This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the analysis that follows in the next four chapters. In it, our overriding concern is to explain the necessity of crisis in capitalism, the periodic appearance of crisis in the form of the overaccumulation of capital, and the relation between crises of overaccumulation and the transformations in production and patterns of social reproduction witnessed across much of the world since the 1970s – culminating in the current crisis. The chapter is organised as follows: First, we elaborate upon Marx’s analysis of capital as a process – one of self-expanding value – and the importance of inter-capitalist competition as a ‘coercive law’ that results from the formation of the general rate of profit across different branches of production. Competition impels individual capitalists to play their part in the continuous, ‘leapfrogging’ technological and organisational revolutions characteristic of capitalist production, a process marked by the uneven development of the forces of production. We explain why there is a general tendency toward overproduction in capitalism, and the relation between money, the credit system, and crises of overaccumulation. We then introduce our understanding of the social constitution of national states that together mediate the global unity of capitalist production. Here, we develop the notion that the national state itself should be understood in processual terms, and as an active ‘moment’ in the global accumulation of capital and in crisis formation and management. We follow this with a discussion of the uneven development of global production, the general tendency toward a new international division of labour since the 1960s, and how cycles of overaccumulation and crisis since then have been characterised by the spectacular expansion of credit and debt on a global scale. Throughout this chapter, our analysis remains at a relatively general and abstract level. In Chapter 2, we shift
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our focus to the specificities of capitalist development in relatively late industrialising countries, and Spain in particular.

The accumulation of capital and the ‘coercive laws’ of competition

Since the emergence and consolidation of the capitalist mode of production on a world scale, the general mode by which social-ecological processes combine to reproduce the means of human social reproduction itself has had its basis in a material process – that of the production of commodities. As Marx explains in the infamously difficult opening chapter of Capital (1976), a commodity is the embodiment of two potentialities: that of being socially useful and of being exchangeable for other such commodities for the right price. The secret to the commensurability of the exchange value of commodities lies in their being forms of (or the mode of appearance of) value. Value mediates the unity of all concrete, independent, and private acts of social labour within the capitalist mode of production, and therefore social-ecological metabolism in general. Marx names the substance of value ‘abstract labour’, since the expenditure of concrete labour time by so many individuals appears as the same general and undifferentiated social labour time – congealed in the form of commodities as the products of that social labour. The magnitude of value is determined by the socially necessary labour time for its production – the average measure of the entirety of private and independent concrete acts of productive activity required to produce the (material and moral) means of human social reproduction. Value therefore has no corporeal materiality; one cannot touch it, as it were. Rather, value is expressed in its most developed concrete form as money (Starosta, 2008: 310). As such, money is ‘the most abstract form of private property’ – ‘the supreme social power through which social reproduction is subordinated to the reproduction of capital’ (Clarke, 1988: 13–14).

But what is ‘capital’, in this sense? The private and independent manner in which commodities are produced is a general organisational principle that is historically specific to capitalism (Iñigo Carrera, 2008: 10–11). In capitalism, the production process itself generally consists of a series of transformative moments in which money is invested in a labour process (specifically to purchase means of production and labour-power) with the motive of exchanging the commodities produced for the original sum outlaid plus a surplus which is realised once they are sold in their intended market. The capitalist, as proprietor of