurality of subjects) “determinations that reflect their relations to one another” (Longuenesse 2007, 210).

²² Though Sicilia, Arthur, Russell and Meany mention Hegel's discussion of judgements of subsumption, none of them brings up the issue of relational properties. For this reason, they could not link this crucial characteristic of Hegel's judgements of subsumption to Marx's concept of subsumption, which involves, as we will later see, the acquisition of relational properties. Compare: Sicilia 2016, 55–68; Arthur 2009, 156–157; Russell 2015, 33–38; Meany 2002, 125.

In line with the tradition, Hegel defined subsumption as “the application of the universal to a particular or singular posited under it”.²³ But in contrast to his predecessors, Hegel did not consider that all judgments are acts of subsumption. Reason is that Hegel took the imagery behind subsumption more seriously. For Hegel, judgments are subsumptive only if their subjects are subordinate – in a literal and specific sense – to their predicates. As we will shortly see, not all types of judgment meet this criterion.

Hegel enumerated four types of judgments: (a) judgments of existence, (b) judgments of reflection, (c) judgments of necessity and (d) judgments of the concept. There are several ways to explain this typology, but an explanation by type of predicate is most relevant to our discussion.²⁴ For the sake of brevity, I will explain this point only with reference to the first two types of judgments – judgments of existence and judgments of reflection, which Hegel also labels “judgments of inherence” and “judgments of subsumption”.

In judgments of existence (or “inherence”), subjects are predicated with sensory properties. Hegel’s examples of such judgments are “this rose is red”, “this wall is green” and “this stove is hot”. In judgments of reflection (or “subsumption”), by contrast, subjects are predicated with “relational determinations”.²⁵ In Hegel’s words, in this case the subject is in “a connection with and joined to an other”.²⁶ His examples are: “this plant has healing powers”, “this instrument is useful” and “this punishment works as a deterrent”.²⁷

For Hegel, additionally, judgments of existence (or “inherence”) and judgments of reflection (or “subsumption”) exhibit two different metaphysical models. Judgments of existence (or “inherence”) exhibit the traditional,

²³ Hegel 2010a, 555 (GW 12, 58).

²⁴ A typology of judgments by type of predicate is unusual in logical treatises (compare Kant 1998, 207 [B97]). It is accordingly useful to recall that Hegel’s *Logic* is an unusual logical treatise. In the *Logic*, Hegel is not focused on the study of valid reasoning but on the metaphysical import of various logical functions. As we will now see, a study of judgments by type of predicate allows Hegel to explicate the different metaphysical models reflected by them.

²⁵ Hegel 2010a, 569 (GW12, 71). I note that, throughout this paper, having a relational property simply means being in a relation. Compare: Heil 2009, 313. A relational predicate is similarly a predicate that attributes a relational property to the thing referred to by the subject of a judgment.

²⁶ Hegel 2010b, 248 (GW20, 188).

²⁷ Hegel explained this point in clear terms: “If [...] we make the judgment ‘this plant has healing powers’, we consider the subject, the plant, as standing in a relation with another (the illness to be healed by it) through its predicate, the healing capacity.” (Hegel 2010b, 249 [GW23.3, 936]). For a more detailed explanation of Hegel’s theory of judgments of reflection (in their difference from judgments of existence), see Martin 2012, 281–288; Doz 1987, 213–216.

Aristotelian, substance-accident metaphysical model. In these judgments, accordingly, the property attributed by the predicate (“red”) appears to be dependent on – and thus subordinate to – the thing referred to by the subject (“rose”). In his *Lectures on Logic*, Hegel explains that in this model the “subject is generally the whole, *hypokeimenon* [substance], foundation, and thus the predicate is not fully independent of it. The rose as what is actual is the bearer of redness, as the thing and its properties where the thing possesses the properties”.²⁸

Conversely, judgments of reflection (or “subsumption”), or judgments with relational predicates, exhibit a relation-accident (or function-variable) metaphysical model. In this case, the thing referred to by the subject appears to be dependent on – and thus subordinate to – the relation or the relational property attributed by the predicate. In other words, relations or relational properties (for instance, “x is useful” or “x is useful to y”) appear to be prior and independent with respect to their relata.

One might wonder why Hegel labeled judgments with relational predicates judgments of subsumption. In what sense are subjects more subordinate to relational predicates than to non-relational predicates? Since Hegel did not settle this question explicitly, it remains a matter of interpretation.²⁹ In my interpretation, the answer resides in the fact that earlier idealist philosophers, notably Leibniz, did not conceive of relations as accidents. Leibniz reasons as follows: accidents are in substances; relations are between them; therefore, relations are not accidents. He concludes that “being neither substance nor accident, it [the relation] must be a purely ideal thing”.³⁰ It thus appears that Hegel was encouraged by Leibniz’s characterization of relations as ideal non-accidents when he took the Leibnizian position further to argue that in judgments of subsumption the relational

²⁸ Hegel 2008, 184 (GW23.2, 779).

²⁹ McTaggart already noticed this difficulty but found no answer to it. He asked: “What is there in the fact that a predicate expresses a relation, that should involve the fact that the predicate, rather than the subject, should be taken as the *datum*?” (McTaggart 1910, 207). I found no satisfactory answer to this question in more recent commentaries.

³⁰ Leibniz 2000, 47. John Heil explains this point clearly and in greater detail (Heil 2009, 315–316). It is noteworthy that excerpts from Leibniz’s discussion of the ideality of relations appear in Marx’s notebooks from 1842 (MEGA IV/1, 194–197). Marx was thus doubtlessly familiar with Leibniz’s unique notion of ideal relationality, even though there is no direct evidence that he connected it with Hegel’s theory of judgement.

determination is “the *implicit* universal” to which the “subject is subsumed as an accidental”.³¹

A detailed interpretation of Hegel’s theory of relational predication would take us too far afield.³² But the point to retain from this section is that, for Hegel, subsumption consists in the attribution of relational properties. Though I found no direct evidence that Marx was aware of this, support for such an awareness may be found in Engels’s acquaintance with this point. In a short fragment on Hegel’s theory of judgment from his notes and fragments for the *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels clearly noted: “Judgment of subsumption, in which a relation determination is predicated of the subject”.³³

2.2 Subsumption of Means to Ends

In his discussion of external teleology from the *Logic*, Hegel employed the term subsumption in a sense that is analogous to Kant’s aforementioned use of subsumption. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx referred to this discussion when he stated that man takes means of labor “and, as Hegel correctly said it, subsumes them under his activity”.³⁴ But despite Marx’s reference, Hegel’s discussion of external teleology has been ignored in prior accounts.³⁵ This discussion is nonetheless key to grasping Hegel’s influence on Marx’s concept of subsumption.

In Hegel’s terminology, external teleology is a label used to designate the teleology of purposive actions. Hegel distinguished between three factors which exist in any purposive action: (a) the subjective purpose (namely, a thought expressed in concepts); (b) the means (usually an external object³⁶); and (c) the

³¹ Hegel 2010a, 574, 570 (GW 12, 76, 72).

³² For a fuller discussion of Hegel’s theory of relations, see Horstmann 1984.

³³ “Hegel groups judgments as 1. Judgment of inherence, the simplest form of judgment, in which a general property is affirmatively or negatively predicated of a single thing [...] 2. Judgment of subsumption, in which a relation determination is predicated of the subject [...] 3. Judgment of necessity, in which its substantial determination is predicated of the subject [...] 4. Judgment of the notion, in which is predicated of the subject how far it corresponds to its general nature or, as Hegel says, to the notion of it” (MECW 25, 504 [MEGA I/26, 229]).

³⁴ Marx 1993, 735 (MEGA II/1.2, 609).

³⁵ Despite Marx’s explicit reference, Sicilia, Arthur and Russell (like the other interpreters of whom I am aware) do not mention Hegel’s discussion of external teleology in their accounts of Marx’s concept of subsumption. Meany does mention this discussion but only briefly and in a different context (Meany 2002, 151).

³⁶ “The means are something external that is taken up by my activity in light of my end” (Hegel 2008, 210 [GW23.2, 793]). But the means may also be the body: “Among human beings, these means are first of all our own hands” (Hegel 2008, 210 [GW23.2, 793]).

realized purpose. For Hegel, these three moments are analogous to the three terms of the syllogism. Especially, he equates between the means and middle term of a syllogism. There is also a play on words in this equation: “*Das Mittel* [the means] *ist die Mitte* [the middle term]”.³⁷ In the framework of this analogy, Hegel notes that the means is “subsumed under the determination of purpose” or “subsumptive with respect to the [...] still indeterminate objectivity”.³⁸ With this analogy, Hegel highlights that the realization of subjective purposes in realized purposes, just like the subsumption of minor propositions under major propositions, is mediated by means or middle terms. This analogy is close to the gist of Kant’s aforementioned use of subsumption. Moreover, Hegel highlights that in purposive actions things are subordinated to concepts. Thus, the subsumption of individuals under classes, as in traditional logical subsumption, functions as an analogy for the subordination of means to ends.

After drawing this initial analogy, Hegel continued to articulate the relation between means and ends. On the one hand, the means is an “external existence indifferent towards the purpose itself and its realization”. On the other hand, the means is “utterly penetrable” and “receptive” to the purpose, “determined by purpose” and having “latter’s activity within it”.³⁹ By this, Hegel had in mind that (a) though the means has no inner impetus to realize the purpose; (b) the means is shaped to suit its purpose.

Think of Hegel’s example, the plough. Obviously, no plough will cut furrows on its own. In this sense, cutting furrows is external to it. But a quick look at the plough teaches that it was made to cut furrows. The chisel is sharp enough and the moldboard just the right size. In this sense, the plough is “determined” by the activity of cutting furrows. Hegel’s point is that the plough’s indifference to cutting furrows does not preclude it from being very well suited to do so. For this reason, Hegel states that the means is a “determinateness with reference to one extreme [...] a reference which is for it a form to which it is indifferent”.⁴⁰

³⁷ Hegel 2010, 659 (GW 12, 162).

³⁸ Hegel 2010, 660 (GW 12, 163).

³⁹ Hegel 2010, 660–666 (GW 12, 163–168).

⁴⁰ Hegel 2010, 660 (GW 12, 163). This quotation supports the aforementioned claim if we understand (a) “determinateness with reference to one extreme” to imply the determination of some of the physical properties of the means in view of the end, which is the extreme term of

In sum, Hegel's use of subsumption in this context suggests that using means to achieve ends regularly involves adapting the former to suit the latter. Put in the passive voice: when things acquire the relational property of being a means to a subjective purpose – when they are “subsumed” under the latter –, some of their non-relational properties tend to be changed to better suit this purpose.⁴¹

This, again, is not the place to expand on Hegel's theory of purposive action in any detail.⁴² However, it is possible to note that by using the term subsumption in the context of a discussion of means to an end relationships, Hegel emphasized that (a) the means is subordinated to a concept (the subjective purpose); and (b) changes occur in the means as a result of this subordination.

2.3 Subsumption in Hegel's Account of the State

In his discussion of the internal structure of the state from the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel used subsumption in an analogous sense again. Hegel argued that the state is divided into three substantial elements: the legislative power (“the power to determine and establish the universal”), the executive power (“the subsumption of particular spheres and individual cases under the universal”) and the power of the sovereign (“in which the different powers are united in an individual unity”).⁴³ In this theoretical framework, the executive power is charged with a “task of subsumption”, namely the “execution and application of the sovereign's decisions”, and hence with “the subsumption of particular spheres and individual cases under the universal”.⁴⁴ By virtue of this subsumption, particular interests are “subordinated to the higher interests of the state”.⁴⁵ In this discussion, Hegel draws an analogy between the logical subsumption of individuals under concepts and the application, by civil servants, of general directives to particular circumstances. Hegel's analogy is of interest since Marx explicitly refers to it in his early writings, to which I will shortly turn.

the action; (b) “to which it [the means] is indifferent” to imply that the end is not internal to the means but imposed on it by a subject.

⁴¹ I say “tend” to clarify that, though the adaptation of means is not a necessary condition of external teleology, it is what usually happens. In Hegel's words: “the adaptation of means to ends can be seen everywhere” (Hegel 2008, 208 (GW23.2, 793)).

⁴² For a comprehensive discussion of Hegel's theory of action: Quante 2004.

⁴³ Hegel 1991, 308 (GW 14.1, 226).

⁴⁴ Hegel 1991, 308, 328 (GW 14.1, 226, 241).

⁴⁵ Hegel 1991, 329 (GW 14.1, 241).

3 Marx's Concept of Subsumption (1843–1858)

Marx speaks of *Subsumption* and *Subsumtion* mainly in the economic manuscripts leading up to *Capital* (1857–1864). In the following pages, I will concentrate on the emergence of Marx's concept of subsumption in the first of these economic manuscripts – the *Grundrisse* (1857–1858). Beforehand, however, I will pause on two noteworthy occurrences of subsumption that appear in Marx's earlier writings: Marx's critique of Hegel's account of the executive power from the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843) and Marx's remark on capitalistic pleasure from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Though both occurrences are unsystematic in nature, they attest to Marx's early familiarity with the term subsumption. Marx's remark on pleasure, as will become apparent, even prefigures certain points from Marx's concept of subsumption as it appears in the *Grundrisse*.

3.1 In the Early Writings (1843–1844)

For Hegel, as we already know, the executive power is charged with the a “task of subsumption”.⁴⁶ In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (a critical commentary of Hegel's work), Marx declared that Hegel's discussion of the executive “does not deserve the name of philosophical argument”.⁴⁷ First, Marx complained that “Hegel does not inquire whether this is the rational, the adequate mode of subsumption”.⁴⁸ In other words, Marx criticized Hegel for only describing the function of the executive without pursuing a normative inquiry into this function.⁴⁹ This is a crucial point for Marx, given that he considers that the Prussian executive governs improperly, namely in its own class interest rather than those of society. Second, Marx claimed that even Hegel's description is unsatisfactory. Instead of searching for suitable concepts to apply, Marx argued, Hegel resorts to his pre-established philosophical categories, such as the category of subsumption.

⁴⁶ Hegel 1991, 308, 328 (GW 14.1, 226, 241).

⁴⁷ Marx 1992, 105 (MEGA I/2, 48).

⁴⁸ Marx 1992, 109 (MEGA I/2, 52). Translated altered.

⁴⁹ This remark reflects the sense Marx had of philosophy in his early years; a sense which appears explicitly in his doctoral dissertation: “the practice of philosophy [...] is the critique that measures the individual existence by the essence, the particular reality by the Idea” (MECW 1, 85 [MEGA I/1, 68]).

As Marx put it, Hegel “provides his logic with a political body; he does not provide us with the logic of the body politic”.⁵⁰ In other words, Marx criticized Hegel that in guise of explaining reality, he did nothing but attempt to vindicate the pre-existing categories of his *Logic* by finding far-fetched parallels for them in reality. This sort of critique has since been frequently leveled at Hegel.

Even more interesting are Marx’s remarks from his 1844 manuscripts. In his discussion of the rise of the industrial capitalist, Marx argued that even when the industrial capitalist seeks pleasure, his pleasure is “subsumed under capital”, “subordinated to production” and “the pleasure-seeking individual under the capitalizing individual”.⁵¹ By this Marx means that the enjoyment pursued by the “working, sober, prosaic, economical industrialist” is not an enjoyment for its own sake, but rather functions as a productive pause from work. Pleasure “is only incidental, a means of relaxation”. Since the capitalist is also careful not to spend on his enjoyment more than he earns, this enjoyment is “a calculated and even an economical form of pleasure”.⁵² In pre-capitalist Europe, Marx noted in comparison, “the contrary was the case” as “the extravagant rentier” viewed pleasure as the goal of his economic activity.

In this short remark, Marx draws attention to the historical character of industrial capitalism, which applies even to its forms of pleasure. But what interests us here is Marx’s use of subsumption. When Marx says that pleasure is “subsumed under capital”, he notes that pleasure and capital are found in a hierarchical relationship. First, in analogy to the traditional logical sense, capital may correctly be predicated of pleasure since pleasure has become capitalistic (“a calculated and even an economical form of pleasure”). Second, pleasure and capital are said to be in a hierarchical relationship, not only as subject and predicate – but also as means and end. For Marx, capital is the purpose of capitalist pleasure, which accordingly is nothing but a productive “means of relaxation”. By indicating this specific means to an end relationship, as will become apparent, Marx’s remark on pleasure from 1844 prefigures a crucial feature of Marx’s concept of subsumption in the *Grundrisse*.

⁵⁰ Marx 1992, 109 (MEGA I/2, 52).

⁵¹ Marx 1992, 368 (MEGA I/2, 292).

⁵² Marx 1992, 368 (MEGA I/2, 292).

3.2 In the *Grundrisse* (1857–1858)

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx used the term subsumption in the traditional logical sense,⁵³ in various analogous senses⁵⁴ and in two specific senses he later labeled formal and real subsumption. In the sixth notebook of the *Grundrisse*, written in February 1858, we find the first occurrences of Marx's own concept of subsumption. By this I mean that we find more than a traditional or analogous use of the term. We find a specifically Marxian concept of subsumption that is introduced to explain a specific phenomenon, namely mechanization, as a means to the end of valorization. This new meaning is primarily visible in the text known as the fragment on machines. But three auxiliary remarks elsewhere in the *Grundrisse* help us better ascertain Marx's intentions. I will accordingly examine, in the order in which they occur in the *Grundrisse*: (1) Marx's remark on the "crude materialism" of the economists; (2) the fragment on machines; (3) Marx's remark on the subsumption of means of labor; (4) Marx's remark on subsumption in the context of his discussion of interest-bearing capital.

3.2.1 Remark on "Crude Materialism"

In a sidenote to a discussion on fixed and circulating capital, Marx criticized Ricardo for mistaking social properties for natural ones. Ricardo had argued that something is called circulating or fixed capital depending on whether it is physically "more or less perishable". For Marx, on the contrary, being circulating or fixed capital are properties of means of production that depend on the role they play in relation to other factors of production. For Marx, Ricardo's mistake is typical of the "crude materialism of the economists who regard social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, as the *natural properties* of things".⁵⁵ Though Marx did not use the term, qualities that things obtain because they enter social relations can be labeled social relational properties.⁵⁶ When Marx argued that

⁵³ Marx 1993, 513–514 (MEGA II/1.2, 413–414).

⁵⁴ Marx 1993, 158, (MEGA II/1.1, 91).

⁵⁵ Marx 1993, 687 (MEGA II/1.2, 567). Marx is alluding to: Ricardo 1821, 26. Translation altered.

⁵⁶ Following my previous definition of relational properties, to have a social relational property simply means being in a social relation. For more on relational properties in Marx's theories, see Cohen 2000, 89.

things obtain new qualities because they are “subsumed” under social relations, he explicitly associates subsumption with the acquisition of social relational properties. Several pages later comes the fragment on machines.

3.2.2 The Fragment on Machines

Marx’s fragment on machines is one of the most debated segments of the *Grundrisse*.⁵⁷ It is also the text in which Marx’s concept of subsumption emerges most clearly. When the “means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the machine, or rather, an automatic system of machinery”, Marx argued, labor is “subsumed under the total process of the machinery itself”; living labor is “subsumed under self-activating objectified labour”.⁵⁸ Shortly after Marx added that this is a “subsumption under the social relation of capital”.⁵⁹ In this section, I cannot go into Marx’s account of mechanization⁶⁰ in any sufficient detail. I will accordingly limit myself to explaining what Marx means by subsumption.

In modern factories, Marx noted, mechanization makes work more productive. But in the capitalist mode of production, productivity is not the end of production. By increasing the productive power of labor, mechanization “increases the relation of surplus labour to necessary labour, by enabling labour, through an increase of its productive power, to create a greater mass of the products required for the maintenance of living labour capacity in a shorter time”.⁶¹ With these words, Marx touched upon a process that he explained more fully in *Capital*: the introduction of machinery reduces the socially necessary labor time for producing subsistence goods, thus reducing the amount of necessary labor in a working day, thus increasing the ratio of surplus labor to necessary labor.⁶² Though Marx’s explanation is still incomplete in the *Grundrisse*,⁶³ his main point is clear: the

⁵⁷ An account of the reception history of this fragment can be found in: Tomba and Bellofiore 2013.

⁵⁸ Marx 1993, 693, 695 (MEGA II/1.2, 572, 573).

⁵⁹ Marx 1993, 700 (MEGA II/1.2, 574).

⁶⁰ While Marx himself did not use the term mechanization, this is nonetheless an appropriate term for a process he described as the “transformation of the means of labour into machinery, and of living labour into a mere living accessory of this machinery” (Marx 1993, 693 (MEGA II/1.2, 572).

⁶¹ Marx 1993, 701 (MEGA II/1.2, 587).

⁶² See Marx 1976, 429 (MEGA II/5, 251).

⁶³ Compare: Heinrich 2013.

increased productivity brought about by mechanization raises the rate of surplus value.

Marx proceeded to argue that mechanization occurs because it raises the rate of surplus value. Mechanization realizes the “the necessary tendency of capital” to “increase the productive force of labour and the greatest possible negation of necessary labour”.⁶⁴ For this reason, in a clear indication of causal relations between capital and mechanization, Marx argued that the “development of the means of labour into machinery is not an accidental moment of capital, but is rather the historical reshaping of the traditional, inherited means of labour into a form adequate to capital”.⁶⁵ Since the term capital is used here in the sense of the process of extracting surplus value,⁶⁶ Marx’s statement that machinery is “the most adequate form of capital as such”⁶⁷ means that mechanization occurs not merely because it raises the rate of surplus value, but because it maximizes it.

Marx then emphasized the dire consequences mechanization has on worker autonomy. In Marx’s words, the machine does not appear as the worker’s means of labor. Rather, labor “is posited in such a way that it merely transmits the machine’s work, the machine’s action, on to the raw material”.⁶⁸ The worker’s activity is thus “determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery”.⁶⁹ In this way, mechanization creates workers who are passive and hence docile, for a certain time at least. By minimizing worker autonomy (namely, their agency and ingenuity), mechanization reduces “individual labour to the level of helplessness”.⁷⁰ Though Marx did not argue that mechanization occurs because it reduces workers to a state of helplessness, the debilitation of workers is seen as

⁶⁴ Marx 1993, 693 (MEGA II/1.2, 572).

⁶⁵ Marx 1993, 693–694 (MEGA II/1.2, 572–573).

⁶⁶ Marx explained this equivalence in the course of the *Grundrisse*. First, we learn that capital is an “exchange value which preserves and perpetuates itself in and through circulation” (Marx 1993, 262 [MEGA II/1.1, 185]). Second, we learn that this “circulation” involves a relationship with labor in which the “labour objectified in the price of labour is smaller than the living labour time purchased with it” (Marx 1993, 321 [MEGA II/1.1, 237–238]). Third, Marx labels this relationship exploitation when he says that accumulation “is transformed into capital only by means of the exploitation of labour” (Marx 1993, 460 [MEGA II/1.1, 369]). Marx also notes, emphatically, that the “only utility whatsoever which an object can have for capital can be to preserve or increase it” (Marx 1993, 270 [MEGA II/1.1, 194]).

⁶⁷ Marx 1993, 693–694 (MEGA II/1.2, 572–573).

⁶⁸ Marx 1993, 693 (MEGA II/1.2, 572).

⁶⁹ Marx 1993, 693 (MEGA II/1.2, 572).

⁷⁰ Marx 1993, 700 (MEGA II/1.2, 577).

a clear result of mechanization. In addition, it may be thought of as advantageous to the capitalist class in its struggle against the working class.

The gist of Marx's point in the fragments on machines is thus (1) that the mechanization of labor is explicable by its direct tendency to increase productivity and hence to maximize the rate of surplus value; and (2) that decreased autonomy is explicable as an indirect or adventitious outcome of mechanization, which may nonetheless be advantageous to the class extracting surplus value. Since mechanization is, in Marx's words, a subsumption of labor "under the social relation of capital", saying that labor is subsumed under capital means that the labor process changes to better suit the extraction of surplus value. In the fragment on machines, therefore, Marx's concept of subsumption does not merely denote a general sense of subordination; not only – in analogy with the traditional logical sense – that capital may correctly be predicated of labor since labor has become capitalistic, but a specific Marxian sense of subsumption in which changes occur in labor as a result of becoming a means to the end of extracting surplus value – and occur to better suit this end.

Since these changes obtain in labor as a result of entering a means to an end relationship with capital, subsumption involves labor acquiring the social relational property of being a means to the end of extracting surplus value and consequently changing some of its non-relational (physical and psychological) properties to better suit this end. These changes include changes (e.g. increased productivity) that are directly explicable by their contribution to extraction as well as further changes (e.g. decreased autonomy) that result from – and are indirectly explicable by – the contribution of those changes that are directly explicable.

3.2.3 Remark on Means of Labor

In a discussion of revenue from fixed and circulating capital, Marx noted that there could be no production of capital without means of labor. He then made the following remark: "As soon as he has to produce, man possesses the resolve to use a part of the available natural objects directly as means of labour, and, as Hegel correctly said it, subsumes them under his activity without further process of

mediation.”⁷¹ This remark clarifies that Marx found Hegel’s concept of subsumption appropriate to describe the acquisition of the relational property of being a means to an end. It may be further noted that by using the terms “directly” and “without further process of mediation”, Marx’s emphasis here is on the productive use, not of tools, but of unprocessed natural objects. An example would be using dry fallen wood for cooking over an open fire. In this remark, accordingly, Marx used subsumption to describe the acquisition of the relational property of being a means to an end, without subsequent changes in non-relational properties.

3.2.4 Remark on Interest-Bearing Capital

In a discussion of interest-bearing capital, Marx remarked that when an independent worker, who owns the means of his or her labor, borrows money from a creditor, these means of labor become less and less the property of the worker and increasingly “the property of a particular class of usurers”.⁷² But despite this growing dependence of the worker on the usurer, Marx continued, the worker’s labor “is not yet subsumed into the process of capital. The mode of production therefore does not yet undergo essential change.”⁷³ Later we learn that by this “essential change”, which is not produced in the relation between worker and usurer, Marx means “the development of new forces of production”.⁷⁴ In other words, if labor were subsumed under capital, production would become more productive. In this remark, accordingly, similarly to the fragment on machines, Marx used subsumption to denote changes in the non-relational properties of labor owing to its acquisition of the social relational property of being a means to the end of extracting surplus value – and occurring to better suit this end. In this case, again, said changes in the non-relational properties of labor consist in a rise in productivity.

4 Defining Marx’s Concept of Subsumption in the *Grundrisse*

Drawing on Marx’s scattered remarks discussed so far, it is possible to provide a definition for Marx’s concept of subsumption as it appears in the *Grundrisse*. In

⁷¹ Marx 1993, 735 (MEGA II/1.2, 609).

⁷² Marx 1993, 853 (MEGA II/1.2, 716).

⁷³ Marx 1993, 853 (MEGA II/1.2, 716).

⁷⁴ Marx 1993, 853 (MEGA II/1.2, 716).

this text, subsumption is one of two processes: (a) the process of acquiring the social relational property of being a means to an end; (b) the process in which changes in non-relational properties occur in something resulting from its acquisition of the social relational property of being a means to an end – and occur to better suit this end.⁷⁵ These two types of subsumptions prefigure, respectively, Marx’s later concepts of formal and real subsumption.

(a) Marx’s remark on “crude materialism”, as well as his remark on the means of labor, pertain to the first type of subsumption. In his remark on “crude materialism”, to be subsumed is equivalent to entering a social relation (or acquiring a social relational property). In this remark, the hierarchical character of subsumption is not explicit but nonetheless suggested by the term itself. In his remark on means of labor, however, Marx explicitly claimed that Hegel’s concept of subsumption appropriately designates the acquisition of the social relational property of being a means to an end.

(b) Both Marx’s fragment on machines and his remark on interest-bearing capital pertain to the second type of subsumption. In the fragment on machines, Marx explained that a rise in labor productivity, along with a debilitation of workers, are the results of work increasingly becoming a means to serve the extraction of surplus-value. It may hence be inferred that in this case to be subsumed is equivalent to obtaining new non-relational properties as a result of becoming a means to this end. In the remark on interest-bearing capital, again, Marx used subsumption to denote changes in non-relational properties owing to an acquisition of the relational property of being a means to an end – and occurring to better suit this end.

From what has preceded, it appears plausible that the immediate source of Marx’s concept of subsumption is not medieval logical subsumption, nor Baumgarten’s legal or Kant’s transcendental subsumption, but Hegel’s concept of subsumption as it appears in his theory of judgment and in his theory of external teleology. Certainly, Marx’s concept of subsumption also retains elements from pre-Hegelian concepts of subsumption such as its role as the basis of predication, since the subsumption of labor under capital implies that capital may correctly be

⁷⁵ Marx’s use of the accusative rather than the dative (*Subsumption unter das Capital* rather than *unter dem Capital*) attests to the processual character Marx associates with subsumption.

predicated of labor. However, Marx used subsumption in ways that are unique to Hegel's concept: (a) to denote the acquisition of relational properties (as in Hegel's theory of judgment); (b) to denote the acquisition of the relational property of being a means to an end (as in Hegel's theory of external teleology); (c) to denote changes in non-relational properties resulting from the acquisition of the relational property of being a means to an end – and occurring to better suit this end (as in Hegel's theory of external teleology). Further support for this account may be found in Marx's acquaintance with the role subsumption plays in Hegel's theory of external teleology, which is evident in Marx's remark on means of labor. Though Marx's acquaintance with Hegel's theory of judgment is not explicitly attested, Engels's acquaintance with this theory, alongside Marx's own use of subsumption to refer to the acquisition of relational properties, suggests that he was familiar with it too.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I examined the emergence of Marx's concept of subsumption by reconstructing its origins in pre-Hegelian as well as Hegelian philosophy and by providing two definitions for this concept as it appears in the *Grundrisse*, which prefigure Marx's later concepts of formal and real subsumption. The origins of Marx's concept of subsumption were traced to Hegel's theories of judgment and teleology. Marx's concept of subsumption in the *Grundrisse* was defined as one of two processes: (a) the acquisition of the social relational property of being a means to an end; and (b) subsequent changes in non-relational properties occurring in the means to better suit its end.

Though the focus of this article was more historic than systematic, I would like to suggest, in guise of conclusion, that Marx's concept of subsumption in the *Grundrisse* incorporates a Hegelian thesis without a corresponding Hegelian explanation. Marx's concept of subsumption incorporates the Hegelian thesis according to which things change upon entering certain relations, like those of means and ends.⁷⁶ This is especially evident in the fragment on machines. Nonetheless, the incorporation of this Hegelian thesis does not, as such, entail the adoption of any specifically Hegelian explanatory mechanism to elucidate how

⁷⁶ It should be made clear that, for both Marx and Hegel, entering a relation does not *as such* modify a thing, beyond endowing it with a relational property. See Horstmann 1984.

things change upon entering relations. Throughout the *Grundrisse*, moreover, Marx distanced himself from Hegelian explanations. Social interactions, he stressed, are not “a matter of conceptual determinations” and of a “dialectic” of concepts.⁷⁷ Using abstract concept such as labor and capital, he added, is only a way to denote that which is common to many individual cases.⁷⁸

Demonstrating that Marx’s concept of subsumption incorporates a Hegelian thesis, without a corresponding Hegelian explanation would require expanding our textual scope to include, not just the *Grundrisse*, but also the posthumously published “Chapter Six” of the first volume of *Capital*, as well as Marx’s manuscripts from 1861–1863, in which Marx’s concept of subsumption is developed in greater detail. In filling important historical lacunae, and by providing a definition for Marx’s concept of subsumption in the *Grundrisse*, this article nonetheless constitutes a point of departure for such a demonstration, which will involve elaborating, not just a definition, but a theory of Marxian subsumption.⁷⁹

Abbreviation Key

AA	Kant, I. 1968. <i>Kants Werke</i> . Berlin.
GW	Hegel, G.W.F. 1968. <i>Gesammelte Werke</i> . Hamburg.
MEGA	Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1958. <i>Gesamtausgabe</i> . Berlin.
MECW	– 1975. <i>Collected Works</i> . New York.

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⁷⁷ Marx 1993, 151 (MEGA II/1.1, 85).

⁷⁸ “a rational abstraction [...] brings out and fixes the common element” (Marx 1993, 85 [MEGA II/1.1, 23]).

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