

CONTENTS

Special Issue: Marx and Revolution

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Part 1: The Inverted World

- 426 Turning the World Upside Down: On Marx, Religion, and Revolution
Mikkel Flohr
- 436 Which Human Is Needed for the Revolution? On the Role of Philosophical Anthropology for a Marxist Political Theory
Lotte List
- 454 "Hell is Not Something that Awaits Us": Inverse Theology and Critical Theory
Isaac Bernard Horwedel
- 473 Faith and Revolution in Gillian Rose's Critical Marxism
Bogdan Ovcharuk
- 494 Calling the World Dead: Marx's Philosophy of History and the Question of Theodicy
Neal Spadafora
- 514 Religion and Revolt: A Critique of Secular Supersessionism in the Communist Historiography of the Malabar Rebellion
Abdul Vajid Punakkath
- 534 Teleology and Revolution
Massimiliano Tomba

Part 2: Beyond Redemption

- 540 Between Revelation and Reflexivity: Introducing the Leap of Black Studies
Sara-Maria Sorentino
- 553 Freedom as Fetish
Tia Trafford
- 572 Revolution (The Hand of God at Work)
Anisha Sankar
- 594 Minor Revolution: From Marxist Hermeneutics to Wayward Theology
Adam Banks and Ahura Sultan
- 608 Unrealizing the Haitian Revolution: On Popular Insurgency and Destituent Power
Alex Dubilet
- 638 Bread & Roses: The Soul After Capitalism
Anthony Paul Farley
- 650 Blackness at Revolution's Narrow Gates
Franco Barchiesi

INTRODUCTION



Turning the World Upside Down: On Marx, Religion, and Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue “Marx and Revolution” and situates its contributions at the intersection of Marxism, political theology, and the question of revolution. It traces how Karl Marx’s critique of religion developed into a critique of the modern state and political economy, and reconstructs the different figures of revolution that emerged from this trajectory. The article then introduces the contributions collected in the first part of the special issue, showing how they engage questions of emancipation, historical possibility, political theology, and revolutionary transformation from a range of Marxist and critical perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Karl Marx; revolution; political theology; religion; political economy; critical theory; history of ideas

This special issue engages with Karl Marx (1818–1883), Marxism, and critical theory in relation to the question of revolution as it intersects with political theology. That intersection is not incidental. Marx’s intellectual and political trajectory started with the critique of religion and then developed towards a critique of the critique of religion that seeks to grasp religion’s earthly conditions and effects. This became the point of departure for a critique of the modern state and the dynamics of modern civil society that ultimately led him to the problematic of political economy, which would occupy him for most of his life. A central theme that unifies Marx’s initial critique of religion and his subsequent critique of political economy is the underlying critique of the power of abstractions. Marx’s critique does not reject them as subjective errors but instead seeks to grasp the social relations that generate them, make them appear independent, and imbue them with real power. This is one of many reasons why Marx remains such a productive interlocutor in relation to political theology; it is also one of the most prominent openings for a critical dialogue with contemporary black studies, a connection that is explored at length in the second part of this special issue.

The special issue consists of ten articles that cover a multitude of different but complementary fields and approaches to the theme, as well as two response essays by Massimiliano Tomba and Franco Barchiesi. Due to the number of contributions, the editors have decided to subdivide the special issue into two parts, each consisting of five articles with dedicated introductions (this being the first of the two) and separate response essays. The first part is titled “The Inverted World” and addresses the intersection of Marxism, revolution, and political theology, while the second part, titled “Beyond Redemption,” addresses this intersection from the perspective(s) of black studies. Because none of

the articles in the special issue directly elucidate Marx's concept of revolution and its intersection with political theology, this introduction will provide a brief overview of this topic to frame the special issue and its contributions. This introduction proceeds in two parts: First, it outlines how Marx's critique of religion developed into a critique of the modern state and political economy, and how revolution emerged as the practical horizon of that critique. Second, it introduces the contributions that make up the first part of the special issue and situates them in relation to this theme.

Marx and the critiques of religion

Marx's famous assertion that the "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism" serves as the prelude to his own critique of the (Young Hegelian) critique(s) of religion, which emphasized the earthly foundations and efficacy of religion, as well as his concomitant critique of political theology in his unfinished manuscript "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law."¹ In order to make sense of this statement, however, it is necessary to consider the social, political, and intellectual significance of (the critique of) religion in contemporary Prussia. Religion had been a central political issue across the German Confederation since the Reformation. Prussia was a protestant Christian state within the Confederation, where the reformed denominations had been merged and consolidated into the Prussian State Church [*Preussische Landeskirche*], which was integrated in and subjected to the state by Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840, reigned 1797–1840). The political role of religion became even more central under his son and successor, the politically and religiously conservative Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861, reigned 1840–1861), who promoted religion as the ideological foundation of the social and political order and proactively repressed dissenting voices.²

A group of radicals associated with the prominent Hegelian school of philosophy began to formulate a series of controversial critiques of religion under the relatively permissive reign of Friedrich Wilhelm III. The group later became known as the "Young Hegelians" and included figures such as Bruno Bauer (1809–1882), Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804–1872), Arnold Ruge (1802–1880), and many more. They proposed that the relationship between God and humankind traditionally depicted by religion was inverted: God did not create humankind in his image, rather humankind had created God in its image, as a projection of its universality and limitless potential.³ However, over time, this projection had gained a sort of illusory autonomy and power that stopped humankind from recognizing and realizing its true potential. The figure of God thus came to function as an abstraction from and alienation of humankind's capacities. The Young Hegelians conceived it as their task to uncover and recover this potential to humankind through the critique of religion.⁴

¹Marx, "Introduction," 175; Marx, "Critique of Hegel's"; Marx, "Heft 4," 181; see also Flohr, "From the Critique."

²Breckman, *Origins of Radical Social Theory*, 44, 63, 134–48; Heinrich, *Birth of Modern Society*, 229–30; Toews, *Hegelianism*, 253–4. Given this highly particular historical and political context, it is worth highlighting that the concept of "religion" has been fundamentally shaped by western Europe's historical experience with Christianity and should not be transposed unto other contexts without careful consideration. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 29.

³The designation "Young Hegelians" was first mobilized as a derogatory description in an 1838 pamphlet attacking their atheism. See Leo, *Die Hegeligen*; Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*, 78.

⁴See among others Breckman, *Origins of Radical Social Theory*; Toews, *Hegelianism*; Heinrich, *Birth of Modern Society*, 228–321.

Feuerbach formalized this critique of religion with his method of “reformatory critique,” which involved the (re-)inversion of subject (God) and predicate (humankind) in theology, in order to reveal its underlying truth. While the other Young Hegelians conceived their critiques of religion as continuing their master’s work, Feuerbach also extended his critique to Hegel’s speculative philosophy, which he accused of being “the last refuge and the last rational mainstay of theology” on account of the central role played by “spirit” [*Geist*] elevated above humanity and determining its fate among other things.⁵

In “Introduction” Marx conceived religion as an inverted conception of the relationship between humankind and God like his Young Hegelian compatriots. However, he also insisted that a consistent critique of religion could not continue to treat its object religiously, i.e., as a matter of divine revelation. Instead he suggested that it had to consider religion’s foundations in this world, the world of humankind.⁶ Thus the criticism of heaven must turn into the criticism of the earth and Marx argued that the inverted relationship between God and humankind in religion reflected the inverted world that humankind inhabited where society was dominated by the seemingly sovereign modern state (which controlled the church and its doctrines). While the modern state’s power was rooted in society’s collective participation in and obedience to its institutions, its members were incapable of recognizing their own collective agency as the animating force behind the state since they were divided from one another by the individualizing economic competition and class antagonisms of the emerging capitalist system.⁷

The state therefore appeared as an autonomous and omnipotent subject transcending and ruling society from without – an appearance that was codified and perpetuated by contemporary political philosophy, which drew extensively on secularized theological doctrines to formulate theories of state sovereignty *qua* “political theology.”⁸ This was the result of the transfer and transformation of the idea of an absolute and transcendent power from theology into modern political thought, where it became vested in the state, conceived as an impersonal subject transcending and exercising absolute power over its various institutions and subjects. Thomas Hobbes’s (1588–1679) description of the state as a “mortal god” in *Leviathan* and G.W.F. Hegel’s (1770–1831) conceptualization of it as “objective spirit” in *Philosophy of Right* are exemplary in this regard. This political theology efficiently codified and legitimized the state’s seeming sovereignty in relation to society and sustained citizens’ participation in, and obedience to, its institutions.⁹

Marx’s analysis of the dynamics of civil society in the unfinished manuscript was rudimentary, focusing primarily on the role of private property, but he also referred to a section meant to address the dynamics of civil society in more detail that was unfortunately never completed.¹⁰ However, he continued to pursue this theme in the notebooks

⁵Feuerbach, “Preliminary Theses,” 154, 168; see also Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁶Marx, “To Ruge,” 394–5.

⁷Marx, “Introduction,” 176; Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s”; Flohr, “From the Critique of the Heavens”; Dubilet, “General Secular Contradiction.” On the historical complexities of the concept of the human being see also Wynter, “Unsettling Coloniality.”

⁸Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s”; Marx, “Heft 4,” 181. This is what Marx also describes as “the *theological* notion of the political state” in Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s,” 119.

⁹Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 109; Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 276; see also Schmitt, *Political Theology*; Flohr, “Political Atheism.”

¹⁰Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s,” 80, 81.

he compiled in Paris the following year and in his subsequent critiques of political economy.¹¹ The account of his intellectual trajectory in the preface to his 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, emphasized that his “critical re-examination of the Hegelian philosophy of law [*Rechtsphilosophie*]” had revealed that the key to understanding the state and the legal system were the dynamics of civil society, more specifically political economy, which would continue to occupy him for the rest of his life.¹²

His magnum opus *Capital* starts from the commodity, “the economic cell-form” of capitalism, which he insists “abounds in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” before outlining how commodities and their exchange value “appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own,” seemingly independently of “the definite social relationships between human beings” that constitute them as such.¹³ Marx’s critique of this fetish-like appearance of the commodity, reflected in political economy, but rooted in definite social relations, implies structural parallels with his previous works and the possibility of reading *Capital* on the same model, as a critique of economic theology.¹⁴

Figures of revolution in Marx’s thought

Marx’s displacement of the Young Hegelian critique of religion from the misty realm of theology into the world of humankind also suggested that this critique could only be completed insofar as it assumed an earthly or material form capable of (re-)inverting the inverted relationship between state and society, i.e., *a revolution*.¹⁵ This revolution would need to overthrow the seemingly sovereign state as well as the system of private property that underpinned it in one movement; this would lay the foundations for what he called a “true democracy” in “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law.”¹⁶

In a contemporaneous text, he criticized the French Revolution for being “partial” and “merely political” insofar as it had only attained formal legal and political freedom and equality, which concealed and supported the substantial economic “private” inequalities and social contradictions of the modern system of private property (capitalism). This was, at least in part, related to the revolution being led by the bourgeoisie and shaped by their particular interest. Marx suggested that a revolution led by the proletariat would be genuinely universal because they were both politically marginalized and impoverished and therefore had no particular interests within the present order.¹⁷

In a somewhat strange reversal, the initial calls to overthrow the modern state alongside capitalism were muted in the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that Marx

¹¹Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”; Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy”; Marx, *Grunderisse*; Marx, *Capital*.

¹²Marx, “Critique of Political Economy,” 262.

¹³Marx, *Capital*, 90, 163, 165.

¹⁴The concept of fetishism denotes the worship of inanimate objects believed to be inhabited by a spirit and/or possessing supernatural powers. See Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, 15–21. For an overview of contemporary (non-Marxist) approaches to economic theology see Dean, “What is Economic Theology”; Schwarzkopf, *Handbook of Economic Theology*.

¹⁵The concept of “revolution” comes from astronomy, where it referred to a cyclical and circular movement, which Marx implicitly invokes in his reference to Nicolaus Copernicus’ *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* but also ties it to the modern political meaning of revolution. Marx, “Introduction,” 176, *passim*; see also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 42, 47; Kumar, “Revolution,” 2112–2121.

¹⁶Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s,” 30; Flohr, “Beyond Political Theology.”

¹⁷Marx, “Introduction,” 184, 186–7; Marx, “Jewish Question,” 165–8, 153–5.

coauthored with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Here it was suggested that the state should be taken over by the proletariat and used (temporarily) to take over the means of production in order to ensure the transition to a classless communist society, where it would cease to exist as such.¹⁸ However, the experiences of the Paris Commune in 1871 made them reassess their position. The 1872 preface to the German edition of *The Manifesto* thus asserts that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes” with explicit reference to the Paris Commune.¹⁹ It was the commune itself, with its councils and imperative mandates, that, according to Marx, constituted “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.”²⁰

In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he advanced a somewhat different account of revolutions focusing on their social and economic foundations. Marx here suggested that societies’ legal, political, and intellectual structures and institutions were shaped by the historically determinate ways that a given society produced the necessities of life. He called this its “mode of production,” which was defined by the interaction between “the material forces of production,” consisting of technology, machinery, and labour power, and “the relations of production,” the property relations that define the class structure of a society and how it reproduces itself. Marx moreover suggested that the development of the productive forces would inevitably render the dominant relations of production antiquated and restraining, setting in motion a period of crisis and class struggle, which could lead to “social revolution” establishing new and more appropriate relations of production, effecting the transition from one mode of production to another along a seemingly linear path towards communism.²¹ However, Marx’s considerations in the *Grundrisse*, the 1873–75 revisions to the French edition of *Capital*, as well as his correspondence with Vera Zasulich (1849–1919), suggests a more complicated image characterized by multiple and contingent pathways (presaged by his insistence on the necessity of a “radical” revolution in the backwards states of Germany in his 1844 “Introduction”).²²

¹⁸Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” 504–5. While Marx famously rejected elaborating “recipes [...] for the cook-shops of the future” he did occasionally sketch outlines of the practical transition towards communism. The exact process would later become the subject of fierce controversy within the International Workingmen’s Association. Marx, *Capital*, 99; Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program”; see also Lotte List’s contribution in this issue; on the conflict in the First International see Nimtz, “Marxism versus Anarchism.”

¹⁹Marx and Engels, “1872 Preface,” 175; with reference to Marx “Civil War in France,” 328. In one of the drafts for the latter text, he continues “The political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation.” In these texts, Marx formulated himself in a manner very similar to his 1843–44 texts about the necessity of overthrowing the “supernaturalist” modern state-form. See Marx, “Drafts of the Civil War in France,” 533, 484–47; see also Kouvelakis, “Marx’s Critique of the Political,” 88–93; Colletti, “Introduction,” 42–44; Abensour, *Democracy against the State*, pp. 84–88.

²⁰Marx “Civil War in France,” 334, 330ff; see also Ross, *Communal Luxury*. Marx also emphasised three central governing principles of the Paris Commune (1) universal suffrage independent of property and income (2) capping officials’ salaries at the level of the average workers’ wage (3) making all official positions subject to election and recall. See Marx “Civil War in France,” 331; Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 235–36; Leipold, *Citizen Marx*, 372ff.

²¹Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” 263. At this juncture, Marx also suggested that the current capitalist mode of production would be the last to be characterized by class distinctions, since “the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.” Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” 264.

²²Marx, *Grundrisse*; Marx, *Le Capital*; Marx, “Letter to Zasulich”; Marx, “Drafts of Letter to Zasulich”; Marx, “Introduction”; Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 154–236; Shahin, *Late Marx*; Traverso, *Revolution*; Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*; Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 332–6; but see also Neal Spadafora’s contribution in this issue for a contending perspective.

Contributions

The first part of the special issue commences with Lotte List's "Which Human Is Needed for the Revolution? On the Role of Philosophical Anthropology for a Marxist Political Theory." List departs from Carl Schmitt's (1888–1985) polemical claim that Marxism might be able to criticize bourgeois institutions and ideology, but cannot generate a political theory of its own, because it does not start from a pessimistic anthropology.²³ List's response is neither to accept Schmitt's terms nor simply to revive a variant of Marx's early humanism.²⁴ Instead, she reconstructs and develops a philosophical anthropology from Marx's mature works, where the human is understood as a form of collective historical self-production, plastic but also historically determinate. A future revolution cannot simply reinvent the human as many revolutionaries have fantasized about. Human beings are historically determinate beings, which makes some political forms and institutions more viable than others at any given historical juncture. The "human" needed for the revolution is a determinate negation of what came before it, and any future revolution will have to build institutions where actually existing humans can prevent relapse into capitalist domination while remaining open to further collective transformations.

Isaac Bernard Horwedel's "'Hell is not something that awaits us': Inverse Theology and Critical Theory" takes Theodor W. Adorno's (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer's (1895–1973) disagreement about the continued possibility of emancipation as its point of departure. Horkheimer rejected the possibility and suggested that Adorno's refusal to do the same revealed that he "still retains a certain penchant for theology."²⁵ Horwedel elaborates Adorno's position as a form of "inverse theology" that insists on the possibility of capitalism's end without presuming it. The (inverse) theological register refers to a mode of criticizing the hellish qualities of contemporary social reality as a whole from the standpoint of its potential redemption, while refusing to turn that standpoint into a position or positive program. Horwedel explores the inferno of contemporary capitalism through Adorno's reading of Marx's critique of political economy, where the abstraction of exchange value imposes its impersonal social domination and deforms both social reality and our thoughts.

Bogdan Ovcharuk's "Faith and Revolution in Gillian Rose's Critical Marxism" considers the subjective element of revolutionary practice. Ovcharuk reconstructs Gillian Rose's (1947–1995) reading of Marx through Hegel's speculative account of religion and politics, which refuses both voluntarism and determinism. He pursues Rose's diagnosis of an "abstract faith" that reappears inside Marxist voluntarism as a materialist redeployment of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762–1814) idealist faith.²⁶ Ovcharuk shows how Rose's later engagement with Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) supplies crucial resources for thinking an alternative "concrete faith" as a mode of revolutionary praxis that is neither messianic nor quietist withdrawal. Instead, it takes the form of a concrete and inherently risky commitment to transformation that remains entangled with the social and political actuality of capitalism.²⁷

²³Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 61.

²⁴E.g., Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts."

²⁵Adorno & Horkheimer, "Towards a new Manifesto," 36.

²⁶Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*.

²⁷Rose, *The broken Middle*.

Neal Spadafora's "Calling the World Dead: Marx's Philosophy of History and the Question of Theodicy" interprets the collectively authored and incomplete notes retrospectively collected and published under the title "The German Ideology" through the optic of theodicy.²⁸ Spadafora defines modern theodicy as the attempt to reconcile thought with evil by subsuming suffering into a singular historical narrative of rational progress that presents history as the ground of human self-assertion and (retrospectively) justifies human suffering as a necessary step on the way to redemption. Spadafora reads "The German Ideology" as staging an "a-theological" version of such theodical reconciliation, where proletarian suffering is made intelligible by a historical arc that culminates in communist revolution. The argument then engages with and complicates familiar attempts to rescue Marx's later writings (namely the previously mentioned letter to Vera Zasulich). The essay then turns to juxtapose Marx with Lee Edelman and Meister Eckhart (1260–1328).²⁹ On this basis, Spadafora begins to outline what it might mean to think and live "non-theodically," refusing to let promises of future reconciliation and redemption justify present suffering.

Abdul Wahid Punakkath's article "Religion and Revolt: A Critique of Secular Supersessionism in the Communist Historiography of the Malabar Rebellion" revisits the 1836–1921 uprisings in the Malabar region of Kerala in Southern India and asks what it means for Marxist historiography to take such subaltern religious revolts seriously. It starts by outlining early communist engagements with the 1921 rebellion, which inscribed it in a legacy of communist insurgency to forge a bridge between Islamic peasant militancy and the communist movement's self-understanding. But this connection was built on brittle premises, since the latter held to a secular supersessionism, in which religious idioms were considered fundamentally "primitive," politically useful but destined to be superseded by modern secular communist rationality. Building on and criticizing Marxist accounts of the rebellion, the article reconstructs its religious forms as sites of political invention rather than historical "immaturity." On this basis, the article proposes a novel "desecularizing" vocabulary capable of rethinking the relationship between revolution and religion and recovering the messianic form of rebellious subject-formation over and against communist complicity in secularization.

Massimiliano Tomba's response essay "Teleology and Revolution" interrogates the contemporary crisis of the concept of revolution, which is frequently diluted into a synonym for any kind of invention or reduced to a trajectory of violence culminating in totalitarianism. Against both liberal and melancholic left accounts, Tomba proposes that revolution be conceived as an experiment that opens historical possibilities from within concrete struggles. Reconstructing Marx's movement between teleology and openness, he rejects both determinist philosophies of history and abstract indeterminacy. Instead, he develops a conception of revolutionary telos as the political directions opened and pursued through the recombination of heterogeneous struggles across different temporalities. Tomba's essay situates the contributions in this part of the special issue as efforts to rethink revolution beyond secular progressivism, theodicy, and the dominant legacies of European modernity.

²⁸Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology."

²⁹Edelman, *Bad Education*; Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*.

The articles in this part of the special issue do not converge on a single understanding of revolution. They approach revolution from different angles as a problem of historical possibility: how to think and practice transformation without collapsing into either teleological determinism or abstract openness. In this way, they echo the plurality of revolutionary figures in Marx's own work, from the practical overcoming of the inverted world of state and capital to the search for political forms adequate to emancipation and historically specific paths beyond capitalist domination. They explore how revolutionary horizons can emerge from the critique of domination, the refusal of theodicy, and the practical recombination of struggles, institutions, and forms of life. In that sense, they reopen the question of revolution at the intersection of Marxism, religion, and political theology by showing how new possibilities and paths must be constructed within and against the contradictions of the present.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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Which Human Is Needed for the Revolution? On the Role of Philosophical Anthropology for a Marxist Political Theory

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses a common objection against Marxism, as formulated by Carl Schmitt: that it may be able to criticize the bourgeois state, but that it remains unable to formulate a political theory of its own. As Schmitt's criticism is based in his pessimistic view on human nature, the article counters this objection by reconstructing a philosophical anthropology in the writings of the mature Marx. It argues that he had a *productive* concept of human nature, which on the one hand conceptualizes the human being as essentially historically constituted, but on the other hand as not simply a tabula rasa to be rewritten at will. Finally, it argues that this productive philosophical anthropology delimits which kind of political institutions we are able to imagine.

KEYWORDS

Marx; Schmitt; political theory; philosophical anthropology; humanism; revolution; production

Introduction: Utopia revisited

Within contemporary Marxist theory, the long-standing ban on utopian thought seems to have finally been lifted. A new generation of thinkers has begun to reimagine what a post-capitalist society may look like. Their attempts amount to more than wide-eyed fantasies, as they flesh out in the most general but also the most careful terms possible institutional structures, political infrastructures, and organizational principles. Recently, Aaron Benanav, Søren Mau, and Phil A. Neel and Nick Chavez, among others, have all published entries in an ongoing debate about the institutional framework for communism.¹ These authors are very aware that such attempts should not aim at definite prescriptions for a future society, but rather should be seen as experiments in alternative organizational forms intended to inspire change in the now. If we do not confuse them with political programs, modern utopias may serve a strategic purpose as an iconographic reservoir for concrete contemporary struggles.

Furthermore, recent voices within Marxological research have sought to trace the contours of a Marxian political theory. Marx himself never did construct such a theory, sketching out the institutions and procedures or organizational principles for a future communist society; an omission which is often interpreted as a deliberate caution in abstaining from any utopianism.² Nevertheless, these new voices argue, Marx was no

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¹Benanav, "How to Make"; Mau, "Communism Is Freedom"; Neel and Chavez, "Forest and Factory."

²On Marx's sceptical view on utopian systems, see Leopold, "The Structure of Marx."

foreigner to the concrete work of politics and from his commentaries on historically specific proletarian forms of organization we can deduct certain minimal conditions for a revolutionary political theory. Bruno Leipold and William Clare Roberts have both interpreted Marx's political thought as growing out of a radical republican tradition, where the basic principle of political institutions is the preservation of freedom in the sense of non-domination.³ As opposed to bourgeois republicanism, "domination" here should be understood not merely as direct coercion (violence) but also as the indirect coercion of economic dependence, or what Mau has called mute compulsion.⁴ Most importantly, Marx elaborates on such institutions in his commentary on the proletarian-republican government of the 1871 Paris commune. The basic three principles of this government, both Leipold and Roberts argue, are first, universal suffrage independent of income or property, second, the reduction of officials' salaries to the level of proletarian wages, and third, the limitation of such offices to be both electable and recallable.⁵ Furthermore, Leipold claims, there is no evidence to indicate that Marx saw such institutional arrangements as merely transitional; rather, we should take them as the starting point for a Marxist political theory.⁶

Such endeavors raise questions about the preconditions for societal transformation. Surely, these preconditions relate to the productive and logistical capabilities of society, as well as the political potential for change: Do we have what it takes to change things, both regarding production and political power? Yet aside from these practical preconditions, a more abstract and more principal precondition is the question of *human nature*: Which boundaries does human nature set for the reformation of social forms? For instance, do we inevitably need the repressive force of a police sanctioned by the state in order to constrain some natural human tendency toward aggression and transgression?⁷ This question of human nature can only be asked in terms of *philosophical anthropology*, since it is a question of transhistorical constants of humanity, and the human being cannot be observed outside of history. Specifically, it is a fundamental question of political philosophy.

The following considerations take their starting point in a common objection against Marxism, as poignantly formulated by the conservative-authoritarian German jurist Carl Schmitt: that it may be able to criticize the bourgeois state, but that it remains unable to formulate a positive political theory; that is, a theory providing the political framework for a possible social organization. As Schmitt's criticism is based in his pessimistic view on human nature, I counter this objection by reconstructing a philosophical anthropology in the writings of the mature Marx. I argue that he had a *productive* concept of human nature, which on the one hand conceptualizes the human being as essentially historically constituted, but on the other hand as not simply a tabula rasa to be rewritten at will. Finally, I argue that this productive philosophical anthropology has consequences for which kind of political institutions we are able to imagine. Thus the aim of the

³Leipold, *Citizen Marx*; Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*.

⁴Mau, *Mute Compulsion*. For a discussion of the utility, but also limitations, of socialist republicanism's idea of freedom as non-domination, see also Mau, "Marx's Republican Communism."

⁵Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 235–6; see also Leipold, *Citizen Marx*, 372 ff.

⁶Leipold, *Citizen Marx*, ch. 7, esp. p. 386, p. 403.

⁷According to Leipold, this is one of the major questions of political organization which remains open in Marx, Leipold, 389.

article is neither the development of a philosophical anthropology in itself, nor of a Marxist political theory, but to investigate the necessary relationship between them.

Schmitt's challenge

For the problem of human nature in relation to political form, I turn to Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). Schmitt's famous notion of "political theology" is often understood in a narrowly religious sense as some essential affinity between the theological content of specific religions and seemingly secular politics. There is some truth to this, for instance in his preference for a theistic Christian God as the model of the sovereign of the national state. However, the specific theological concepts he used for political theorization shifted and transformed greatly over time, according to the historical situation and his own political investment in it, whereas his broader claim about political theology remained the same: "The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization."⁸ Schmitt's theory of political theology was essentially a claim about the necessary symmetry between fundamental metaphysical beliefs and political organization, within a community or belonging to a "school" or tradition of political thought. It was a method of enquiring into the metaphysical foundations for any political argument, foundations which could not themselves be rationally established through argumentation but only assumed as the necessary preconditions for that particular system of social organization.⁹ In this sense, "political theology" is not the prerogative of theocratic states or religious political thinkers, and Marxism, to Schmitt, was as "theological" as any other system of thought.

The question of political anthropology is such a foundational metaphysical question. Because Schmitt himself did not shy away from metaphysics, he posed quite explicitly criticisms of socialism which in a liberal commentator might remain hidden behind rationalist arguments. Thus, he formulated in theoretical terms a common, but often understated criticism of Marx and Marxism: that it is unable to provide a political theory beyond criticism of existing conditions. According to him, this incapacity sprung from Marx's philosophical anthropology. As opposed to the legal positivism dominant in his time, Schmitt was interested in the liminal concepts and minimal conditions of political form; that is, their metaphysical preconditions. As a conservative seeking to provide juridical legitimacy to the existing sovereign state, he theorized such metaphysical principles of political organization. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt writes that "all genuine political theories presuppose man to be 'evil,' i.e., by no means an unproblematic but a 'dangerous' and dynamic being."¹⁰ That is, no positive political theory can rest on the assumption that humans are by nature altruistic. Schmitt insists that this does not imply any pessimist anthropology, since he does not claim that humans actually *are* dangerous, but merely that political theory as a science has to start with this hypothetical assumption. Whether his pessimist anthropology is hypothetical or not, however, Schmitt thus makes it a necessary constant of any human society, and thus

⁸Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

⁹For Schmitt's political theology as a method of enquiring into political metaphysics, see List, "Crisis Sovereignty." For a general dissection of the different meanings of Schmitt's contested concept, see Flohr, "Political Theology."

¹⁰Schmitt, *The Concept*, 61.

understands socialism as incapable of founding a political form. To him, socialism necessarily implies an untenable anthropological optimism, since it excludes any institutionalized coercive force.

Schmitt's pessimist anthropology forms the basis of his famous definition of the political as determined by the friend/enemy distinction: to pose something as a political issue is to problematize it as a subject of conflict between two opposing sides, and thus to draw the line between friend and enemy. As opposed to the intellectual poverty of liberalism, in Marxism Schmitt does identify such a distinction: the distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie. "[A] class in the Marxist sense ceases to be something purely economic and becomes political," Schmitt grants, when it reaches the point of treating the "class adversary as a real enemy."¹¹ The Marxist concept of class conflict thus exemplifies the general model of the friend/enemy distinction as the essence of the political. However, in his view, this remains a historically specific analysis only valid for the critique of the capitalist system, and thus cannot engender a theory of political organization beyond capitalism. The ultimate aim of Marxist dialectics to him is not the theorization of politics, but its dissolution: "The class contradiction must become the absolute contradiction so that all contradictions can be absolutely overcome and disappear into pure humanity."¹² Because Marx and Marxists do not recognize that the bourgeois/proletarian conflict is only a *specific* instance of the friend/enemy distinction, they absolutize this conflict and come to view it as the final struggle of history. To Schmitt, Marxist political critique transforms into an absolutist political movement because it is unable to theorize the transhistorical status of the friend/enemy distinction as the basic premise of politics.

Schmitt's critique of Marx and Marxism is not particularly good.¹³ His analysis is politically occasionalist and shifts according to which specific contemporary opponent he is directing his polemics against in any given text,¹⁴ and his knowledge of Marx's writings is superficial. However, his critique of Marxism's incapacity for a political theory expresses, I believe, a typical objection against Marxist theory. It also offers an alternative which is attractive in its simplicity and apparent open-endedness: the friend/enemy distinction holds no specific content and can be extended to any political context. For these reasons, some post-Marxist scholars have taken Schmitt's challenge as a cue for developing a theory of radical democracy as independent of any (socialist) political content. This is for instance the case in Chantal Mouffe's concept of "agonistic democracy." Mouffe adopts Schmitt's model of political form but replaces friend/enemy with "adversaries" who mutually recognize the legitimacy of their positions: "they agree about the ethico-political principles which organize their political association but disagree about the interpretation of these principles."¹⁵ In this way, she argues, we can retain a notion of

¹¹Ibid., 37, translation modified.

¹²Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary*, 62.

¹³Quite the contrary, already from the Weimar period, Marxist thinkers such as e. g. Georg Lukács, Otto Kirchheimer, and Walter Benjamin have been among the best and clearest critics of Schmitt's authoritarian sympathies, theoretical mysticism, and methodological inconsistency, see Scheuerman 1996; Buchstein 2024; List 2021. For the present purpose, we do not need to treat seriously Schmitt's own political theory as any viable alternative to Marxism, but merely counter his metaphysical critique.

¹⁴On Schmitt's unsystematic 'occasionalism', see Löwith, "Der okkasionelle."

¹⁵Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 138–9. Another example is Jorge E. Dotti, who replicates Schmitt's critique of Marxism, Dotti, "From Karl to Carl."

conflict within the political while protecting democratic pluralism. She reproduces, however, the empty schematism of Schmitt's model, and indeed echoes what was already the stated aim of his original formulation, namely, to protect the "pluriversum" of politics.¹⁶

I concur with Mouffe and others that we should take Schmitt's challenge, but not in order to reformulate the political according to his basic anthropological premise. What Schmitt does, and what those who take his lead are bound to repeat, is to void the political of historical content. In effect, paradoxically, they depoliticize the political – the very tendency Schmitt criticized in his 1929 essay "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations."¹⁷ I suggest instead that we take his challenge as an instigation to rethink the relationship between political theory and philosophical anthropology and ask: How must human nature be understood to allow for a post-capitalist political theory?

Humanism or philosophical anthropology

Human nature is no under-researched topic in Marxism. A tradition of Marxist humanism has existed at least since the posthumous 1932 publication of the so-called *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which the young Marx began to criticize political economy from a conceptual background in Hegelian and Feuerbachian philosophy. Furthermore, the ensuing dispute on the status of these manuscripts in the overall architecture of Marx's work emphasized the question of his early "philosophical" notion of humanity as a species-being, and whether this notion remains central to his later works or is replaced by scientific economic categories. On one side, Marxist humanists have insisted on a continuity between the early humanist critique of capitalism and the later economic critique, while on the other, anti-humanists have maintained that an epistemological break with the pre-scientific conceptual framework of the early Marx's philosophical humanism was necessary in order to make way for a completely new economic mode of thought.¹⁸ This ongoing discussion is an important background for the reconstruction of a concept of human nature, also in Marx's later works. However, for the present purpose of linking human nature with political forms, the humanist tradition also has its limitations. To see how far it may take us, I will revisit some exemplary positions.

To the Marx of the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, the main charge against capitalist relations of production was that they alienated the human being from its authentic mode of existence. The concept of human nature was thus a pivotal element of his first steps towards a systematic critique of capital. Here, Marx defined the human as a "species-being, not only because in practice and in theory it adopts the species (its own as well as those of other things) as its object, but – and this is only another way of expressing it – also because it treats itself as the actual, living species; because it treats itself as a *universal* and therefore a free being."¹⁹ The defining character of

¹⁶Schmitt, *The Concept*, 53.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 80 ff. On Schmitt's own, paradoxical depoliticization of the political, see also Flohr, "Political Theology," 8.

¹⁸For an overview of this decades long discussion, see Musto, "The 'Young Marx' Myth"; Anderson, "Marxist Humanism after Structuralism"; Ng, "Humanism."

¹⁹Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 3: 275. I have modified all translations from Marx where "*Mensch*" is rendered "man" to the gender-neutral form "human."

human nature is first, to be a social creature in the sense of living through and for the species, and second and most importantly, to relate to oneself *as* a social creature, that is, in Hegelian terms to be a social creature for oneself, to be conscious of one's sociality. To relate to oneself as a social being is to mediate one's self-relation through the relationship with other social beings in the community. In a society organized through capitalist relations of production, the commodity form stands between humans, which means that they do not only lose a direct human relationship with others, but also their authentic self-relation as social beings. They thus become *alienated* from their proper nature. The unfreedom of capitalism in this context can be understood as this inauthentic way of life: because humans have become isolated and lost their consciousness of themselves as species-beings, they no longer freely and collectively produce for humankind, i.e., for themselves, but have become slaves to productive aims outside of them, namely profit.

Herbert Marcuse saw the manuscripts as evidence that Marx's later economic critique grew out of a philosophical concern with human essence: "It is thus a matter of man as man (and not just as worker, economic subject and the like), and of a process not only in economic history but in the history of man and his reality."²⁰ Although the concept of "species-being" lends itself to misconception, as Marcuse grants, he maintains that it remains a central concept to Marx. Humanness is precisely not a biological trait, and thus the human being is not a species among other species of animal, but rather, "human *freedom* has its roots in man's ability to relate to his *own* species: the self-realization and 'self-creation' of man."²¹ In this regard, Marx remains a Hegelian and his break with Feuerbach does not mark a farewell to Hegel, but rather a return to the source himself. Like Hegel, Marx sees labor as this realization of the freedom natural to man, and alienation according to Marcuse is therefore essentially alienated labor. Communism to him is humanism in the sense that it would return the control over labor to the laborers themselves and thus lead to the "realization of the human essence."²²

In direct opposition to such Marxist humanism, Althusser famously distinguished between the early humanist Marx, and the later scientific Marx. According to his 1964 essay "Marxism and Humanism," the early Marx dealt in ideological concepts and only later developed them into proper theoretical concepts suitable for the analysis of capitalism. While ideological concepts are not necessarily false, their function is political, not epistemic, and they do not allow us to expand our knowledge of a phenomenon. With the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, in which Marx criticizes the concept of "species being," he definitively breaks with any humanism as theoretically futile. The concept of human essence, according to Althusser's reconstruction, is simply an abstraction from the historical constellation of real social relations in which the individual human being finds itself. It thus distorts our examination of actually existing humanity by universalizing the particular: "It is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes."²³ While Althusser's schematism has been criticized,²⁴ much subsequent Marxist scholarship has followed him in disregarding the discussion of human nature as an ideological Hegelian

²⁰Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, 8.

²¹*Ibid.*, 16.

²²*Ibid.*, 15.

²³Althusser, *For Marx*, 229.

²⁴See Musto, "The 'Young Marx' Myth," 247 ff.

remnant of the early Marx irrelevant for his later systematic critique of capitalism.²⁵ Yet rather than delegating the question of human nature to the early “philosophical” Marx, in complete isolation from the later “scientific” Marx, we might look at how the function of the concept of human shifts from the early to the late works in order to ask, *why* does Marx abandon the definition of human nature as species-being? It is not because he stops concerning himself with what is human (and conversely, inhumane), since we find scattered throughout the late works plenty of comments on human nature, human liberty, etc.

In *Capital* vol. 1, for instance, Marx explicitly claims that the human being is a social animal, although in no Aristotelian sense a political animal. He thus entertains a positive concept of humanity’s natural collectivity, while in the same breath criticizing such notions of human nature which would universalize some historically particular characteristic as the general definition of humanity: „The real meaning of Aristotle’s definition is that man is by nature a citizen of a town. This is quite as characteristic of classical antiquity as Franklin’s definition of man as a tool-making animal is characteristic of Yankeeedom.”²⁶ This indicates that Marx sees sociality as a transhistorical trait, in contrast to such historically specific traits as active citizenship and technological innovation, which are merely reflections of their time. This being the case, it is not that Marx abandons any notion of human nature whatsoever, but that the specific concept of the “species being” is no longer useful for his purpose.²⁷ In the early writings, the concept had a critical function: as mentioned, it denoted the authentic mode of existence for humans, and thus the primary charge against capital was its alienation of humans from their proper self-relation. Freedom was conceived as harmonious correspondence between natural predisposition and historical situation, and thus the unfreedom of capitalism appeared as a disharmony in this relation. It was thus a romantic critique and depended on a notion of freedom as an innate human feature, which was furthermore expressed in Hegelian terms as a certain form of (collective) consciousness.

In the later writings, it would seem that this concept is discarded, both for its romantic implications, but also because it is no longer necessary: By this point, Marx has established the unfreedom of workers under capital as a physical and concrete condition. Humans are made unfree to shape their conditions of life collectively, both through the physical force of the state, and through the economic coercion of inescapable market relations. It appears that Marx never explicitly replaced his early concept of human nature with a mature one; however, we can reconstruct one from assumptions implicit in his arguments as well as scattered remarks on the concept of “human.” What remains of human nature in this theoretical complex is no longer a concern with authenticity, but with the traits of the human being necessitating its submission to capital; and beyond Marx himself, or perhaps in continuation of him, we could add: *how these transhistorical traits demarks the possible institutional form of any human society.*

²⁵See e. g. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 87.

²⁶Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, 444, n. 7.

²⁷In *Grundrisse*, we can still find the concept of ‘species being’, but here in a more restricted sense: it denotes simply the fact that humans produce for other humans in reciprocity – or, in another passage, that humans are originally gregarious animals and are only later individualized, Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations*, 243, 496.

These considerations do not say much about the contents of the later Marx's concept of human nature, but merely demonstrates the fact that he has such a concept. However, I believe that we can meaningfully reconstruct this concept as centered on the notion of *production*. This was already part of the species-being conception in the sense that humans realized their authentic self-relation through the conscious production for society as the human species. Yet in the later texts, the notion is radicalized and becomes the main content of the concept of human nature, as opposed to any romantic notion of transhistorical human authenticity. Already in the manuscripts known as the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels famously write that humans "begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence" and in so doing they are "indirectly producing their material life."²⁸ Through collective production, humans produce themselves as humans, they alter their nature.

This notion of humanity as a self-producing collective recurs in remarks throughout his later works. Thus, in his notes on Wagner, Marx writes:

The "human"? If the category "human" is meant here, then it has "no" needs at all; (...) if it is a human already existing in some kind of society (...) then as a starting-point the specific character of this social human must be presented, i.e., the specific character of the community in which it lives, since in that case production, i.e., *the process of obtaining a living*, already has some kind of social character.²⁹

He adds that humans do not "begin" with a passive relationship to the things in the surrounding world, but rather "they start, then, with production." In this way, he distinguishes between an abstract notion of an unchangeable human nature and the concrete community of collectively producing humans. Marx does not simply brush aside the question of human nature, but provides an alternative definition: humanity, understood collectively and historically, begins with *production*. There is no *individual* "human nature" since such a creature would be isolated and thus unproduced, untouched by human history. It would be a species among other species of animal, but it would have no quality to set it apart from animality and make it specifically human. Marx repeatedly criticizes Wagner for his use of the word "stand" to describe the relationship with the world characteristic of man, since this indicates a static position;³⁰ the human being, Marx argues, does not *stand* in any relationship to the world at all, since humans are defined precisely by the plasticity of their collective being. Thus, for human nature to be historical means not simply to be defined by a given synchronic context, but to be in movement, to be continuously in the process of self-production.

Whereas to the early Marx, the human collective could produce freely only on the condition of its being-in-an-for-itself as species-being, to the late Marx, collective production itself has become human nature. Whether or not humans are self-aware of their nature does not define their humanity, and thus the concept of species-being has lost its purpose. There is no authentic human mode of being which we could return to by removing the barrier of alienation; but rather the human mode is itself characterized by being self-produced and thus changing. Furthermore, the definition of human nature as self-producing

²⁸Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 5: 31.

²⁹*Ibid.*, vol. 24: 538, translation modified.

³⁰*Ibid.*, vol. 24: 549.

implies that human existence is essentially historical, but it also means *more* than this. Marcuse too defined human nature as historical, yet in an ideal rather than concrete sense: “The discovery of the historical character of the human essence does not mean that the history of man’s essence can be identified with his factual history.”³¹ According to Marcuse, the factual history of humanity is the history of the separation between essence and existence, that is, alienation. To be essentially historical means to be essentially free, to carry the possibility of emancipation at one’s core, and therefore, becoming conscious of this innate freedom in contrast to one’s factual state of unfreedom holds the key to revolution, the actualization of humanity’s freedom in history. This historical essence of humanity is more akin to an abstract Heideggarian “historicity” than any concrete history. The definition of human nature as self-productive, however, is bound to the actual, differential, finite historical trajectory of actually existing humans.

The concept “production” should be understood here in the broadest possible sense; that is, not limited to any specific economic activity or social class, but encompassing all human cultivation of some material, physical or otherwise.³² It is a form of creation that does not arise out of nothing, but always reworks some preexisting conditions. Production is “construction” in the sense that it is specifically human, and insofar artifice, yet it is not opposed to nature, but rather a prolongation of it; etymologically, “produce” means to lead or bring forward.³³ It is the total productive and reproductive activities of a collective. That humans are self-producing means, surely, that humankind is historically malleable, but also that it cannot be changed at will; it carries with it its history, its past renditions, vices, virtues, and wants.³⁴ This corresponds to a different aspect of Hegelianism: not freedom through self-consciousness, but the yoke and possibilities of determinate negation. The past self is never eradicated but negated and carried over into its new form as remnant and historical content. While human nature may be an abstract and liminal question in comparison with concrete institutional considerations, how we view humans in the final instance demarks which kinds of society are conceivable to us, and which principles define them.. In political-metaphysical terms, Schmitt called the foundational and defining principle of societies the “*nomos*”; that is, the basic norm, self-image, and constituent historical moment of a society, all in one. With the concept of *nomos*, Schmitt theorizes *political form* as an abstract principle emerging out of concrete historical circumstances. In a 1953/1954 essay with the telling title “Appropriation / Distribution / Production,” Schmitt lays out his theory of the *nomos* in an engagement with Marx.³⁵ The Greek word “*nomos*,” meaning norm or law, etymologically links the three concepts of appropriation, distribution and production, which are the constitutional element of any historical social order, he argues. First, the verb form of *nomos*, *nemein*, means to take, to appropriate a territory. Second, *nemein* can also mean a parting or distribution of the products of the taken land among the appropriating community: the normative judgement (*Urteil*) refers back to an original act of distributing

³¹Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, 29.

³²In this sense, production means, under capitalism, both production of commodities for a market, and all the productive activities surrounding it, as argued by social reproduction theorists (see Bhattacharya, “Introduction”) as well as aesthetic production etc.

³³Authors referred to as ‘constructivist’ arguably would also protest to the common understanding of ‘construction’ as something purely artificial with no basis in ‘nature’, see Butler, “How Can I Deny.”

³⁴Vanessa Wills makes this argument forcefully in Wills, “What Could It Mean.”

³⁵Translated as an appendix in Schmitt, *The Nomos*, 324–35.

(*Ur-Teil*). And third, *nemein* can mean the pasturing of cattle (*Weiden*), which Schmitt takes to represent all production as such.³⁶ While all these three elements co-produce the *nomos* of the community, appropriation is the precondition for both distribution and production, and thus Schmitt's argument is that the basic law of any society originates from and is determined by an original act of land appropriation, that is, of conquering a territory and giving it the name of a state. All societal forms to Schmitt thus rely on a primordial act of hostility, continuing the anthropological pessimism of his interwar writings.

According to Schmitt, liberalism and socialism have concerned themselves with an argument over the primacy of either production or distribution, ignoring the more fundamental question of appropriation. While liberalism believes that development of production will solve all social problems, socialism focuses on redistribution and as such, it is a "doctrine of redistribution."³⁷ (Of course, this is both grossly reductive and distortive as a criticism of Marxist economic critique, which has as its basic point the primacy of production over distribution). However, Schmitt argues further, appropriation resurfaces as a problem for socialism when the question concerns not only the historical origins of capitalism, but the future possibility of communism. By framing the revolution as the appropriation of the appropriators, Marx circumvents but does not solve the problem, Schmitt claims: for even if it were possible to completely eradicate appropriation as an active part of the new productive system, it would persist within society as its *precondition*. The form of original appropriation of society does not pass away with the moment of revolution, but remains its defining principle. It becomes that society's *nomos*. However crude Schmitt's intervention in Marxist theory, there is a fundamental dialectics to this insistence on the determinate negation of the negation. There is also a historical sensibility to it: the preliminary institutions erected during a revolution have a tendency to carry over in some form or other in the ensuing permanent institutions. However, Schmitt's theory of the *nomos* also retains his friend/enemy distinction as the defining property of societal form: all social formations are determined by their enmity toward some historically preceding society.

In a 1953 addendum to the essay, Schmitt shifts his approach slightly to credit Marx with having described the primacy of appropriation in his chapter on the "So-Called Primitive Accumulation" of *Capital*, volume 1. Schmitt here expounds on his theory of the *nomos* as a historico-philosophical principle, whereby "world history is a history of the progress – or perhaps merely the transformation – in the means and methods of appropriation." He then quotes a poem by Goethe as cited in the French edition of *Capital vol. 1*, in which a teacher repeatedly asks for the origins of a child's belongings: the child replies that it has them from its father, who had them from its grandfather, who originally simply *took them*.³⁸ To Schmitt, Marx's citation of the poem illustrates the historical regress recounted in the chapter on so-called primitive accumulation: that accumulation is never purely economic but can always be traced back to acts of coercion external to the market. But to Schmitt, it also illustrates the historico-*philosophical*

³⁶Ibid., 326.

³⁷Ibid., 331–2.

³⁸Schmitt, "Nehmen / Teilen / Weiden," 503 (the English translation omits this addendum); Marx and Engels, *MEGA*, vol. II.7: 662; included in the Volksedition, Marx, *Das Kapital* ed. Korsch, 659, which was edited by Karl Korsch and gifted by him to Schmitt. I thank Daniel Badenhorst, Ksenia Arapko, and Juraj Zadunajský for this reference.

regress that any society's system of production and distribution always refers back to a primordial act of taking, hidden in the collective memory of that society.

Marx himself, however, forestalled Schmitt's line of argument, when working out the historical relationship of production and distribution in his 1858/1859 manuscript *Grundrisse*:

As regards whole societies, distribution seems to precede production and to determine it in yet another respect, almost as if it were a pre-economic fact. A conquering people divides the land among the conquerors, thus imposes a certain distribution and form of property in land, and thus determines production. Or it enslaves the conquered and so makes slave labour the foundation of production. Or a people rises in revolution and smashes the great landed estates into small parcels, and hence, by this new distribution, gives production a new character.³⁹

Written close to a century before, this paragraph perfectly captures the essence of Schmitt's much later argument.⁴⁰ Notice that when Marx uses the word "distribution" in this context, he means both distribution *and* appropriation in Schmitt's terminology; distribution is both the act of taking and sharing the land among the "conquering people." This act of taking and sharing gives concrete political form to the societal structure of production in the ensuing commonwealth. The specific way of conquering determines the relations of property: If the conquerors enslave the conquered, production will rely on a slave economy. If they divide property and land among themselves, leaving the conquered with nothing but their labor power, the economy will rely on the relation between owners and non-owners, capital and labor. This is what Schmitt means by his concept of *nomos*: the basic norm of a society is the historical result of its original act of conquest. Furthermore, Marx accounts for an aspect which is important to Schmitt: revolution is not the abolition of power, but simply another form of original appropriation bringing with it a new power structure. The innocent diligence of production carries within it the original sin of appropriation.

To Marx, however, appropriation/distribution only *seemingly* predates production historically. For there to be anything to appropriate, he argues, there must first be production as the source of the wealth which is appropriated. And this primary production determines the political form of the society of the appropriators just as much as the act of appropriation. There can be no society based only on appropriation without a previously existing form of production as its prerequisite. Incidentally, Marx uses the same example of a simple form of production as Schmitt, namely pasturing: "The Mongols, with their devastations in Russia, e.g., were acting in accordance with their production, cattle-raising [*Viehweide*], for which vast uninhabited spaces are a chief precondition."⁴¹ A conquering people, Marx argues, must either force their own form of production onto the conquered, or they must rely on the production of the conquered adopting it as their

³⁹Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations*, 96.

⁴⁰Schmitt likely didn't have access to the *Grundrisse* when writing his essay or the addendum. Although Schmitt owned many books on Marxism and by Marxists as well as by Marx, the *Grundrisse* was not among them, according to the (incomplete) list provided by the Schmitt Society, Carl-Schmitt-Gesellschaft, "Die Bibliothek." While it was published in Moscow in 1939, it did not become widely available until its republication in 1953, and gained a broader reception only with its translation into French, Italian, and English from 1968 onwards, see Musto, "Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*." However, it is doubtful whether knowledge of the text would have led Schmitt to revise his judgement, which was in any case prejudiced and grossly idiosyncratic.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 98.

own, or the forms of production of conqueror and conquered will synthesize into a new one. In either case, a previous system of production co-determines the one that comes after the conquest. These primary forms of production may seem natural, such as cattle grazing, but they only appear thus from the perspective of the new form of production, which sees them as a precondition rather than as a result. In actual fact, cattle keeping is a historically emerged form of agriculture.

“Distribution,” Marx writes, “is itself a product of production, not only in its object, in that only the results of production can be distributed, but also in its form, in that the specific kind of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution, i.e., the pattern of participation in distribution.”⁴² What Schmitt describes as the *nomos*, the basic structuring principle of a specific social form, to Marx consists in production rather than appropriation/distribution. Under capitalism, the *nomos* would then be capitalist relations of production, and the corresponding social form would be the bourgeois state. However, we need not reduce this relationship to some schematic basis/superstructure construct if we understand production in the broad philosophico-anthropological sense which I have suggested above. Human self-production is not limited to the economic sphere but takes place at all levels of society. And it is the fact that humans produce and reproduce themselves, their relations, and society, and the historically specific way they do this, which gives political form to their society, not some primordial, momentary act of violence – although violence may very well be part of the productive relations. Marx’s notion of social form thus corresponds to a productive philosophical anthropology.

Human nature and political theory

So what does this productive concept of human nature mean for a Marxist political theory? First, it means that human nature is open-ended. It is not a pre- or transhistorical given to which we could return or, inversely, which we would be bound to realize throughout the totalizing unfolding of human history. Properly speaking, it means that there is no “human being,” but always only concretely and historically existing human beings. Second, however, it would mean that while the human being is indeterminate by nature, it *is* determined by its history – it is not a tabula rasa for the revolution to give new content. The political institutions of post-capitalist society would have to be constructed for the actually existing human beings, without assuming that their nature is something permanent in history.

Among those who have contributed most to the reconstruction of a Marxian political theory, are newer studies in Marx’s relationship with socialist republicanism, such as those of Leipold and Roberts. As mentioned above, these authors have identified in Marx’s political writings the contours of some minimal political institutions required to establish a post-capitalist society. They draw the principles for these institutions from Marx’s commentary on experiments with socialist organizations, primarily the Paris Commune; yet they argue that these comments are valid for any socialist society and thus can form the basis for a political theory. Because they take their starting point in concrete social formations, they tend to bracket the more principal discussion about the premises for their theorems, such as philosophical anthropology. By

⁴²Ibid., 95.

defining his republican interpretation of freedom in Marx in contrast to readings of Marxian freedom as self-realization, Roberts places himself in opposition to Marxist humanism. He grants that the later Marx did operate with a notion of human nature, but maintains that this fact does not contradict Althusser's argument that Marx was a methodological anti-humanist. "After all," he notes, "there is no way to get from historically constant facts about human nature to historically local explanations of social structure and dynamics."⁴³ It is true that we cannot deduct any positive specifics about political institutions from a philosophical anthropology. Yet what we view as possible social forms is conditioned by our assumptions about human nature. It is necessary to make these assumptions explicit in order to counter such common objections which hold that a post-capitalist society is impossible because "people will always barter" or "humans are inherently evil and therefore we will always need a police force."

Leipold too, grants that there is a concept of human nature in Marx while on the other hand emphasizing his belief in the malleability of humankind, whose "corruptible aspects" would be ameliorated under communism. Drawing on Machiavelli, however, Leipold argues that we need to take into account the possibility that the problematic aspects may never be completely eradicated from human nature: "it is necessary for anyone who organizes a republic and establishes laws in it to take for granted that all men are evil."⁴⁴ This point is remarkably similar to Schmitt's about the necessary precondition for political theory: We do not need to truly *believe* that humans are inherently evil, but we must *assume* it in order to construct a political theory which would be able to contain the effects of this evil. Leipold uses this hypothetical assumption to argue that the political institutions described by Marx in his commentary on the Paris Commune are not merely necessary to create communist society, but also to maintain it. The hypothetical permanence of human evil thus necessitates the permanence of certain institutions preventing a return to capitalist relations of domination. This is indeed important, but if we do not take a pessimist philosophical anthropology as our starting point, we may not need to conceive of such institutions in terms of any permanent content. For instance, as Leipold himself mentions, whether or not some form of organized coercion is universally necessary remains an open question in Marx.

Rather than taking for granted the permanent necessity of some definite institutions, I think it is worth entertaining the idea of a political theory which takes the self-produced nature of humans seriously. That is, a theory which takes into account the virtues and vices of existing humans, while also allowing for the possibility that humans may change, developing new virtues and new vices alike. We should not, like Schmitt, assume that humans are by nature malevolent. But we have to account for the dynamics of power erected throughout the history of capitalism in order to create institutions which would prevent these from reestablishing themselves in new forms. This also means that we must keep in mind *all* such dynamics rather than assume that restrictions on capitalist exploitation will in themselves eradicate all forms of oppression. Racism or sexism may not be constants of human nature (at least we have no reason to believe so), but they are tendencies inherent in the kind of human existing under capitalism. Hence, we need mechanisms to contain these non-universal but nevertheless anthropological

⁴³Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 247.

⁴⁴Leipold, *Citizen Marx*, 403.

facts of our existence. At the same time, such mechanisms should not be so encompassing or finite that we would be prevented from producing ourselves as something *other* than racist and sexist in the future.

The discussion on philosophical anthropology thus intervenes in a central question for the contemporary debate about a post-capitalist society: To what degree should this society be modeled on actually existing humans? While I agree with Neel & Chaves that utopian thought is often limited by the incapacity to think beyond the present – that is, its tendency to universalize that which is historically specific – I also see a pitfall in their counterpoint that “a communist revolution is, fundamentally, an anthropological revolution.”⁴⁵ Surely the historical malleability of humankind would not stop with a communist revolution, and we must remain agnostic as to how future humans will reshape themselves. Yet we should be careful not to assume that such a revolution would have any immediate emancipatory effect on the anthropological specificity of the humans involved in this transition. We have to take into account actually existing humans as the ones who will both reshape their society and for whom society is reshaped. To take a practical example, this would be an argument against Neel & Chaves’s deliberately naïve approach to the division of work tasks: “Processes that nobody wants to do are simply not done. If this annoys anyone, they are free to find the other people annoyed by it and form an association for this purpose.”⁴⁶ This sounds remarkably like the present “system” for the division of household tasks and unpaid reproductive work; we should not kid ourselves that such tasks would then be anymore democratically distributed in a communist society than in the present.

As Vanessa Wills argues, social relations of dominance such as racism and sexism are indeed historically produced, and while they are not the creation of capitalism, they serve its purposes and for this reason are reproduced and intensified. However, this does not mean that they would automatically disappear with it. A post-capitalist society, she maintains, “would likely continue to be marked by all manner of racist and sexist attitudes, beliefs, and practices.”⁴⁷ The fact that human beings are self-producing and thus historical does not mean that human nature can be changed at will. We are material beings, Wills argues, and this materiality includes our ideas and prejudices about the world and about other humans – they cannot be dispelled by thought alone but are integral parts of our produced selves. She refers to Marx’s commentary on the Gotha program, in which he criticizes the assumptions of the social democrats about the simplicity of transitioning to a socialist society:

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.⁴⁸

Marx is here arguing against Lasalle that the appropriation of the means of production does not immediately lead to a just distribution. On the one hand, there needs to be collective deliberation about the distribution and employment of resources for collective purposes.

⁴⁵Neel and Chavez, “Forest and Factory.”

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Wills, “What Could It Mean,” 244.

⁴⁸Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 85.

And on the other hand, what is a “just” distribution of the surplus product among individuals is a *moral* [sittlich] question, and the morality we have is inherited from the capitalist society with which this redistribution seeks to part ways. The revolution can make possible a new morality, that is a new norm for social life, but it cannot give it content. This is something that will have to emerge in the process of the self-production of a new humanity.

As Wills argues in relation to sexism and racism, the task of a post-revolutionary society is not to dispel such forms of discrimination as if they were simply expressions of a false consciousness, but to “create the conditions within which antiracist and anti-sexist work might far more effectively be done.”⁴⁹ This would imply envisioning political institutions which were, like the people whom they serve, self-producing; that is, constitutively open to change. Challenging as it is, we would have to conceive of political form in terms of transformation rather than universal principles. *However*, importantly, we should not view this transformative political form as an intermediary stage between capitalism and “true” socialism. Instead, assuming that any human life form is historically self-produced, there is no end-stage and no end to the self-production of humanity. The best we can do is try to create institutions that take seriously the malleability, but also the inertia, of human nature. As both Leipold and Roberts note, one central feature of the Commune was to Marx the recallability of democratically elected representatives; approached from the perspective of transformative institutions, we could add that these should include mechanisms to allow the reformation of the institutions themselves, not just of the people occupying them.⁵⁰ Contemporary Marxist republicanism remains one of the most serious attempts at developing a political theory of a post-capitalist society today, and it includes nuanced discussions about the desirability of institutionalized power, as well as an acute attentiveness to open questions about the possible uses and abuses of certain institutions. However, in my view, it remains wedded to a pessimist anthropology, if only a hypothetical, rather than a metaphysical one. This anthropology corresponds to a vision for a future organization, where *personal* power is limited by recallability etc., but *institutional power* remains fixed.

The conception of self-transforming institutions is a difficult task, especially since it requires striking a balance between stability and openness. Institutions would have to have a certain durability in order to be functional, yet on the other hand should include some measure to prevent them from solidifying in a rigid form.⁵¹ It is a difficult task, but also an important commitment to consider at every step *both* the historical baggage of existing human beings *and* their historical openness, and build institutions that do not only contain the anthropological remnants of class society but also allows the development of human potential for new forms of collectivity.

Conclusion

In the context of recent attempts at thinking political theory with Marx, I have argued that what we consider possible within politics implies assumptions about human

⁴⁹Wills, “What Could It Mean,” 244.

⁵⁰See also Flohr on Marx’s notion of ‘true democracy’ as non-static institutional form(s), Flohr, “From the Critique,” 339–40.

⁵¹Popp-Madsen suggests that self-governing councils may serve as a historical example of an “institutional approximation” of extra-institutional ‘constituent power’, see Popp-Madsen “Between Constituent Power,” 58.

nature. Political form is therefore linked to philosophical anthropology. Taking my starting point in Schmitt's criticism of Marxism: that it is incapable of political theory because it rejects a pessimistic anthropology, I have turned the question upside down to focus instead on which notion of human nature would be suitable for a Marxist political theory of a post-revolutionary society. If I can claim to have outlined features of such a political theory (the notion of self-producing institutions), they remain both abstract and vague, since I have emphasized instead the philosophical anthropology to which they correspond. For more concrete visions, I refer to the valuable experiments of others.⁵² Here, I have focused on the later Marx's notion of human nature as founded in collective self-production.

This productive philosophical anthropology implies on the one hand that there is no transhistorical human nature, but that this nature is instead historically produced and open to future transformation. While a commonplace belief in "human nature" as something permanent and incorrigible is arguably dominant in political discourse, the argument that this nature is historically malleable is, however, not new to Marxist theory; already Marcuse argued for a form of "historicity" as part of what made human life authentically human. On the other hand, however, a productive philosophical anthropology differs from the mere observation of humankind's historical malleability by insisting on a certain *inertia* in this historical transformation. It amounts to saying more than that human nature is simply historical in the sense that it is essentially open and in constant flux. It is a properly Hegelian notion: humans labor on nature to change it, make it their own, but in so doing they also labor on themselves; their own nature changes. Yet if we take the Hegelian implication of this seriously, it also means that we do not simply leave our past selves behind. The humans that have already been produced are not a piece of clay to be reshaped at will. They carry within them all the humans of the past, and they will live on in the humans of the future. Not in any accumulative sense, of course, but in a dialectical sense – as a "determinate negation."

As regards Schmitt's challenge, this is important for how alternative forms of social organization can be envisioned, especially in relation to political form and the question of the state. This reading would position us somewhere entirely different from Schmitt's crude dichotomy of pessimistic vs. optimistic anthropology. It would mean that human nature is not static, but it is also not completely open. The human beings we have *now* are historically shaped and we cannot simply reshape them, we must work with the humans we have got. This implies that we should think political theory in terms of institutions which would prevent relapse into historical forms of domination, but also that such institutions should be open and transformative enough to allow for the collective unlearning of these forms of domination. To conceive of human nature as the self-production of the collective, in short, is to understand it as historical in a very material sense – not in the sense of an intellectual *Zeitgeist*. Human nature is no abstract historicity, but is always embedded in the "real, active humans, as they are conditioned,"⁵³ that is, as produced by humans before them and in return producing a humanity to come.

⁵²Mau, *Mute Compulsion*; Benanav, "How to Make"; Popp-Madsen, "Between Constituent Power"; Flohr and Popp-Madsen, "Omrids af en historisk."

⁵³Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 5: 36.

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“Hell is Not Something that Awaits Us”: Inverse Theology and Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that an analysis of Theodor Adorno’s “inverse theology” helps account for his totalizing critique of capitalist society and his persistent belief in the objective possibility of its end. I argue that this theological impulse must be rooted in his distinctive understanding of Karl Marx’s critique of political economy. Ultimately, I hope to elucidate how and why Adorno’s distinct theological account of capitalist society as irredeemably wrong and hellish might nonetheless work in service of its revolutionary end, and the resurrection of a transfigured social reality that remembers its wounds. I also hope to encourage further engagement between readers interested in critical theory, Marx, and theology.

KEYWORDS

Theodor W. Adorno; Karl Marx; critical theory; capitalism; Frankfurt School; inverse theology; communism

The belief that all will be well in the end does not
reconcile us to the bad things that have happened.

– Max Horkheimer

A revelatory disagreement

The year is 1956, and critical theorists Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer are recording a disagreement in service of a new manifesto “that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin, while keeping up with culture at its most advanced.”¹ Horkheimer remarks that the problem they are discussing stems from two opposing beliefs: ongoing faith in progress and the view that history cannot achieve progress. Adorno disagrees. Horkheimer persists: “Your view is that we should live our lives in such a way that things will get better in a hundred years. That’s more or less what the parson says too.”² Adorno responds that the point of contention is not an undeserved faith in the inevitability of progress, but the nature of social possibility within history. The question is indeed “whether or not history can succeed,” but all hinges on interpretation of the word *can*. Everything now appears as if under a spell, but it can be broken: “If people want to

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¹Adorno and Horkheimer, *Toward a New Manifesto*, 69.

²Ibid., 12.

persuade us that the conditional nature of man sets limits to utopia, that is simply untrue. The possibility of a completely unshackled reality remains valid.” Horkheimer suggests that “[i]n the long run things cannot change,” because regression to barbarism always lurks. He then remarks that the difference between him and Adorno “is that Teddie still retains a certain penchant for theology.”³

Horkheimer has resigned himself to the belief that the possibility of a “completely unshackled reality” is necessarily tied to a naive and untenable “faith in progress.” The Marxist revolutionary hopes of younger days are waning. In a later conversation, Adorno insists that the growing irrationality of rationalized exchange society, increasingly “intensified to the point of insanity,” still cannot help but unleash “objective oppositional forces.”⁴ The belief that a classless society *will* come about is too mechanistic. “It *can* come,” he states, but its coming cannot be guaranteed.⁵

In this article, I attempt to account for Adorno’s persistent belief in the impossible necessity of a classless, unshackled social reality called communism. I will also attempt to account for Horkheimer’s jest that this persistence stems from Adorno’s particular theological sensibilities. I argue that the “certain penchant for theology” retained by Adorno, what he early on refers to as “inverse theology,” is tied to his understanding of Karl Marx’s critique of political economy and his own critical theory of capitalist society. I do not suggest definitive readings of Adorno or Marx, nor that this interpretation is *the* hermeneutical key for unlocking the most accurate readings of their work. Instead, I hope to provide a reading of Adorno that might elucidate a theological impulse running through his Marxian critical theory, and the Marxian impulse running through his inverse theology. The purpose of doing so is not only to encourage further engagement between political theology, critical theory, and interpretations of Adorno and Marx, but also to think with others as we work toward critical and revolutionary possibilities facing us today in the hellish social world we currently inhabit.

Inverse theology

In the broadest sense, Adorno’s project might be described as an attempt to think through the wrong state of things with an eye toward the right state of things. Borrowing the language above, he is attempting to think through the spell of existing social reality with an eye toward a world free of that spell. The wrong state of things here refers to the spellbinding social reality of capitalist society in which the processes of human social reproduction threaten social life itself.⁶ As will become clear, Adorno typically refrains from providing positive images of such a world, instead describing it as one without hunger, or as one of “differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”⁷ Adorno insists that such a state remains possible in human existence.

But there is only one social world, for Adorno, and, as such, there is no world outside the wrong from which to critique it; we cannot merely posit a wished-for state of things as

³Ibid., 12–13.

⁴Ibid., 26–127.

⁵Ibid., 34.

⁶Braunstein, *Adorno’s Critique of Political Economy*, 146.

⁷Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 247.

the basis of hope. All the concepts we have with which to think have emerged from within the wrong, yet they are all we have. For the young Adorno, “inverse theology” becomes a way to describe a form of critical messianic thought that works toward the presently impossible goal of a reconciled society by attempting to see our thoroughly broken world as it would be illuminated retrospectively from the vantage point of its negation. Such light grants no positive vision of redemption; it illuminates the world of suffering and gestures at its potential opposite.

Adorno use of “inverse theology” can be traced back to a series of letters with his close friend Walter Benjamin in 1934, which primarily concern Benjamin’s work on Kafka and the forever unfinished *Arcades Project*. In his December 17 letter, Adorno references his own unpublished interpretations of Kafka, whose work he describes as a photograph depicting “our earthly life from the perspective of a redeemed life.”⁸ Kafka’s world is one of vivid and extreme mutations that illuminate and call into question the semblance of normalcy. The standpoint of redemption here is nothing other than “an edge of black cloth” at the outer limits of the image. This is the standpoint they’re after, Adorno adds, and one might call it an “inverse theology” that avoids both natural and supernatural interpretation. It is this image into which he would “gladly see [his and Benjamin’s] thought dissolve.”⁹ In Adorno’s later published piece on Kafka, this life from the standpoint of redemption becomes “hell seen from the perspective of salvation.”¹⁰

How we describe this hell, and how we avoid justifying its hellishness in pursuit of a better world, is of critical significance. In an earlier letter from November 6, Adorno expresses his excitement at Benjamin’s decision to begin working again on the *Arcades*, and his wish for him to proceed “without qualms to realize every part of the theological content and all the literalness of its most extreme claims, everything that was originally harboured within it.”¹¹ Adorno suggests moving in this direction in order to avoid merely applying Marxian concepts to reality. Instead, by pursuing phenomena in all their detail, Benjamin and Adorno could arrive at Marxian social analysis more organically as they emerge from within. As such, a theological impulse could work toward deeply political ends. As Adorno writes, “No one is more aware than I am that every single sentence here is and must be laden with political dynamite; but the further down such dynamite is buried, the greater its explosive force when detonated.”¹²

Adorno suggests inverse theology as a way to avoid the pitfalls of both natural and supernatural interpretation of Kafka and, more importantly, present reality.¹³ Throughout his authorship, Adorno works to avoid “natural” interpretations of existing reality associated with positivism, which effectively sanction the status quo insofar as it suggests there is nothing more than what appears before us, and thus no chance of things being other than they are. On the other hand, he avoids supernatural interpretations which merely posit the existence of some ultimate, external vantage point wherein the Truth resides.¹⁴ Like

⁸Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 66.

⁹*Ibid.*, 66–7.

¹⁰Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” 269.

¹¹Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 53.

¹²*Ibid.*, 54.

¹³For a more detailed examination of Adorno’s interpretations of Kafka, see Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 98–102; See also Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 172–82.

¹⁴For critiques of positivism, see especially Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* and Adorno and Adorno, “Theses on Need”; for critiques of supernatural thinking, see Adorno, “Reason and Revelation.”

metaphysics, theology remains critical insofar as it sees more than appearances; it remains mythical when it retains transhistorical concepts that cannot stand up to reason.

Adorno's use of inverse theology subsequently ought to be read as an attempt to avoid both positive and negative theology.¹⁵ Adorno is certainly not after positive theological content in the form of theories, beliefs, or systems about God or other eternal entities. He is not prescribing a theological explanation of existing conditions, a revival of religious beliefs, nor a blueprint to redemption. Elizabeth Pritchard suggests that this kind of positive theology is "mythic," according to Adorno, insofar as it "allows for a continuity between the absolute and the human and thus sanctions the horrors which constitute damaged life."¹⁶

Negative theology, which refrains from positive statements about the divine in favor of negative statements about what the divine is *not*, does not avoid this error. Negative theology still holds fast to a Truth separate from history beyond our reach. Such Truth must originate from an eternal source that would also be our destination. This, for Adorno, is ultimately untenable insofar as truth unfolds within, and is subject to, history.¹⁷ The goals of human social life will be achieved, or not, through human thought and action.¹⁸ As Prichard states, negative theology, too, "veers" into myth insofar as it sacrifices reason by "conjuring a reconciliation that must be denied."¹⁹ In other words, a negative theology also fails because it posits a total separation of reality and our ability to understand reality. This would be analogous to the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God, or redemption, and humanity that Adorno critiques in the thought of both Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth.²⁰

Only an "inverse theology," writes Christopher Craig Brittain, "is able to maintain the attention of human thought and action on the brokenness of present life, and prevent it from escaping to the consolations of sentimentality or ideology."²¹ Inverse theology, then, describes a way of trying to think with and through the concepts of damaged life from a standpoint free of damage. This description bears more than a passing resemblance to the closing fragment of *Minima Moralia*, published nearly two decades after Adorno's letter to Benjamin, in which he argues that the only responsible philosophy in the face of despair is one that attempts to "contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption."²² We will return to that fragment and its relation to Adorno's inverse vision of communism later, but at this point we can say inverse theology is an attempt to maintain a critique of myth without giving up the possibility of redemption, and to maintain the possibility of redemption without giving up critique and thus collapsing into myth.

¹⁵Pritchard, "Bilderverbot Meets Body," 305–6. For an exploration of Adorno's apophaticism, see Finlayson, "On Not Being Silent." See also Truskolaski, *Adorno and the Ban on Images*; Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁷Adorno, *History and Progress*, 91.

¹⁸Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 93.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 306.

²⁰For a more thorough discussion on this point, see Sebastian Truskolaski, *Adorno and the Ban on Images*, especially 102–3.

²¹Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, 83.

²²Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

Bilderverbot and bodily resurrection

Adorno's subsequent use of religious and theological concepts sheds further light on his critical project, particularly when they are understood in the context of his inverse theological thought. A thoroughgoing examination of all such uses would go beyond the bounds of this piece, but here I will draw our attention to two critical concepts with an eye toward their relation to his critique of political economy and its relation to Marx.²³

One of the most significant and controversial concepts taken up by Adorno in line with this theological motif is the "ban on images" (*Bilderverbot*). Adorno concludes his essay "Reason and Revelation" with recourse to the ban as a response to what he saw as a growing tendency to turn toward religious, spiritual, and political meaning-making in the face of political impotence and existential meaninglessness, more or less regardless of the particular religious, theological, or political content. Adorno distances himself from and critiques a certain religious attitude

in which it is not the truth and authenticity of the revelation that are decisive but rather the need for guidance, the confirmation of what is already firmly established, and also the hope that by means of a resolute decision alone one could breathe back that meaning into the disenchanted world under whose absence we have been suffering so long, as though we were mere spectators staring at something meaningless.²⁴

So-called leaps of faith were at one time life-threatening collisions against the status quo.²⁵ The social situation has since changed, but it is in this spirit that Adorno writes against faith reduced to a naive hope that might forcefully penetrate meaning back into the dead corpse of a disenchanted world: new wine bursting old wineskins. The understandable desires for meaning and human connection promised by these religious sensibilities risks ignoring the "massive concentration" of economic, political, and administrative power that "reduces every individual into a mere functionary of the machinery." The ostensible need for meaningful bonds is "increasingly a need for a spiritual or intellectual reduplication and justification of an authority that is nonetheless already present."²⁶ Straightforward hope in the connections promised and engendered by religion run cover for the hellish social relationships from which they emerge.

In light of the increasing disparity between political powers and the political impotence of social actors, the individual ego is weakened such that, for the sake of its own preservation, it comes to identify with "the very thing that condemns it to impotence." In other words, the often well-meaning and well-intentioned "urge for bonds, which exalts itself as though it had relinquished restrictions on egoism" is not oriented to the humane but "capitulates before the inhumane."²⁷ This tendency is particularly true in moments of explicit political crises, in which strong leaders and states promise to restore the normalcy of catastrophe.²⁸ For Adorno, as for Benjamin, catastrophe does not refer to exceptional states of affairs, but to the semblance of normalcy amidst the

²³For more thoroughgoing examinations of Adorno's use of religious and theological concepts, as well as the theological aspects of his own thinking, see especially Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*; Truskolaski, *Adorno and the Ban on Images*; Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*; Braunstein, "Something's Missing," in *Adorno's Critique of Political Theology*.

²⁴Adorno, "Reason and Revelation," 137.

²⁵Adorno specifically names Kierkegaard and Pascal. See "Reason and Revelation," 137.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 138.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 139.

²⁸O'Kane, "Critical Theory and Permanent Catastrophe" 167–70.

hellishness of social reality. As Benjamin writes, “hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now.”²⁹

In order to retain its critical edge, theological content must allow itself to be transfigured and “put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane.”³⁰ Given the wrong state of things, Adorno sees “no other possibility than extreme asceticism toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant.”³¹ This is no straightforward “secular theology.” While Adorno does at times criticize and reduce theological and religious concepts on a sociological basis, as demonstrated above, his call to the ban is not merely an explanation of a theological concept based on its reduction to sociological origins, nor is it a political theology in the sense that it purports to identify some hidden theological ground for political concepts; it is a theological critique of an inverted social world animated by the ongoing possibility of redemption despite appearances.³²

The theological residue of the ban does have philosophical and political implications. In one sense, Adorno suggests that we must be oriented by what we cannot yet know. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that, in its origins, the ban pursued salvific knowledge by rejecting and denouncing “any faith which claims to depict it,” amounting to “knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.”³³ Understood in light of Adorno’s concept of inverse theology, the ban here functions to foreclose positive images of utopia so far removed from the suffering of this world that they take on the status of fairy tales.³⁴ Such images are no different than the religious opiates critiqued by Marx; they blind rather than illuminate.³⁵

Adorno’s insistence on the ban does not resign him to nihilism. Indeed, as will be discussed further below, he suggests that redemption has been possible for some time.³⁶ Adorno insists that we must hold fast to the possibility of redemption *in existence*; if its possibility were totally cut off, then “the human spirit would become an illusion, and the finite, conditioned, merely existing subject would eventually be deified as carrier of the spirit.”³⁷ As Pritchard helpfully writes, total separation of history and redemption “ends up enthroning things as they are. The severing of all ties between this fallen world and its reconciliation amounts to locking us into a closed system of ever-sameness. Hence, demythologization reverts to myth.”³⁸ However, circumventing or lifting the ban prematurely amounts to naivete or hubris, at best, and bends toward theocracy and authoritarianism, at worst. As Benjamin similarly suggests, the Kingdom of God cannot be established as the goal of history: from our present

²⁹Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473 [N9a,1].

³⁰Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” 137.

³¹*Ibid.*, 142.

³²Here I share Roland Boer’s argument that Adorno should not be understood as a “secular theologian” in the standard sense. See Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 422–30. See also Truskolaski, *Adorno and the Ban on Images*, 88–94.

³³Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 17–18.

³⁴This marks one of the key differences between Adorno’s attempt to think with an eye toward utopia and Ernst Bloch’s attempt to do the same. On this crucial difference, see Macdonald, *What Would Be Different*, 14–22.

³⁵Marx, “Contribution to the Critique,” 54. It should be noted that while Adorno is intensely critical of the practice of imagining future societies, he avoids suggesting that such practice should be abandoned entirely: “the vision of a just society has to be the center of force endowing every sentence written about sociology with light. But it is not beneficial to look at the sun.” Quoted in Braunstein, 321.

³⁶Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 67.

³⁷Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 400.

³⁸Pritchard, “Bilderverbot Meets Body,” 297.

standpoint, it is not its *telos* but its *Ende*.³⁹ Adorno suggests that we, like Marx and Engels, must be enemies of utopia, but “for the sake of its realization.”⁴⁰

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno subsequently references the ban on images in close proximity to another extreme theological concept: bodily resurrection of the dead. Against idealist spiritualization, Adorno suggests that the truthful residue of this faithful belief lies in its *materiality*: “It is at its most materialist outer limit that materialism unexpectedly coincides with theology. It longs for the resurrection of the flesh.”⁴¹ Materialism at its extreme comes to agree with theology at its extreme. We must forgo positive images of utopia while we nonetheless maintain belief in the possibility of a kind of resurrection: a society of free individuals organized around the fulfillment of need.

Death does not provide some inherent meaning to life, for Adorno, but presents a stark obstacle to all metaphysical and utopian thinking. In a rare and somewhat odd conversation with Ernst Bloch, Adorno suggests that “[u]topian consciousness means a consciousness for which the *possibility* that people no longer have to die does not have anything horrible about it, but is, on the contrary, *that* which one actually wants.”⁴² Resurrection is not a denial of death, nor does it propose eternal life as the *telos* of earthly life. Resurrection defeats an actual death: it insists on the reality of a deceased, even murdered, body brought back to new life, transfigured but still wounded. The starkness of death likewise insists on the ban on images on this side of resurrection. The possibility of utopia, however unlikely, lives somewhere on the other side of this society’s death coinciding with the resurrection of a transfigured social body. Materialism, as such, might yet indeed be fulfilled in its negation: a social world that knows no material want.⁴³

Illuminating hell

While we cannot know the absolutely good, Adorno suggests we do know what is wrong.⁴⁴ Indeed, his project attempts to think through this wrongness. Too often, even theorists who have provided profound insight into Adorno’s theological thought describe this “wrongness” in vague and abstract terms associated with damage, commodification, reification, and injustice or inhumanity.⁴⁵ I suggest that Adorno’s theological thinking in this regard must be situated within his distinctly Marxist critique of political economy, which informs his own critique of capitalist society as a negative totality of permanent catastrophe that might yet be negated.⁴⁶

³⁹Benjamin, “Theological-Political Fragment,” 305.

⁴⁰Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 322.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 207.

⁴²Adorno in Adorno and Bloch, “Something’s Missing,” 8. Emphasis in original.

⁴³*Ibid.*; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 156.

⁴⁴Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 175; *History and Freedom*, 262–3.

⁴⁵Pritchard provides a detailed and helpful analysis of Adorno’s critical procedure, but tends to reduce the wrongness of damaged life to notions of injustice, inequality, and hierarchy. Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot Meets Body*,” 312. Truskolaski’s excellent overview of Adorno’s use of theological concepts in *Adorno and Theology* does make clear that Adorno mounts a distinctly Marxist critique of damaged life, but what exactly makes Adorno’s critique Marxist, and what exactly makes capitalism so damaging, never fully emerges. Gordon similarly focuses on issues of commodification and reification in *Adorno and Existence*.

⁴⁶O’Kane, “Critical Theory and Permanent Catastrophe,” 167. This is not to say that Adorno is Marxist in a dogmatic sense, nor that Adorno never critiques Marx. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Braunstein, *Adorno’s Critique of Political Economy*. See also Bonefeld and O’Kane’s excellent edited volume, *Adorno and Marx*, referenced throughout this piece.

Part of what makes capitalist society particularly hellish, for Adorno, is the way its historically unique effect upon our social relationships constitutes an historically unique effect upon our thought.⁴⁷ The primary culprit, according to Adorno, and the key to understanding why and how life within advanced capitalist society is both real and illusory, is the social processes underlying surplus value. Adorno is ultimately convinced that Marx is a serious dialectical thinker because he understood that in exchange something is both “equal and unequal” insofar as the formal equality of the exchange of labor-power for wages presumes and produces social inequality and social domination.⁴⁸ Marx’s theory of surplus value becomes essential to Adorno’s descriptions of hell, so to speak, giving it a critical role in his inverse theology.

In a seminar on Marx from 1962, Adorno attempts to work through a crucial theoretical question concerning whether or not “the concept is something the knowing subject adds to the material” or if there is “something like a concept in the object.” He remarks that the Frankfurt school’s answer to this question is what distinguishes it from “all other traditions of sociology.” He goes on to explain that when human beings enter into an exchange relation, they cannot help but “[reduce] different use-values to labour-value” and, in so doing, they “actualize a real conceptual operation socially.”⁴⁹ In other words, whether or not they are aware of it, human beings are compelled to live and act according to abstract economic concepts that are reproduced again and again in relations of exchange. If one “stick[s] to the facts,” then one will “encounter the concept” within them.⁵⁰

The facts at hand are the compulsions of exchange. Adorno writes: “Exchange is still key to society.”⁵¹ In particular, he has in mind the exchange of labor-power for wages. Adorno’s further explication follows closely with Marx:

The worker sells his labour-time for which he receives his equivalent. But the time he gives and the time that is needed for the reproduction of his labour-power are different. On the one hand, exchange takes place in the form of equivalents: the worker gives his labour time and he receives what is required for the reproduction of his labour-power in return. Here lies the source of surplus-value without having to consider the commodity produced: One exchanges the same for the same [*Gleiches mit Gleichem*] and simultaneously the same for the not-same [*Gleiches mit Nicht-Gleichem*]. Behind this lies the entirety of class relations.⁵²

Following Marx, Adorno suggests that the formal equality of the exchange of labor-power for wages results in an inequality. Workers must enter such relations because they are compelled to earn money for their survival; capitalists are compelled to enter such relations because capital, on which they depend, must accumulate in the form of profit. Labor-power is the only commodity that, once used up, produces value for the one who purchases it. This surplus of value assumes the form of profit for its owners.

The significance of this view from Adorno, according to Werner Bonefeld, is that it “focuses the critique of political economy as a critique of the capitalist form of wealth,

⁴⁷On this point, see Baumann, “Adorno and Methodologies of Critique.” Baumann also discusses Adorno’s relationship to the “New Reading of Marx” and “Open Marxism.”

⁴⁸Adorno, “Marx and Basic Concepts,” 245.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 242.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 242.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 246.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 249.

and its production” and that it denies the view that “the critique of political economy is a critique from the standpoint of labour.”⁵³ Marx is not providing an alternative economic theory to capitalism, for Adorno, nor a theory “premised on subjective-proletarian class consciousness.” Marx is instead asking whether or not “society conforms to its own rules.” The answer is both yes, insofar as its rules are premised on formally equal market exchanges, and no, insofar as this formal equality reproduces the inequality of class antagonisms on which it is premised.⁵⁴

Adorno, like Marx, does not critique the capitalist labor economy of his day from the subjective standpoint of labor over and against capital with the goal of achieving a fairer, more just, or even perfected labor economy.⁵⁵ As Bonefeld writes, “The foundation of [Marx’s] critique is not the subjective reason that identifies shortcomings and argues for a more perfect economic situation ... The point of critique is comprehension of society as a process of valorisation, of money that begets more money.”⁵⁶ Adorno echoes the necessity of an objective critique beyond the standpoint of labor over and against capital and drives this point further when he writes that those who wish to understand the social situation of their day must see it for what it is in its actual estrangement, where even “the most hidden recesses” of individual life are conditioned by the “objective powers” of “material production,” which deny it “autonomy or substance of its own.”⁵⁷

This distinct set of social relations subsequently affects our thinking. Adorno suggests that there is a sense in which the “transcendental subject” of idealist theory has become more real than the concrete individual. Actual persons compelled to live and think in exchange society as “*homo oeconomicus* incarnate” are truer to the kind of “humanity” available to them than their own immediate sense of themselves as a living, needing human being. Adorno writes, “If the standard structure of society is the exchange form, its rationality constitutes people: what they are for themselves, what they think they are, is secondary.”⁵⁸ This is true of more than just human self-understanding, it applies to conceptualization more broadly. As Rolf Tiedemann writes,

The reduction of concrete things to what is identical in concepts is, in Adorno’s formulation, nothing other than the reflexive form of a society whose ‘standard structure’ is reflected in the form of exchange. The form of rationality most available to this society is that of abstraction, since only abstraction permits equating real differences by disregarding them, thereby enabling the exchange of commodities.⁵⁹

Adorno argues that the kind of pervasive abstraction named here is “untruth that is nevertheless true.” It is an expression of the fact that exchange society is objectively true *and* premised on a lie: we are being cheated in ostensibly equal exchanges and yet things could be otherwise. Understanding the former is easy enough, one need only look around; truly understanding the latter is more difficult in that it requires the impossible task of reaching “beyond society as it is.”⁶⁰ Thought depends upon objective social

⁵³Bonefeld, *Critical Theory*, 3.

⁵⁴Adorno, “Marx and Basic Concepts,” 245.

⁵⁵See Bonefeld, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion*; Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism, Modern Sociology*, 75.

⁵⁶Bonefeld, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion*, 23.

⁵⁷Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 15.

⁵⁸Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 248.

⁵⁹Tiedemann, “Concept, Image, Name,” 131.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 131.

conditions of equal exchange that are premised on a lie. As Bobka and Braustein state succinctly: “the equality in the process of exchange reproduces the inequality of classes and individuals.”⁶¹

This in part constitutes the spell named above. It is not merely a veil of “false consciousness” that can be pierced in order to reveal the bare facts behind it. Adorno denies that we can merely describe the wrongness of ideology in contrast to the truth of empirical observations or basic economic relationships; doing so would depend upon a conception of truth identical to reality conditioned by the semblance of economic abstraction under discussion.⁶² There is an objectivity to abstract economic concepts, to the fetish character of commodities, for example; it is not “ideological” in this sense that it amounts to an incorrect, subjective description of social relationships. As Marx writes, the appearance of “material relations between persons and social relations between things” is the appearance of things “as they are” in a capitalist society.⁶³ There is an objectivity to society, to its being accurately described as capitalist, and, for Adorno, to such a society being described as false, wrong, and changeable.

The more significant insight is that the abstract economic categories conditioning our reality makes it false in a deeper sense: economic relations condition, and are conditioned by, an antagonistic social totality of class domination and exploitation that occurs prior to and through these individual acts of exchange at the expense of its members.⁶⁴ “In other words,” Adorno argues, echoing his description of Marx above, “the social whole no longer accomplishes precisely what it was supposed to accomplish, for the human beings who are exposed and subjected to this interconnected whole are also mortally and fatefully threatened by the very society to which they owe their life.”⁶⁵ Critique of ideology does not stop at unveiling the so-called facts.⁶⁶ We must recognize the conditionality of the factual.⁶⁷

Capitalist life is a spellbinding, hellish inversion of social life wherein social relations among people are thing-like, and relations among economic things mediate and condition society. As Simon Clarke helpfully describes, Marx suggests that things like commodities and money really do manifest a social power in capitalist society, but they do so in accordance with a social form, not as things in themselves.⁶⁸ The political economists of Marx’s day, not to mention many of his socialist contemporaries, missed this crucial distinction. In doing so, they provided more or less accurate descriptions of social reality as it appeared before them, producing theoretical expressions of inverted social life they could only describe but could not explain.⁶⁹

Contemporary traditional theory thinks like its ancestors in political economy; it forgets the conditional nature of natural history and social life, working from a subjective perspective internal to that hellish inversion. “Instead of seeing the ‘propensity to truck,

⁶¹Bobka and Braunstein, “Adorno and Critique,” 37.

⁶²Adorno, *Philosophy and Sociology*, 100.

⁶³Marx, *Capital*, 166.

⁶⁴Adorno, *Philosophy and Sociology*, 100–2.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁶According to Adorno, ideology is not reducible to willful misrepresentation of the way things “really are.” This he calls the “old Enlightenment theory of religion as deception perpetrated by priests.” *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁸Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism, and Modern Sociology*, 85.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

barter and exchange' as a need imposed by exchange," Clarke writes, "political economy sees exchange as an expression of this 'natural' propensity."⁷⁰ Bonefeld suggests that critical theory in the spirit of Adorno "thinks against the flow of the world."⁷¹ It does not deny that individuals are compelled to act according to abstract economic laws "as if by force of nature ... through and by means of them."⁷² But it does not stop here. Contrary to traditional theory, critical theory works from the premise that the minimal requirements for survival mediated by the capitalist production process in no way explain "the form, content and force of the capitalist economic categories."⁷³ The objectivity of capitalist social life and its antagonisms is felt in hunger pangs, the dread of debt, the shock of an empty wallet, the smile of the boss who fires you.

In the wrong life of capitalist society, life truly is a means to constantly accumulate capital for the sake of its owners. As Adorno writes, "Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it; the profit interest and thus the class relationship make up the objective motor of the production process which the life of all men hangs by, and the primacy of which has its vanishing point in the death of all."⁷⁴ The society of capital is particularly hellish not only because it ruins some lives for the sake of others, but because it also ruins lives as a means of sustaining them and sustains them as a means to ruin them: this is a sickness unto death.

The antagonisms making up the negative totality of capitalist society – the compulsion to subject oneself to the law of value and competition, the requirement to make money in order to survive, the compulsion to accumulate capital, the widespread disregard for actual individuals and non-human life, the violence against all difference – are objectively real. They are *illusory* insofar as they are presented as natural, law-like, inevitable, and eternal. Working from Marx's position above, Adorno argues that economic laws are "mystified into a law of nature" precisely because of their inevitability "under the prevailing conditions of production." Actual social life, social misery, social disregard, is dictated by economic abstractions manifest in exchange. Adorno continues:

Ideology is not superimposed as a detachable layer on the being of society; it is inherent in that being. It rests upon abstraction, which is of the essence of the barter process. Without disregard for human beings there could be no swapping. What this implies in the real progress of life to this day is the necessity of social semblance. Its core is value as a thing-in-itself, value as 'nature.' The natural growth of capitalist society is real, and at the same time it is that semblance.⁷⁵

That such compulsory processes and requirements are law-like is only *socially* necessary. According to Adorno, understanding this fact is foundational for understanding two countervailing realities. On the one hand, it attests to the ongoing fact that no one escapes the social badness: one cannot simply wish or will themselves out of hell through religion or political sloganeering. On the other hand, the social nature of these economic laws points to the fact that they remain changeable: that these particular social forms can,

⁷⁰Ibid., 84.

⁷¹Bonefeld, "Cracking Economic Abstractions," 15.

⁷²Ibid., 15–16.

⁷³Ibid., 18.

⁷⁴Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320.

⁷⁵Ibid., 355.

must be, *abolished*. “What is must be changeable if it is not to be all.”⁷⁶ This, Adorno asserts, is foundational to Marxist theory. “The realm of freedom would no sooner begin than [the laws of capitalism] would cease to apply.”⁷⁷ Freedom and humanity might truly begin once humans are no longer compelled to be free in economic exchange.

This reality, wherein socially contingent facts are presented as either natural or eternal, has significant political implications. While under this proverbial spell, implausible acts of unspeakable evil and suffering that continue to be committed at home and around the world can subsequently become all too easy to *disbelieve*, particularly when a thin semblance of “precious peace” depends upon “capitulation.” Perpetrators of such acts are subsequently able to defend callous disregard for others as a kind of courageous realism: doing what must be done.⁷⁸ Questions of truth are converted into questions of power.⁷⁹ Here we must remember: things truly are as bad as they seem, but they have never had to be this way, and they don’t need to be this way, even as we are presently compelled to live in and through their actualization.

For those who might doubt the objective reality of the social compulsions of exchange society, Adorno suggests imagining what would happen if one simply tried to stop living according to its rules: living with a money-making profession in mind, getting adequate returns investments, following social customs, forms of folk wisdom, and cultural mores, however repressive. One can experience the reality of society as a negative, antagonistic social totality of violent compulsion as soon as one tries to “act otherwise.” We experience the reality of society when it *hurts*.⁸⁰ An inability to even imagine such pain betrays numbed sadism. For many around the world, it is not a matter of avoiding the hurt: there is no choice. As Bonefeld reminds us: the only thing worse than being exploited is being deemed unworthy even of exploitation.⁸¹

The hellishness of capitalist society, for Adorno as for Marx, is therefore not reducible to the fact that some are rich and some are poor, that bosses make more than their workers; it is expressed in the fact that work itself is compelled by the accumulation of capital – value begetting value, money begetting money – and that this process presently constitutes bosses, workers, non-workers, and work as who and what they presently are. Capitalist society is subsequently not only hellish because labor and wealth are divided by the arbitrary violence of social birth, race, gender, sexual orientation, geography, and physical differences and abilities, because the bourgeois promises of freedom, autonomy, private property, and leisure have been denied to so many, but also because they were themselves dreams that never dreamt, ripped from the bellies of those deemed non-subjects, non-humans, less-than-human, unworthy of lives. It is not only that imperial powers fail to count those they murder, but also that historical ingenuities of human evil have so saturated the social fabric that the literal ground becomes too profane for the ashes of martyrs. It is not only that such things happen, but that they presently set the terms for life and death and thought, taking up all our waking hours, stalking our dreams.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 398.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 355.

⁷⁸Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 108.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁰Adorno, *Philosophy and Sociology*, 34.

⁸¹Bonefeld, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion*, 30.

These are some of the contours and conditions of wrong life, within which life is unable to live. To describe Adorno's vision of our society as merely unjust, unfair, or damaged – or to fashion Adorno's wrong life thesis into a transhistorical proposition concerning the difficulty of moral action, practical reasoning, and meaning-making in a general sense, without consideration for the particular effects of capital, the compulsion to conform oneself to abstract processes of value in motion, to fit into the process of money that makes money, or to become cold in the face of mass violence, is to do a disservice to his entire project.

Right life would be reconciled life in a classless society that knows no want. As Bonefeld writes, "The critique of class society does not find its positive resolution in the achievement of a fair and just class society. The critique of class society finds its positive resolution only in the classless society."⁸² Wrong life, our life, describes a social world marred by abstract and absurd exchanges and antagonisms, in which the provision of needs is an arbitrary means to the ultimate end of compulsory production for the sake of private wealth. To say there is no right life within a wrong life is to say that "the good life" is the privatized life of privatized property subsidized by mass suffering: it is no good life at all, even, and perhaps especially, when it feels good. Dwelling here has become impossible.⁸³ No one can live rightly in social hell.⁸⁴

Reconciliation is still possible

Despite this, Adorno suggests that good still struggles free.⁸⁵ He mentions fleeting flashes in which we might catch a glimpse of goodness: the small gleam of a happy eye and the wagging tail of a happy dog. He further suggests that nihilism in the face of those who can and do suffer is another product of a world conditioned by abstraction, "and the abstract is the abominable."⁸⁶ For the purposes of political strategy, we must indeed reflect upon our impotence.⁸⁷ That said, to do nothing "would be simply to leave the dubious totality in place, to allow it to wreak what damage it will – and thus to submit to it."⁸⁸ No amount of private rightness breaks through the conditions of wrongness; no amount of wrongness makes redemption impossible.

Adorno suggests that today it is indeed "perfectly feasible" to imagine a global situation in which wrong life ends. That said, we as humans have not arrived here self-consciously, and we have not embraced the fact that the conditions of wrong life must be resolutely abolished for right life to begin. What goes for progress has unfolded "by reacting to problems that humanity has constantly had to confront in the realm of technology, or in the attempt to master acute and recurrent crises."⁸⁹ In particular, Adorno critiques John Maynard Keynes, whose thought he considers "an example of blind progress insofar as it sprang simply from the desire to preserve the existing social order without grasping one essential thing, namely *the question of how to establish a form of society itself in which*

⁸²Bonefeld, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion*, 152.

⁸³Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 38.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁵Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 149.

⁸⁶Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 380.

⁸⁷Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 273.

⁸⁸Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 263.

⁸⁹Adorno, *Philosophy and Sociology*, 76.

the possibility of such catastrophes would be excluded." Real progress has therefore remained "blind" because society "has continued to be a society of mutually hostile and conflicting interests."⁹⁰

Despite all manner of "progress," Adorno argues that everyone is "even more thoroughly caught up in the social system, even less capable of autonomy and self-determination, than they have probably been in any other phase of history."⁹¹ As Adorno writes in one of his final essays,

People are still what they were in Marx's analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century: appendages of the machine, not just literally workers who have to adapt themselves to the nature of the machines they use, but far beyond that, figuratively, workers who are compelled right down to their most intimate impulses to subordinate themselves to the mechanisms of society and to adopt specific social roles without reservation. Today, as in the past, production is for the sake of profit.⁹²

Marx teaches us that the aim of the capitalist is never a particular use-value, nor the profit of a particular transaction: "His aim is rather the unceasing movement of profit-making."⁹³ It is within these movements that individuals must hope to find their social validation and thus their means of survival. Capitalist society paradoxically constitutes us as individual subjects through our compulsions to adapt to a society in which individuals are made necessarily superfluous in the limitless "valorization of value."⁹⁴ As Fabian Arzuaga argues, the very process of becoming an individual in a capitalist society, with "the individual" being itself a product of this society, is both a means and a consequence of their liquidation. One's formal freedom supersedes and dissolves their concrete individuality: everyone is ultimately replaceable, particularly those themselves deemed a surplus.⁹⁵

Adorno subsequently argues that two ostensibly contrasting ideas have come to coincide amicably: on the one hand, the belief that the present state of things is already more or less provisionally utopian insofar as it represents the best we can do, and, on the other hand, the belief that right life is impossible. These two incompatible ideas unite in conformism with society as it stands, which is implied in "the objective spirit of the age, in its language, its mental household." This expresses the unity of a society that maintains itself through its antagonisms. The former belief expresses "the affirmative doctrine that all is right with the world." The latter expresses the lived experience of unreconciled society, resulting in "a denial of the possibility of reconciliation in general."⁹⁶ These secularizations of Original Sin are easy to demonstrate, and thus believe, because they correspond with the world outside our window.⁹⁷

Adorno asks how we might find the courage to avoid submitting or resigning to the status quo in light of "everything that exists; the entire force ... the entire machinery of history that everything has behind it." His answer lies in the category of *objective*

⁹⁰Ibid., 77. Emphasis added.

⁹¹Ibid., 79.

⁹²Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" 117. Quoted in Arzuaga, "Liquidation of the Individual," 125.

⁹³Marx, *Capital*, 254.

⁹⁴Ibid., 253.

⁹⁵Arzuaga, "Liquidation of the Individual," 126, 135.

⁹⁶Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 56.

⁹⁷Adorno, "Reason and Revelation," 139.

possibility, how we interpret *can*.⁹⁸ Hegel and Marx were of course right to suggest that the possibility of any social realization requires adequate conditions.⁹⁹ But, Adorno adds, “perhaps rashly,” and against traditional Marxist interpretation, the “possibility of making a leap forward, of doing things differently, always existed, even in periods when productivity was far less developed, an opportunity that was missed again and again.” The fact that it has not happened, that it was and is considered impossible, “is one of the propositions that owes its plausibility to the fact that it was uttered by the victors, and so its importance should not be exaggerated.”¹⁰⁰

The very form that world society has taken in order to preserve itself threatens our survival; it is the form that murdered past alternatives and past experiments in social life that may have avoided arbitrary suffering. Adorno insists that today it is the “global social subject alone” who must become “sufficiently self-aware” such that it comes to possess “genuine control of its own destiny right down to the concrete details.” The fact that so many continue to suffer from torture, hunger, and privation should be attributed to the ongoing “*relations of production*” in capitalist society, and “not to the intrinsic difficulty of meeting people’s material needs.” Whether or not catastrophe will ever be averted thus ultimately depends upon “the rational organization of society as a whole in manner befitting humanity.” This is not just a “formal” reality, but an objective possibility.¹⁰¹ Given the time, it is a necessity.

Wounds that remember

As suggested above, one of the few times Adorno writes overtly in an inverse theological key in his major published works comes at the end of *Minima Moralia*. Situated here, his final fragment is a performance of the central conflicts animating what precedes it; it also provides somewhat of a summary of the themes taken up in this article. Adorno suggests that we must try to think from an impossible “standpoint of redemption.” This is not a transhistorical, supernatural standpoint removed, but the unrealized yet ongoing possibility of communist social life in time; a social-historical possibility that sheds light on the hellish world around us.¹⁰² We must work now to see the present world as it might one day appear more sharply illuminated in retrospect: unreconciled, false, distorted, and hellish in all manner of ways. The sole “task of thought” is to try to gain such perspectives entirely through “felt contact” with the only reality we have, without resorting to idealistic wish fulfillment, on the one hand, or to cold violence, on the other. Such a task is “the simplest of all things” insofar as the totalizing wrongness of our social world calls us as it gestures to the felt need and possibility of a reconciled right one. Such a task is “utterly impossible” insofar as we cannot know what will happen until it happens: we cannot presently occupy the source of light we must nonetheless presuppose. Indeed, it may never come. Now we see only a negative, inverse image. We know, painfully, that all concepts and all knowledge and action currently belong to the social reality

⁹⁸For a fuller discussion of Adorno’s notion of possibility, see Macdonald, *What Could Be Different*.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 67–8.

¹⁰¹Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 143–4.

¹⁰²Here I disagree with both Jacob Taubes and Giorgio Agamben, who suggest that the “Finale” ultimately performs a *comme si* or “as if” insofar as the standpoint of redemption is posited as an unreachable regulative ideal. See Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 74; Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 35–8.

we are seeking to escape. The more we try to deny this, the more we delude ourselves. But even this present impossibility we must try to comprehend for the sake of a better world that might yet come. All this we can, must, say and pursue now regardless of what ends up happening.¹⁰³

Such an account might be described as political and theological not because it points to theological content or extra-worldly legitimation for deeply held political or theological commitments, but because it insists that an adequate reckoning with society requires a critique of society as both pervasively bad and yet able to become good, despite appearances. Such a critique might indeed be described as rational and revelatory not because its contents reveal eternal things from beyond, but because it sheds light on the fact that the world as we know it is *not* eternal. Such a critique supports revolutionary potential not because critique is itself revolutionary, but because it turns our critical attention to that which is barring revolution: false, reactionary idols and naive utopian dreams on this side of a revolutionary chasm.¹⁰⁴ It serves revolutionary purposes because it demonstrates that an objective possibility for communistic social life still exists, that the wails of desperation and the trampled, bloodied, maimed bodies of martyrs demand it of us. Even the dead are not safe from their murderous victors.¹⁰⁵ If they must die, we must live on to remember them.

We are left to wonder, and wander, toward an objectively possible society that is presently impossible given the current conditions: a classless global community of free people in which no one starves, in which abstractions dissipate, captives are set free, the last are first, transfigured bodies of all shapes, sizes, and kinds arise anew. Adorno elsewhere refers to this as a peaceful, reconciled state of “differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”¹⁰⁶ An actual equal exchange of everyone for everyone. This is a society that might abolish need in its fulfillment. Such a society has historically been described as communist. As Bonefeld writes, “Communism is not anything positive, which one can point to and experience. Rather it is the self-reflective negation of the direct experience of a society in which the satisfaction of human needs is secondary at best.”¹⁰⁷ It is in this sense that Adorno’s ongoing conception of reconciled or right life remains communist.¹⁰⁸

We must think such thoughts on the very basis that we are able to go on thinking and yearning and acting beyond the lamentable dust and dim of the towering rubble heap of limbs and blood and cash and oil that we make, and by which we are made and unmade. But there is no guarantee of its actualization, no perpetual mechanism by which it might confidently arise, no evidence of its presence beyond its continued absence. Theology remains inverse in the time between the times. Humanity may yet be ground into finer dust; humanity may yet live on.

¹⁰³Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

¹⁰⁴In the closing lines of *Adorno and Existence*, Gordon correctly argues that Adorno’s task was not redemption *from* existence but the redemption *of* existence. Gordon’s mistake, however, is to collapse the redemption of existence with Adorno’s critique of it (198). Adorno’s critical method is not redemptive, nor should it be positioned as the goal of his project. As Adorno writes, “Regarding the concrete utopian possibility, dialectics is the oncology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction.” *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

¹⁰⁵Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391.

¹⁰⁶Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 247.

¹⁰⁷Bonefeld, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion*, 157.

¹⁰⁸See also Loeffler, “Adorno’s Critical Music Theory” for an argument in favor of Adorno’s communism.

The future, and thus the past and the present, is almost unimaginably open; open to newer and frothier blood-soaked torments; open to fiery hells yet, to suffocating tides, to death, death, and more death. But it is open, too, to the possibility of truth, of love, of goodness, and the death of death. We work now to fashion images of our present hell as it might one day appear more transparently: a world that persisted for so long not despite all antagonisms, torments, and suffering, but by means of them. This is a social world that cannot be redeemed in simple living, blood and soil, god and country, work and thrift, man and wife, male and female, a fair day's pay, returns to ignorance, soulless expertise and climate engineering: all golden calves. But it is perhaps a social world that might yet die. And it is perhaps a social world that might yet be resurrected anew with transfigured minds, spirits, bodies, and wounds that remember.

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Faith and Revolution in Gillian Rose's Critical Marxism

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ABSTRACT

Rose's philosophical project of critical Marxism articulated the subjective aspect of revolutionary practice by turning to Hegel's speculative exposition of religion and politics. The question of revolutionary faith was, however, left unanswered. This article demonstrates that Rose's later engagement with Kierkegaard, motivated by her Marxist-Hegelian theory of revolutionary subjectivity, answers this question. It begins by outlining Rose's critique of Marxist voluntarism as the materialist deployment of Fichte's idealist faith. This is followed by a reconstruction of Rose's speculative response to the dualism presupposed in such abstract faith, a response worked out in trinitarian theological and triune philosophical terms. Specifically, Rose forges a conceptual mediation between her Marxian theory of revolutionary praxis and Kierkegaardian concrete faith through Hegel's *Logic*, while also accounting for the existential experience of this mediation through the phenomenology of the leap of faith. The paper ends by showing how revolutionary faith addresses the dangers of political inversions attendant to Marxist subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

Gillian Rose; critical Marxism; Hegel; Marx; Kierkegaard; speculative philosophy

Introduction

Following Karl Marx's critique of the Young Hegelians, Gillian Rose recognized that a critique of religion cannot merely be a "general theory of society" through which one explains objective unfreedom. A sustained critique would approach religion not only as a superstructure but also as a subjective aspect of revolutionary practice. However, this aspect has been obscured in some parts of Marx's own works and within Marxist philosophy. In reinstating Marxism to its philosophical foundations, Rose combines Marx's dictum that "all criticism begins with the criticism of religion" with Hegel's speculative thought. Speculation here does not mean a "conjecture" or a return to a pre-critical position that has been recently undertaken by "speculative realism," but rather a comprehensive thinking that acknowledges and surpasses the dichotomy between revolutionary subjectivity and the critique of capitalism or, in theological terms, between faith and knowledge. To this end, the philosophical project of "critical Marxism" inaugurated in *Hegel contra Sociology* set out to develop a notion of revolutionary practice that would

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avoid abstract faith in utopian revolutionary ends. At the same time, to do away with faith altogether would mean to defenestrate revolutionary commitment. In attending to this problem further in her later work *The Broken Middle*, Rose articulated faith in concrete, not abstract, terms by turning to the thought of Marx's contemporary, Søren Kierkegaard.

Rose's engagement with Kierkegaard is rooted in her broader concern with social and political theory, as the notion of faith pertains to those aspects of Marxist and non-Marxist theory that deal with practical reason and value rationality. For instance, in *Hegel contra Sociology*, Rose demonstrates that because Max Weber's sociology grounds values in abstract faith, Weber creates a divorce between the validity of values and their social determinants.¹ This divorce results in the legitimation of political authority grounded in the "belief in legitimacy" (*Legitimitätsglaube*).² The grounding of norms in abstract faith allowed Weber's student and Fascist political theorist Carl Schmitt to dismiss norms altogether and claim that any political order is based on the exceptional decision in the existential condition of war, an insight he attributed to Kierkegaard's theology.³ In contrast to Milbank's and Gorman's suggestions that Rose resorts to a nihilistic and violent politics of a similar sort, Rose was well aware of the dangers that abstract decisionism poses in yielding the spirit of Fascism.⁴ Importantly, though, Rose does not seek to further a Weberian-style sociology but a self-reflective Marxist theory of the subject that avoids the temptation of pure voluntarism.⁵ To this end, as I will show, her magnum opus *The Broken Middle* articulates a revolutionary faith that acknowledges its concrete entanglement in the social and political actuality of capitalism, while sustaining a revolutionary commitment.

The first section of this paper examines Rose's Marxist-Hegelian criticism of the dualism between faith and knowledge in post-Kantian philosophy, showing that this dualism is socially determined by bourgeois property relations, formal law, and exploitative labor. In line with Hegel's speculative exposition of religion and politics, Marxist voluntarist revolutionary practice is criticized for reinstating this very dichotomy between faith and knowledge by resorting to a materialist deployment of Fichte's idealist faith. I then demonstrate that Rose's own Hegelian speculative philosophy of history and a triune concept of praxis, as well as her later engagement with Kierkegaard, should be understood against the theological backdrop of trinitarian revelation. In particular, I discuss how Rose responds to Kierkegaard's problematization that the knowledge of trinitarian revelation itself necessitates faith. The second section then proceeds to elaborate on the social import of Rose's engagement with Kierkegaard. I show that Rose's mediation of Marx and Kierkegaard's philosophical authorship through the conceptuality of Hegel's *Logic* articulates the concrete faith in the social consequences of trinitarian revelation, that is, the faith in the real possibility of wholly transformed labor, or praxis of communism. The third section then shifts to the political representation of revolutionary faith. I show that Rose's original reading of Kierkegaard's theological-political critique of

¹Rose, *Hegel*, 19–23.

²Weber, *Economy and Society*, 212–15.

³Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

⁴See Gorman, "Gillian Rose's Critique of Violence," 32–5; Milbank, "Gillian Rose and Political Nihilism"; cf. Rose, *Hegel*, 103, and Rose, "Walter Benjamin" in *Judaism and Modernity*, 170–210, especially n. 19 on p. 179.

⁵For an interpretation of Rose's notion of law in terms of social norms see Lloyd, "The Secular Faith of Gillian Rose", 684–7; for Rose's critique of Lukacs's voluntarism see Lopez, "The Finite and the Infinite."

abstract faith is informed by her Marxist social theory. Finally, Rose's Kierkegaardian phenomenology of the revolutionary leap of faith, expressed in the configuration of "suspending the political," is deployed to salvage Marxism from the inversions that ensue when social and political actuality is voluntaristically abolished.

From abstract faith to Marxist-Hegelian revelation

Although in agreement with Marx's call to begin any criticism with a criticism of religion, Rose finds Marx's religious criticism wanting. First, Marx does not investigate how specific religious notions mask and legitimize specific social and political relations; instead, he turns religion into a general reference or the "superstructure." Second, and as a corollary to the first issue, Marx did not elaborate a notion of revolutionary subjectivity philosophically.⁶ Both issues are rooted in Marx's misunderstanding of Hegel's speculative "identity of identity and non-identity" between subject and predicate, which he instead interprets as an inversion of real social and political relations into the dominance of the subject-concept. According to Rose, Hegel's speculative thinking fundamentally opposes the primacy of abstract conceptuality and, in fact, pays special attention to the objective conditions of subjectivity. To demonstrate this, Rose interprets Hegel's entire corpus through his early radical political and theological writings.⁷ Hegel is shown to criticize the formal bourgeois state through his philosophical criticism of post-Kantian philosophy, particularly its separation of subjective "pure practical reason" from theoretical knowledge of social actuality. Determined by formal law and bourgeois property relations, this dualism elevates the negative notion of subjective moral freedom over and above the realm of natural necessity – the domain of work and production. According to Rose, Hegel sought to recover the experience of labor or praxis that passive morality excludes by recognizing how the formal equality of bourgeois property law implies the debased experience of work and the division of labor, in which the appropriation of surplus creates substantial inequality.⁸

Hegel's critique of post-Kantian philosophy is further expounded as an immanent critique of its theological foundations. In particular, Hegel understood that the "absolute" had been misrepresented as the unknowable God of the Reformation and its offshoots in German philosophy. When the idea of God is stripped of any finite attributes, the unknowable God represents the extreme subjectivity that underpins bourgeois property relations and law, or "relative ethical life."⁹ Hegel's alternative to this dualistic "relative ethical life," according to Rose, was "absolute ethical life," or what can be seen as Hegel's prefiguration of communism.¹⁰ Rose aims to claim such an immanent critique of religion for the project of critical Marxism because the absolute, or "God," represents an idea that we have of ourselves: "[i]f the infinite is unknowable, we are powerless. For our concept of the infinite is our concept of ourselves and our possibilities."¹¹ So, while attentive to the theological significance of Hegel's thought, Rose's thinking largely aligns

⁶Rose, *Hegel*, 231.

⁷*Ibid.*, 52–97.

⁸*Ibid.*, 63–77.

⁹*Ibid.*, 98–108.

¹⁰Lopez, "The Finite and the Infinite," 200.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 48.

with the Left-Hegelian emphasis on the unrealized social possibilities of Christian religion. To this end, her approach partly follows Marx's acknowledgment that "criticism" has its roots in Hegel's dialectic and his riposte to the Young Hegelians's insufficiently developed critique of Hegel's criticism. In particular, Marx accused Feuerbach of transforming religion into the "general theory" of the social and political world, which implies that religion serves as a mere quietist explanation for the illusory happiness of the genuinely oppressed human.¹² The criticism of religion, Marx argued, cannot stop at passively revealing the material truth of this illusion; rather, the critique of critical criticism should achieve a "positive abolition of religion."

Rose understood that, in their different ways, both Hegel and Marx sought to "realize" religion. While she agrees with the direction of Marx's Left-Hegelian critique of Feuerbach, she is critical of those aspects that Marx uncritically adopted from Feuerbach, particularly his pre-critical or pre-Kantian position, which is far removed from any properly Hegelian stance. One manifestation of this uncritical position is Feuerbach's anthropological approach, which presupposes that God is a "projection" of finite human beings. It can be understood that Rose's own variant of the "critique of critical criticism" is directed against Marx's agreement with Feuerbach that religion projects human finite suffering and aspirations onto the infinite God, that "man makes religion, religion does not make man."¹³ Although Marx's theory is more dialectical than Feuerbach's, major aspects of Marx's thought nonetheless adopt from Feuerbach the theory of projection and the conviction that religion can only be criticized based on finite sensation.¹⁴ As such, for Rose, Marx's Feuerbachian position reproduces the divorce between finite human experience and the infinite idea of God, an opposition that reinstates the dualism between theory and practice, between base and superstructure.¹⁵ Insofar as the "infinite," God, and ultimately religion stand for "subjective disposition" in general, Marx's treatment of the infinite in a Feuerbachian manner has direct consequences for the theory of subjective revolutionary consciousness.

These consequences are demonstrated by Rose through Hegel's philosophical criticism of the subject as the infinite God stripped of any finite attributes and grounded in mere faith. This divorce between the infinite and the finite, concept and experience, was prepared by Kant but fully realized by Fichte. In Kant, moral action cannot be motivated by any finite inclination but only by the pure concept of moral law – the categorical imperative. Because no finite determination corresponds to the concept, Kant had to introduce a postulate, a proposition that cannot be known theoretically but only presupposed. The postulate of God in Kant is thus introduced to indicate a possible harmony between moral action and the faculty of knowledge, a regulative principle that is "necessarily connected with the moral legislation of pure [practical] reason".¹⁶ Fichte, however, replaces the *postulate* of God with the *concept* of infinite subjective will, which grounds both moral action and knowledge.¹⁷ According to Rose, Fichte's elevation of "infinite

¹²Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy," 53–60.

¹³Ibid., 53.

¹⁴Rose, *Hegel*, 119; Ameriks, "The Legacy of Idealism," 259–64.

¹⁵Rose, *Hegel*, 230–4.

¹⁶Kant in Rose, *Hegel*, 102.

¹⁷Rose's Hegelian criticism of Fichte is directed against his early philosophical works. Incidentally, she cites Kierkegaard's critique of early Fichte in his *Concept of Irony*, thus foreshadowing her latter engagement with Kierkegaard's criticism of abstract faith. See Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 272–328 and section 3 of this paper.

will” destroys the Kantian critical project of justifying moral actions; in Fichte, knowledge of the empirical world is foreclosed, and all justifications by infinite will “depend on faith.”¹⁸ In Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge*, the “absolute I” of the moral will produces determinations – the non-I – within itself. But this ego is empty since it has abstracted from everything that is not itself and “lives in an incomprehensible faith in an invisible world.”¹⁹ And insofar as the idea of God represents our idea of ourselves and our possibilities of freedom, abstract faith does not allow for any knowledge of our social reality and possibilities. Faith in an unknowable God conceals and legitimizes bourgeois property relations.

Rose shows that, insofar as Marx did not grasp Hegel’s critique of Fichte’s abstract faith, he paradoxically produced a reading of Hegel that closely resembles the subjective philosophy of Fichte. To produce a Fichtean reading of Hegel is to fence off subjective disposition from any critique of the social determination of the subject’s action, leading to direct consequences for the practical aspects of Marx’s philosophy. This becomes salient when Marx responds to Feuerbach by arguing that social reality should be revolutionized through the active formation of the revolutionary class.²⁰ According to Marx’s Fichtean reading of Hegel, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* develops this active aspect by conceiving humans as a self-generating, laboring species-being. While Marx contends that Hegel reduces the historical movement of human essence – labor – to the activity of the mind, the active element of Hegel’s philosophy must be recovered from its “idealism” in the practical formation of the revolutionary class.²¹ To this end, Marx posits that “labor is a knowing and conscious activity” and that “man” proves himself a conscious species-being “by his practical activity.”²² As a result, according to Rose, Hegel’s system is misrepresented as hinging on “the unconditioned absolute idea which pours forth nature, which does not recognize but creates determination.”²³ This Fichtean reading of Hegel by Marx prioritizes objectification as an outpouring of the Fichtean “absolute I,” which posits both I and non-I but does not acknowledge determinations that are not posited through auto-poetic labor. Consequently, Marx effectively replaced infinite will with humans as a “self-originating truth” – an objective, laboring being.

This materialist recasting of the Fichtean absolute subject could have been dismissed as an unfortunate philosophical oversight on Marx’s part, but the problem is that it has been reproduced in voluntarist Marxism. In line with Adorno’s criticism, Rose understood that Georg Lukács’s theory of proletarian consciousness reinforces Marx’s Fichteanism. While Lukács correctly identifies Fichte’s irrational faith as the foundation of instrumental rationalism at the heart of capitalism, according to Rose, his thought is implicated in the very philosophical structure he critiques. Lukács sought to overcome reification through the standpoint of the proletariat, which dispels the fetish character of human relations by making “man the measure of all things,” including of contradictions in the total development of capitalism. To elevate the proletarian subject in this way

¹⁸Rose, *Hegel*, 102.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy,” 64–5.

²¹Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 112.

²²Marx in Marcuse, “The Foundations of Historical Materialism,” 13.

²³Rose, *Hegel*, 229.

means asserting that both capitalist reification and its overcoming originate in the Fichtean act of consciousness of the total subject.²⁴ Understood in this way, Lukács' revolutionary subject resembles an abstract will unaffected by the dynamic actuality of capitalism. According to Rose, faith in the proletariat's ascendancy has stripped voluntarist Marxism of the aspect of Marx's work that allows for a structural analysis of capitalism. As a result, Lukács misses the speculative moment in Marx's exposition of capital, wherein the theory of commodity fetishism is integral. In particular, the theory of reification becomes divorced from the theory of capitalist surplus value production and the concomitant distinction between abstract and concrete labor.²⁵ This voluntarism precludes an analysis of how the reification of consciousness takes on specific social forms, such as the formal equality under capitalism that obscures the substantial inequality between those who own capital and those who sell their labor-power as wage laborers.

The philosophical predominance of unjustifiable faith in Fichte is thus the correlate of voluntarist revolutionary action in Marx and Marxism. Rose emphasizes that this critique of Marx does not diminish his analysis of capitalism but is directed against the way this analysis becomes philosophically divorced from revolutionary practice when such practice is articulated in a voluntarist fashion. The proletarian revolution, so conceived, falls under Hegel's critique of the French Revolution: "an instrumental use of a 'materialist' theory rests, in fact, on the idealist assumption that social reality is an object and that its definition depends on revolutionary consciousness."²⁶ This divorce between theory and practice in Marx's historical materialism reproduces the distinction between finite materialism and infinite idealism that Hegel understood as the dichotomy between the French Revolution and the Protestant Reformation, "satisfied Enlightenment" and "unsatisfied Enlightenment." Both these modern events inherit the divorce between politics and religion – what is presented by Hegel as the "unhappy consciousness" in *Phenomenology*. While Marx dismisses the unhappy consciousness as "occult criticism," Rose understood that "unhappy consciousness" stands for the dualistic consciousness that arose out of this separation from the beginning of Western Christianity and persisted in both the Reformation and the Revolution.²⁷ Hegel, on Rose's account, sought to combine revolution and reformation – that is, the radical change of social relations and the "transformation of subjective disposition."²⁸ Instead of resorting to faith by rejecting all aspects of actuality (revolution) or covering with faith the experience of actuality that falls outside bourgeois formalism (reformation), Hegel's notion of the absolute sought to articulate how social actuality is recognized in subjective action, or praxis.²⁹

In theological terms, to think the absolute and praxis in Hegelian terms means confronting Kant's attempt to keep religion within the bounds of reason, which removes revelation from knowledge and culminates in Fichte's abstract faith and inexplicable rationality.³⁰ In this perverted case, "[the] subject understands itself as infinite (universal) precisely by excluding the finite (determination, or, the particular) and then

²⁴Rose, *Hegel*, 33.

²⁵See an excellent development of Rose critique of Lukács in Lazarus, "Gillian Rose and the Value-Form."

²⁶Rose, *Hegel*, 235.

²⁷Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 111; Rose, *Hegel*, 125, 183–4.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 224.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 218.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 102.

misrepresents universality to itself in the form of religion.”³¹ In contrast, Hegel’s notion of the absolute unites faith and knowledge, as expounded in the *Logic*. But the abstract *Logic* can only be grasped if the idea of the absolute is intuited, that is, experienced. The way through which the absolute has been experienced exoterically is religious representation.³² As Rose suggests, Hegel sought to rethink the subject in line with the speculative insight of Christianity, “the absolute religion,” which has been obscured throughout its history. The speculative subject in Christian teaching has been represented in the figure of Christ. Unlike the abstract revelation divorced from reason, “[i]n the revelation, Christ is God become man, the infinite and finite united without suppression. This reconciliation is no dualistic suppression but a triune recognition or trinity. Hence it represents freedom, not domination.”³³ In Christianity, the idea of love means that the finite world is not merely produced by the subject-concept, but the finite sensuous world is known to be part of the divine life. “Love is a distinguishing of two, who nevertheless are absolutely not distinguished for each other.”³⁴ This relational way of thinking about identity and difference is crucial. For Rose, whose intellectual project can be characterized under the title of her autobiography *Love’s Work*, true recognition in love is akin to the recognition that occurs in praxis.³⁵ To be sure, these analogies are grounded in religious representation, but they allow us to grasp “pictorially” what Hegel wants us to grasp in philosophical terms.

Revelation is the central notion in Rose’s political theology as it seeks to demonstrate the theoretical purchase of Christian Trinitarian theology for Marxist-Hegelian social and political theory. The exposition of revelation was undertaken by Hegel not only in the “Revealed Religion” section of *Phenomenology*, but, as Rose shows, in his lectures on religion and history. On the one hand, in the philosophical reading of Christian religion, revelation is salvaged from the association of the absolute with the otherworldly infinite, from the spiritual bondage to the dead God opposed to the finite world.³⁶ Just as in Christianity revelation means a reconciliation of God and man in the figure of Christ, Hegel’s philosophy offers a rational way of recognizing the infinite in the finite through the subject.³⁷ On the other hand, the philosophy of history reveals the dualistic subject to be determined by historical institutions that have perverted this triune recognition: “the subjective standpoint is criticized by means of the exposition of its formation” in the Roman law of legal status and in modern formal bourgeois law, which conceals the difference between owners of capital and wage laborers.³⁸ Taken together, these two aspects of the subject reveal that the notion of revelation is meant to introduce a phenomenological mediation between the idea of the unity of the infinite in the finite and the historical fate of this unity in the dualism between faith in the infinite and knowledge of the finite.³⁹ The notion of revelation becomes central to articulating the

³¹Ibid., 121.

³²Ibid., 112.

³³Ibid., 114–5.

³⁴Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 418.

³⁵See the comparison between love and labor in Rose’s interpretation of Hegel’s early political writings in *Hegel*, 70–1.

³⁶Rose, *Hegel*, 111.

³⁷Ibid., 115.

³⁸Ibid., 113.

³⁹As Rose emphasizes, the revelation of “Speculative Good Friday” has to be taken together with the historical Good Friday.

speculative identity (identity of identity and non-identity) of subject and substance, of action and its social and political determinants.

This speculative notion of revelation does not reduce religion to either a mere explanatory superstructure or an abstract revolutionary action.⁴⁰ To introduce revelation thus means allowing the dualistic subject, which does not know its own determinations or substance, to recognize its own formation in the philosophy of history.⁴¹ Similarly, “absolute ethical life” or communism, as an alternative form of social organization, cannot be imposed as a preconceived practical notion. Rather, the recognition of the absolute is achieved in a relational way, particularly through human transformative activity that recognizes its determinations, or the philosophical notion of praxis that differs from Marx’s Fichtean understanding of labor or Lukacs’s proletarian subject. With this, Rose insinuates a Marxist-Hegelian notion of revelation that recognizes that humans are both subjective and objective, and that actuality, or spirit, has the subject as its object.⁴² This means that any application of Marxism as a revolutionary theory needs to attend to the historical specificity of social and political relations to avoid resorting to an abstract faith in the utopian end of the communist revolution. To reveal specific historical contradictions thus means “keeping open and undecided the question of the historical realization of justice.”⁴³ It is on the basis of this specificity and openness of Marxist-Hegelian revelation, as we shall see, that Rose introduces Kierkegaard’s philosophy into her project of critical Marxism.

From Marxist-Hegelian revelation to concrete faith

The critique of abstract faith and Rose’s articulation of Marxist-Hegelian revelation were meant to demonstrate that revolutionary consciousness cannot be extricated from concrete historical, social, and political determinations. The highest philosophical point of Rose’s project in *Hegel contra Sociology* is her Marxian rewriting of Hegel’s *Logic*, which allows for thinking the coincidence of revolutionary consciousness and its social determinations in philosophical terms. Such revolutionary consciousness “will re-form the ethical without being re-formed by it, which will comprehend itself, its positing, as the law of substance, of absolute ethical life.”⁴⁴ However, as she emphasizes, Hegel failed to find this absolute ethical life because “it has never existed in history.”⁴⁵ As a result, the ultimate statement of absolute ethical life remained within the realm of abstraction. It is only Marxist revolutionary consciousness that has the vocation to strive towards absolute ethical life. This vocation can nonetheless be perverted precisely because communism never existed; hence, these strivings are prone to abstract intentions. This problem of revolutionary commitments and their abstraction informs Rose’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s notion of faith. This would go against the claim that Rose’s early writings are more Marxist and sociological while her later engagement with Kierkegaard toys with the ethic of singularity.⁴⁶ On the contrary, as I will

⁴⁰Ibid., 93.

⁴¹Ibid., 112–13.

⁴²Ibid., 230–1.

⁴³Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, 18.

⁴⁴Rose, *Hegel*, 195.

⁴⁵Rose, *Hegel*, 214.

⁴⁶Gorman, “Gillian Rose.”

demonstrate, Rose's engagement with Kierkegaard's faith cannot be understood apart from her Marxist-Hegelian recasting of revelation and commitment to philosophically articulating the real possibility of revolutionary action.

Rose's political theology of revelation is centered on the recognition that "the good and justice are not accomplished."⁴⁷ Unlike the doctrinal Christian meaning of Revelation as redemption realized, Rose follows Hegel's systematic revealing of the historical determinations of bourgeois subjectivity, which simultaneously create the possibility of praxis.⁴⁸ It is the same combination of system and uncertainty that Rose detects in Kierkegaard in her book *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*. Against the commonplace philosophical position that juxtaposes Marxist-Hegelian dialectics with Kierkegaard's existential faith, Rose articulates how both Hegel and Kierkegaard combine systematicity and existential pathos.⁴⁹ She calls this a "diremption between law and ethics," an obvious correlate of what in *Hegel contra Sociology* was the speculative identity between religion and politics.⁵⁰ Rose's notion of law, *pace* Lloyd, does not refer to social norms in general, but rather to a differentiated account of modern law that considers its constitutive social and political actuality, as seen in her Marxist-Hegelian sociology of bourgeois state law. Ethics signifies the practical guidance for action, largely motivated by Rose's concern with the Marxist vocation of revolutionary practice. Rose uses the term diremption instead of separation to distance herself from the dualistic separation of faith and knowledge in Kant and Fichte; likewise, diremption is contrasted with contradiction, which in terms of the formal logic of political economy implies resolution.⁵¹ Instead, diremption emphasizes that absolute ethical life – a speculative unity of law and ethics – can be reflected upon and enacted in a way that neither separates faith and knowledge nor assumes a resolution in a utopian future.

If Rose's concern is with the Marxist theory of revolutionary consciousness, why doesn't she directly relate Marx and Kierkegaard? The introduction of Hegel is necessary to mediate between the Marxian critique of religion and Kierkegaardian existential theology, grounding their relation on properly philosophical foundations. While the trinitarian notion of revelation was articulated through the religious representation of Christ – that is, "pictorially" – one needs to resort to the terms of Hegel's *Logic* to attain conceptual knowledge. "Only in the *Logic* can the absolute be thought."⁵² In the "Rewriting the Logic" chapter of *Hegel contra Sociology*, Rose recasts the *Logic* in Marxian terms to demonstrate how Hegel overcomes the dichotomy between infinite freedom and finite determinations through the philosophical conceptuality of Kant and Fichte.⁵³ On the one hand, the *Doctrine of Being* shows that Kantian "external reflection" implies a displaced understanding of actuality. Bringing Hegel's *Logic* to bear on the insights of his social theory, Rose shows that because the actuality of bourgeois property relations is not recognized in moral action, the possibilities of moral subjects are not real but abstract. The equality of Kantian "kingdom of ends" is abstract equality that does not see its entanglement in bourgeois actuality. Such external actuality thus remains

⁴⁷Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, 18.

⁴⁸Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 18.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 24–9.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 236.

⁵²Rose, *Hegel*, 101.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 197–209.

unchanged and is naturalized. On the other hand, the *Doctrine of Essence* shows that Fichte's attempt to unite infinite ego and finite non-ego in the self-generating absolute act of subjective positing, or production, brackets all external determination, even the displaced actuality. The dialectical act of "positing reflection" by which the infinite ego posits finite determinations is an illusory reflection because whatever is generated remains abstract. As a result, the actuality of bourgeois law is sanctified rather than critically examined.

Hegel's philosophical solution is to expound the determinations of subjective positing.⁵⁴ By combining Kant's external reflection and Fichte's positing reflection, Hegel's "determinate reflection" acknowledges that the boundary between the infinite ego and finite non-ego is determined by social actuality.⁵⁵ The opposition

is restated [by Hegel] as a reflection which posits the immediate and then withdraws from its positing. This positing presupposes the immediate and does not claim to have determined it. It acknowledges the immediate as a presupposition, as *found*, and withdraws from its own determining. Hence 'the externality of reflection over against the immediate is sublated.'⁵⁶

The resultant determinate reflection in the *Doctrine of Essence* allows for comprehending the relationship to the other as a determinate reflection-into-itself. According to Rose, this materialism of Hegel's *Logic* informs Marx's critical account of commodity fetishism. Hegel's recasting of Fichte's illusory reflection through its social determinations allows for grasping illusory being, in which the "relations between apparently independent determinations ... [are] internally generated relations."⁵⁷ Thus, what appears as separate determinations—such as capital/employer and wage-labor/employee – can be comprehended through the inner dynamics of labor exploitation. In Marx analysis of "commodity fetishism," this structure of illusory being is most salient in his account of how, under capitalism, the formal equality between subjects of economic exchange conceals the substantial inequality between the parties to that exchange. While Marx's *critique* of capitalism is premised on the *Logic*, the speculative philosophical mediation of infinite and finite is nonetheless missing from Marxism's theory of subjectivity.

Against this backdrop, Rose's Marxian reading of the *Logic* aims to establish a philosophical foundation for the Marxist theory of revolution. She shows that while Hegel failed to articulate "absolute ethical life" in the *Logic*, he nonetheless presented a triune logical structure that acknowledges the dualism between theory and practice and goes beyond this dichotomy.⁵⁸ In contrast to Marx's Fichtean reading of Hegel, according to Rose, "thinking the absolute means recognizing actuality as *determinans* of our acting by recognizing it in our acts," in human transformative activity – praxis, or revolutionary labor.⁵⁹ Hegel's notion of actuality thus "dissolves and maintains" the subject in the world.⁶⁰ This notion of actuality is not Fichte's unconditioned positing ego, or its materialist iteration in Marx and Lukács, but an actuality that recognizes

⁵⁴Ibid., 206.

⁵⁵Ibid., 209.

⁵⁶Ibid., 210.

⁵⁷Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 68.

⁵⁸Rose, *Hegel*, 211–17.

⁵⁹Ibid., 218.

⁶⁰Ibid., 212.

the totality of determinations excluded from bourgeois property relations, which nonetheless reappear in the process of labor: “actuality is and it acts or produces.”⁶¹ In Marxist terms, once it is recognized that actuality is produced through the relations of bourgeois exploitative work, the real possibility of reconfiguring actuality becomes conceivable – an actuality in which work would not be exploitative. Instead of the Kantian dualistic “animal-spiritual kingdom,” in which the spiritual “kingdom of ends” smuggles in the institutions of private property that presuppose the “animal” treatment of others as means in exploitative work, this transformed “labor of the individual for his own needs is just as much a satisfaction of others as of his own, and the satisfaction of his own needs he obtains only through the labor of others.”⁶² This praxis is not abstract work under capitalism but concrete work, in which production is recognized as determined by its relationship to nature, human needs, and the labor of others.

Revolutionary labor, conceived as praxis, would transcend bourgeois right (law), as Marx called for, by organizing work according to the principle: “[f]rom each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”⁶³ However, this does not mean that one has attained any final “absolute” knowledge of communism, but rather a subjective vocation to surpass the dualism between finite and infinite. In theological terms, the real possibility of this revolutionary labor reflects the trinitarian unity of God and man, the “potential nature” of the spiritual community.⁶⁴ The problem, as Rose anticipates in *Hegel contra Sociology*, is that while in the Christian spiritual community “God is known as trinity,” there is no concrete universality in the worldly Christian community and, as such, no final knowledge.⁶⁵ Together with Kierkegaard, Rose understood that this community does not, strictly speaking, *know* God as trinity. This paradox means that the philosophical notion of the trinity – the very notion that serves as the basic principle of praxis – requires faith. This faith, however, cannot be the abstract faith of Fichte. Just as praxis has grasped an actuality that is neither displaced nor abstract, faith has to be thought of concretely. This is precisely the problem that Rose confronts in *The Broken Middle*, which starts with a philosophical discussion and proceeds to Kierkegaard’s notion of faith as it appears in the triune conceptuality of Hegel. Under the philosophical pseudonymous authorship of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments* directly engages Hegel’s *Logic* and, to this extent, offers a possibility of establishing continuity with Rose’s Marxist-Hegelian rewriting of the *Logic*.

The main question that *Philosophical Fragments* seeks to answer is: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness?”⁶⁶ This question appears to continue Hegel’s speculative exposition of the trinitarian subject and the fate of historic Christian dualisms. At the same time, Rose emphasizes that Climacus himself admits that he does not mediate the history of Christianity with speculative thought: there is no “phenomenological exposition of the truth and untruth of Christianity world-historically.”⁶⁷ Instead, what is at stake in Johannes Climacus’s philosophical engagement with Hegel is the notion of spiritual community as such. If the trinitarian

⁶¹Ibid., 220.

⁶²Hegel in Ibid., 167.

⁶³Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 59.

⁶⁴Rose, *Hegel*, 116–17.

⁶⁵Hegel in Rose, *Hegel*, 117–18.

⁶⁶Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 7.

⁶⁷Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 39.

reconciliation of God and man in the figure of Christ is known by the spiritual community of faith, then this faith must be reinvigorated and repeated continuously by the subject for triune knowledge to be possible. Climacus frames this problem through the distinction between the situations of “the contemporary follower” and the “follower at second hand.” The contemporary follower is depicted as one who has witnessed the figure of Christ, the so-called “fact” of God taking on a human form.⁶⁸ This witnessing is taken as the historical “occasion” for receiving the news of the incarnation – the condition of triune knowledge. However, this historical occasion of the contemporaneous follower cannot simply be passed on to future generations as a form of knowledge, since even the initial witnesses of Christ were a community of believers.⁶⁹ The follower at second hand – that is, any Christian believer throughout Christian history – can become a Christian only through an act of faith in the triune reconciliation of infinite and finite. The paradox by which a Christian believer comes to know the synthesis of “God-Man” is faith.⁷⁰ Only faith in triune revelation can not merely reform but *transform* the subject – or, to invoke Rose’s key political concern, “re-form the ethical without being re-formed by it.”⁷¹

At the core of Kierkegaard’s existentialism is thus the question of how the community of faith comes into existence. The problem of the coming-into-existence of the Christian believer is elaborated by Climacus in terms of Hegel’s *Logic*. If Rose’s Marxist rewriting of Hegel’s *Logic* revealed the real possibility of transformed labor, here she shows that Kierkegaard’s philosophical authorship is concerned with faith in transformation as such – that is, with the question of change *qua* becoming. Climacus elaborates the transition from unbeliever to Christian believer as the movement from non-being to being, an inner movement within the *Doctrine of Being*. If Hegel derived the determinations of subjective absolute positing by re-inscribing the logic of being into the logic of essence, Climacus does the opposite by “insinuating the logic of essence into the logic of being or existence.”⁷² (To recall, the logic of essence explains the historical change of determinations in terms of the negative self-relation, while the logic of being explains change by distinguishing one determination from another externally).⁷³ What becomes central for Climacus is how the determination of non-believer/non-being changes to believer/being. As a result, historical change is broken up into qualitatively different determinations of consciousness, the transition between which becomes possible as a transformative leap of faith to the higher determination of believer/being. This is the reversal of the Marxian-Hegelian logic of essence, which sees separate determinations as internally generated historical relations (as Rose emphasizes, “essence” is the past participle of the verb “to be”). In this way, it is not subjective Fichtean faith that is given determinations, but historical knowledge that has its basis in subjective existential faith.⁷⁴ Significantly, though, this faith is not an abstract faith in the infinite God but is existentially elaborated through a triune conceptuality that mediates the determinations of the *Doctrine of Being* through the *Doctrine of Essence*.

⁶⁸Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 103.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 101.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 59–67.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 14; Rose, *Hegel*, 195.

⁷²Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 46.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 49.

While Rose appreciates the triune conceptual elaboration of faith, she is critical of the way Climacus “undermines and exploits the logic of essence.”⁷⁵ This critique is clearly grounded in her Marxian rewriting of Hegel’s *Logic* undertaken in *Hegel contra Sociology*. In line with Adorno’s criticism of Kierkegaard, Rose shows that the result of Climacus’ conceptualization of faith is that the existence of the believer prevails in the realm of thinking or reflection, rather than actuality.⁷⁶ What this conceptualization of the change from non-believer to believer excludes is *kinesis*, the historical dynamic movement that yields “real possibility.”⁷⁷ While Climacus acknowledges that for the change from no-faith to faith to occur, something has to stay unchanged, or essential, Rose points out that this understanding of essence is pre-Hegelian. To evade the dynamic logic of essence is to overlook the Hegelian insight that real actuality and possibility “is a negation (not an annihilation), ‘a going together with itself.’ Possibility is not annihilated by actuality but pregnant with it, and ‘when all the conditions of something are completely present it enters into actuality’.”⁷⁸ In other words, Climacus overlooks that essence, the past of being, consists of a totality of social conditions of actuality that offer the backdrop against which the moment of transformation occurs. The coming-into-existence of existential possibilities, with some being excluded by existential choice and those chosen at risk of annihilation, occurs against the backdrop of the historical dynamic of the modern state-society complex. This clearly shows that Rose’s approximation of Kierkegaard and Hegel on the *Logic*’s terms of actuality and possibility is driven by her Marxian-Hegelian motivation to develop a subjective revolutionary disposition.

Rose’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s philosophical authorship thus seeks to address the problem of Marxist subjectivity. The subjective illusion of formal equality was shown to deceptively conceal the actuality of substantial economic inequality or, in theological terms, the illusion of the infinite subject-God conceals the debased finite object-world. Once the illusory actuality of “commodity fetishism” is revealed in terms of the social contradictions of bourgeois law and property relations, the real possibility of reconfiguring actuality depends on revolutionary labor, a praxis that shares its revolutionary structure with the trinitarian God: speculative equality in difference. While the operation of the *Logic* expounds the determinations of the absolute subject, transformed labor must confront the theological and political problem of spiritual community, which is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s philosophical authorship. Just as the trinitarian unity of finite and infinite in Christ is not fully known by believers but is grounded in faith, transformed labor necessitates faith in a new actuality. For the revolutionary subject to be truly committed to transformation, the change from non-faith to faith is needed. Unlike the abstract faith of Kant and Fichte, which Hegel criticized for its inability to know actuality, Kierkegaard’s engagement with the *Logic* allows Rose to tie the conceptual ground of faith with her Marxist-Hegelian articulation of transformed labor. The *logos* of the concept is thus brought together with the *pathos* of the concept. In this way, both praxis and passion become the real possibility for the transition from the actuality of

⁷⁵Ibid., 47.

⁷⁶Ibid., 36.

⁷⁷Ibid., 45.

⁷⁸Ibid., 47.

bourgeois civil society to the new actuality of communism. In what follows, I show how these theological and logical terms translate into politics.

Revolutionary faith, or “suspending the political”

What was at stake in Rose’s Marxist-Hegelian “unresolved revelation” is the contradiction between triune Christian rationality and the real history of Christianity’s fall into the philosophical dualism underpinning bourgeois property relations. Kierkegaard complements this speculative reading of religion and politics by problematizing faith in triune Christian rationality itself. As Rose’s Marxist-Hegelian engagement with Climacus’ philosophical meditations demonstrates, the social consequences of the Trinity, which is the praxis of communism, necessitate triune faith. This is the full meaning of “unresolved revelation” or “open system” in Rose’s critical Marxism: just as Hegel’s speculative exposition of Christianity’s trinitarian promise and historical dualism must be continuously *repeated* to reveal the real possibility of absolute ethical life, so too must faith in triune reconciliation be *repeated*.⁷⁹ In other words, the repeated recollection of historically real possibilities is revealed together with the repeated faith in this revolutionary transformation. *The Broken Middle* expounds this double predicament in the historical context of the politics of the revolutionary age of 1848 under the title “Suspending the Political.”⁸⁰ I show that Rose’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s political commentary on the events of 1848 is premised on her Marxist-Hegelian understanding of the “political.” At the same time, Kierkegaard’s concrete faith allows for the suspension of the political, which means embracing a revolutionary commitment that avoids the pitfalls of Marxism’s political inversion toward “totalitarian egalitarianism.”

Hegel justified the passage from religious representation to the *Logic* by highlighting that the pictorial or exoteric reading of Christian religion is limited insofar as it relies on analogies like “father” and “son.” In *Phenomenology*, Hegel insisted on the passage from the religious representation of the Trinity to the *Logic*’s thinking of the triune absolute.⁸¹ As we have seen, Rose appreciates that this thinking of the absolute in the *Logic* is the social import of Hegel’s philosophy in that it *fails* to expound the absolute differently from Kant and Fichte. The subject is recognized not as an abstract infinite but as “failing towards” the triune knowledge of social determinations, that is, as having a vocation to change them. However, Kierkegaard’s challenge to this is that the very triune conceptuality itself necessitates the existential and experiential passion of faith. What Rose’s engagement with Kierkegaard shows is that one cannot live a political life on the pages of speculative *Logic*. Instead, political life is lived in the difficulty of “speculative representation,” which means that one needs to return from the pure thinking of the *Logic* back to phenomenological, aesthetic, and religious representation – to the exoteric and existential one.⁸² Thus, the social import of Kierkegaard’s thought is the realization that one cannot do away with the subjective representation of the absolute. For this reason, the notion of the absolute figures most prominently not in Kierkegaard’s philosophical authorship under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus but in his aesthetic-religious

⁷⁹Rose, *Hegel*, 127.

⁸⁰Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 153–83.

⁸¹Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §787.

⁸²Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 156.

authorship under the pseudonym *Johannes de silentio*. In *Fear and Trembling*, as Rose shows, the absolute is not thought but is represented in the subjective act of the leap of faith.⁸³ Abraham, “the father of faith,” takes a subjective risk by “suspending the ethical” – not surrendering or abolishing it – while *de silentio* offers a phenomenological mediation of this leap.

Before grasping what “suspending the ethical” fully means for Marxism, one needs to appreciate Rose’s rethinking of Kierkegaard’s “ethical” (or “ethical life,” not to be confused with “ethics” *qua* action) in explicitly political terms. In the most political chapter of *The Broken Middle*, Rose turns to Kierkegaard’s critique of the political separation of state and religion in modernity, a separation already problematized in the critique of bourgeois law in *Hegel contra Sociology*. Rose focuses on those overlooked parts of Kierkegaard’s writings that offer a Christian commentary on the revolutionary events of 1848 and, as such, are the closest in historical and social significance of his thought to that of his contemporary, Marx.⁸⁴ In particular, Kierkegaard shares Marx’s concern with the emancipation of religion into politics. In his *On the Jewish Question*, Marx showed that the political emancipation of the Christian state from feudalism meant that collective political sovereignty became subservient to the politics of bourgeois civil society. This is because, while collective sovereignty of the state hinges on citizens’ moral passivity, civil society is composed of active, egoistic economic subjects.⁸⁵ As Rose shows, Kierkegaard was closest to this criticism in his commentary on the political consequences of the Protestant Reformation. As Kierkegaard writes in his *Journals*, resembling Marx, although Luther’s affirmation of faith is successful in dislodging papal authority under feudalism, Luther’s abstract universalization of faith means that the political subject withdraws into subjective passive inwardness and rejects the finite world, “while outwardly [the scoundrel] reaps profit and cuts quite a figure in society.”⁸⁶

Kierkegaard’s critique of Protestantism aligns with Rose’s Marxist-Hegelian criticism of Fichte’s abstract faith by demonstrating that Luther’s undialectical affirmation of faith led to a political and social compromise with the established order of the nascent bourgeoisie.⁸⁷ Particularly relevant to Rose is Kierkegaard’s alignment with Hegel’s criticism of the “spiritual-animal kingdom,” which shows that bourgeois philosophy portrays work “as if the work of everyone is the work of all,” but in practice it “serves the particular end of [bourgeois] individuals and not the whole society.”⁸⁸ Rose effectively shows that Kierkegaard understood that the hypocritical “spiritual-animal kingdom” originates in the way Luther’s abstract faith rejected the “principle of works.” Unlike individualized faith, whether it is individualized in a person or class, the principle of works “begins with what is common to us.”⁸⁹ “The principle of works prevents anyone from becoming ‘a hero’ of his own inwardness while outwardly living with no responsibility at all.”⁹⁰ When works are rejected in favor of faith in guaranteed salvation, there can be no

⁸³Ibid., 16–18.

⁸⁴Cf. Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, and Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self*.

⁸⁵Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 212–34.

⁸⁶Kierkegaard in Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 158; as Marx writes, “Luther . . . shattered the faith in authority by restoring the authority of faith,” see “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy,” 60.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Rose, *Hegel*, 187–8.

⁸⁹Kierkegaard in Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 158.

⁹⁰Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 159.

commonality with other people in society. To renounce the principle of works is to renounce the understanding of social actuality and political economy. Similarly, in both Hegel and Marx, as Rose demonstrates, the reference to work or sensuous labor is the first step in a criticism of social and political relations.⁹¹ This criticism by Kierkegaard thus aligns with both Hegel and Marx insofar as the subjective disposition of blind Lutheran faith is contrasted with works, or labor.

According to Rose, Kierkegaard's most distinctive contribution is that he does not merely juxtapose the principle of abstract faith with the principle of good works. In fact, in the draft entry that Rose strategically culls from *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard criticizes the facile priority assigned to the principle of works in the politics of the revolutionary age of 1848. In this historical moment, various attempts to overcome the politics of Protestant acquisitive individualism ultimately reinstate new dualisms. On the one hand, Pietism relies on an otherworldly authority to prescribe a transformation of Protestantism into a Christian egalitarian sect, in which people would have everything in common and suffer no differences among each other. On the other hand, communism relies on a this-worldly authority to prescribe an egalitarian society in which people are equal "like labourers in the factory," thereby abolishing all individual differences.⁹² Both approaches rely on an abstract faith in the abolition of differences and turn equality into "clockwork time and clockwork people."⁹³ For Rose, this abstract equality is a far cry from triune logic, in which equality is speculatively united with difference. If the Reformation's affirmation of faith led to social atomization, the egalitarian responses turn toward "egalitarian totalitarianism."⁹⁴ Rose's highly selective focus on Kierkegaard's rare draft reflections on communism, otherwise not a major theme in his works, makes sense only in light of her Marxist-Hegelian concern with the subjective (see religious) aspect of communist politics.⁹⁵ For, if the Reformation turned religion into the politics of capitalism, the attempts to overcome bourgeois politics in 1848 "must turn politics into religion," which means that what is at stake is revolutionary subjectivity.⁹⁶

This concern with revolutionary subjectivity is also why Rose takes issue with Kierkegaard's social and cultural critique in *The Present Age* from a Marxist perspective. There, on Rose's reading, Kierkegaard attributes the impulse for Pietist totalitarian egalitarianism to the psychological reaction of *ressentiment*, which arises in a society of bourgeois, hypocritical individualism.⁹⁷ The psychological response in such an atomized society – designated in modernity as "the public" – is to succumb to a jejune association with others, an association of egalitarian leveling.⁹⁸ That is, egalitarian totalitarianism becomes an abstract reaction to social differences that fails to truly overcome *ressentiment*. However, Rose emphasizes that the limitation of these rare political passages of

⁹¹Rose, *Hegel*, 230.

⁹²Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 160.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 161.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁵This criticism of egalitarianism by Kierkegaard contrasts with Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard's affirmation of the abstract equality of love that conceals actual inequality. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's critique of egalitarian totalitarianism can be seen as another iteration of Rose's critique of voluntarist Marxism, which seeks to impose a utopian egalitarian end. Rose, *Melancholy Science*, 83; Lloyd, "Secular Faith of Gillian Rose," 104.

⁹⁶Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 157.

⁹⁷In the work that preceded *The Broken Middle*, Rose had already demonstrated that the Nietzschean psychology of *ressentiment* is inextricable from the social relations of bourgeois society. See Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, 202.

⁹⁸Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 162.

Kierkegaard is that they “are only able to reflect abstractly about the individual.”⁹⁹ The psychology of *ressentiment* does not contain a Marxist-Hegelian analysis of actuality, of property relations, and of their concomitant form of law. Similar to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard is able to diagnose the subjective effects produced in bourgeois society but not the underlying political economy in its historical dynamic. Kierkegaard emphasizes the “absolute education” of the individual to progress through the stages of their life from the abstractness of the “public” to the genuine recognition of differences between individuals, which would do away with envy and *ressentiment*. But because his analysis of social actuality is missing, this education is not a historical and social *Bildung*. Kierkegaard thus falls under the reflective attitude, meaning that his thinking does not offer a way to articulate a collective revolutionary practice. For conceiving of the practical aspect of revolution is impossible without a historical and political economic analysis of actuality in bourgeois societies.

The overcoming of *ressentiment* cannot be achieved without the Marxist-Hegelian analysis of the historical actuality of bourgeois society. However, once again, the Marxist revolutionary transformation of this actuality is in danger of falling into egalitarian totalitarianism, another form of domination. To posit such egalitarianism would be to affirm an abstract faith in a utopian end. The establishment of a communist society shares the same problem that Hegel detected in the French Revolution: an idealist application of materialism. This Fichtean abstractness, as we have seen, was embraced by Lukács in his voluntarist Marxism. Rose emphasizes that subscribing to this sort of Marxism would mean falling into a form of determinism by “formulating the iron laws of history from which the inevitable outcome of class struggle in the victory of the proletariat can be predicted.”¹⁰⁰ To reject hypocritical individualism for a belief that the proletarian subject can produce a new egalitarian society without accounting for the danger of being deformed by this society is to espouse an idealist revolution. The positing of such a belief, in *de silentio*’s terms, is the purview of the “knight of infinite resignation.” What this figure in *Fear and Trembling* resigns himself to is the finite world forsaken for the sake of the infinite, which means the pure “ideal.” In this way, infinite resignation ultimately reinstates the dualism between the idea, such as communism, and the finite world that it wholly rejects.¹⁰¹ The revolutionary is in danger of wholly denying the displaced actuality of bourgeois society and, as a result, being subverted by what it denies, thereby producing the domination of totalitarian egalitarianism. This idealist rejection of actual inequality, even when formulated in materialist terms, leads to political inversions.

In a bid to avoid the danger of inversions inherent in the “knight of resignation,” Rose turns to the “knight of faith” from *Fear and Trembling*, exemplified by the figure of Abraham.¹⁰² Importantly, Rose’s interpretation hinges on Kierkegaard’s two personae in *Fear and Trembling*, which she takes to be similar to Hegel’s phenomenological personae: “Abraham illustrates ‘sublime’ pathos while *de silentio* narrates the pathos of representation.”¹⁰³ On the one hand, Abraham risks the life of his irreplaceable beloved son

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁰⁰Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 8.

¹⁰¹Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 15; Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, 168.

¹⁰²Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 14–15.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 16.

without any guarantees: he undertakes the leap of faith that God will return Isaac to him under conditions where there is no knowable law. This illustration is “an incursion of the incomprehensible” for the sake of receiving back Isaac as an initiator of a new community.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand – and this is the core of Rose’s argument – *de silentio*, as the author-commentator, contextualizes Abraham’s leap of faith by pitting it against the contexts of “early Greek law, Hebraic judgeship, the law of the late Roman Empire.”¹⁰⁵ This historical contextualization is similar to the phenomenological exposition of Christian triune religion and the history of law that we saw in Hegel, but with an emphasis on the leap of faith of Abraham against the social and historical actuality of law narrated by *de silentio*. As Lloyd perceptively notes, “the appearance of law in the middle is Rose’s most novel philosophical contribution.”¹⁰⁶

But isn’t the “incursion of the incomprehensible” itself abstract when it is pitted against the law? Again, it is hard to make sense of Rose’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s aesthetic-religious authorship outside of her approximation of his philosophical authorship to the Marxist-Hegelian social theory of law. The mediation between the passion for the absolute and the law shares the fundamental structure of Hegel’s *Logic*, on which Rose bases her synthesis of Kierkegaard and Marx. As we have seen in Rose’s engagement with Climacus, the movement of faith as the passage from the non-being to the being of faith is mediated through the “past of being,” the historical and social “essence” that determines any subjective acts. Once we pay attention to Hegel as the mediating figure between Kierkegaard and Marx, it becomes obvious that the double-movement of the “knight of faith” seeks to address the problem of Marxist revolutionary subjectivity – specifically, its tendency toward abstract intentions. First, “the political” is acknowledged in all its historical complexity. Just as *de silentio* acknowledged that Abraham’s leap of faith presupposes mediation and law, revolutionary subjectivity would acknowledge the actuality of the political – that is, the contradiction between the abstract unity of the formal state and the real inequality of capitalist civil society. The second movement, which happens not subsequently but “instantaneously” or at the same time, does not abolish the political, as doing so would deny that political reality contains real possibilities for a truly egalitarian reconfiguration of social and political relations. Once the actuality of bourgeois society is acknowledged as already at least partially ethical, it becomes possible to conceive a real possibility of revolutionary labor-driven change that would give content to bourgeois formalism. To suspend the political means not to abolish it but to acknowledge its historical, legal, and social actuality, while “taking the risk of universal interest.”¹⁰⁷

This emphasis on the law-context of faith goes against the argument that Rose’s espousal of faith leads her to adopt a Messianic and violent politics akin to that of Benjamin. This assertion does not take into account Rose’s own criticism of Benjamin’s Messianic “disgrace of revelation,” a critique targeted precisely at the failed mediation between the universal history and redemption.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Rose emphatically rejects the logic of

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁶Lloyd, “Gillian Rose,” 212.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 163; Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 62.

¹⁰⁸For a discussion of Benjamin, inspired by Rose’s critique, see Ovcharuk, “The Eclipse of Natural Right in Walter Benjamin’s Natural History of Baroque Sovereignty.”

pure violence by pointing out that no sacrifice occurs in *Fear and Trembling*. The figure of Abraham risking the life of his beloved son does not signify pure transgression or an originary sacrifice, as it has been interpreted by Adorno. Instead,

the ethical is bracketed for the sake of the test of faith, the test of the risk: if the leap is taken, then the ethical is instantaneously resumed – this is the meaning of ‘the knight of faith’ who lives the sublime in the pedestrian.¹⁰⁹

Just like Abraham’s faith that the sacrifice will not happen and Isaac will be returned as a harbinger of a new community, revolutionary subjectivity has to live with the risk of faith, which allows for staying committed while remaining cognizant of the possible unintended consequences attendant to that risk: “without ... risk, language, labour, love – life – would not live.”¹¹⁰ Such revolutionary subjectivity would not posit an abstract idea of egalitarianism in place of the abolished actuality.¹¹¹ Enacting neither abstract Messianism of a utopian future nor the sacrifice that happens in the originary past, the knight of faith introduces the element of passion and commitment without which praxis and reflection would halt.

To conclude, revolutionary faith addresses the Left’s historical and political predicament, in which every intended meaning is prone to inversion under capitalism. In this actuality, Marxism, as the unrealized idea of revolution, remains in perpetual crisis regarding its subjective dimension of political decision-making. To avoid succumbing to abstract and idealist Marxist voluntarism, Rose conceived of concrete faith not as sheer infinite possibility but as a possibility that acknowledges social and political actuality through praxis. And just as dialectical logic is united with existential logic in the theology of unresolved revelation, the “repetition forward” is equally “repetition backward.”¹¹² Concrete faith thus presupposes repeated recollection – that is, social and historical analysis of the institutions of the state and civil society. Such revolutionary faith would take its poetry from the future, as Marx famously called for in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, while still recollecting the real possibilities of the past. In “suspending” this political past, revolutionary faith takes risks for the sake of revolutionary commitment to communist praxis by acknowledging that intended action can lead to unintended consequences – such as totalitarian egalitarianism – thus staying vigilant of the ever-recurring danger of political inversions, “the only undangerous position.”¹¹³ This *aporetic* Marxist approach, as Rose summarizes, “stress[es] the gap between theory and practice, which strain towards each other; insist[s] on the uncertain course of class struggle, which depends on the unpredictable configurations of objective conditions and the formation of class consciousness; and imagin[es] the multiplicity of eventualities which might emerge between the extremes, ‘Barbarism or Socialism.’”¹¹⁴

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¹⁰⁹Ibid., 111.

¹¹⁰Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 151.

¹¹¹Ibid., 154.

¹¹²Ibid., 246.

¹¹³Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 159.

¹¹⁴Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 8.

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Calling the World Dead: Marx's Philosophy of History and the Question of Theodicy

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ABSTRACT

Cued by Hegel's description of his philosophy of history as a "theodicy" and Marx and Engels' recycling of the term in *The German Ideology*, this paper examines the role of theodicy in modern thought through an analysis of Marx's work. I consult Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, and Anthony Paul Smith to develop a definition of modern theodicy as the attempt to reconcile thought with evil by subsuming instances of suffering into a rational, singular, and often periodized historical narrative of progress that represents the world as a reliable and meaningful ground for human self-assertion. I then argue Marx's philosophy of history retains theodical elements in *The German Ideology* and his correspondence with Vera Zasulich. Finally, I turn to Lee Edelman and Eckhart von Hochheim to illustrate how thought and life might normatively challenge portraying the world as reliable and framing suffering within a broader historical narrative.

KEYWORDS

Karl Marx; marxism; modern German thought; theodicy; Eckhart von Hochheim; Lee Edelman; philosophy of history

Introduction

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel claims his philosophy is a theodicy:

In this respect our consideration [of history] is a *theodicy*, a justification of God, something Leibniz attempted metaphysically in still abstract and indeterminate categories. It should enable us to comprehend all the evils (*Übel*) of the world, including moral evil (*Böse*); the thinking spirit is [thereby] reconciled with the negative; and it is in world history that the total mass of concrete evils is set before our eyes.¹

For Hegel, theodicy is a philosophical endeavor that reconciles thought with evil through a systematic grasping of history. Hegel argues that recognizing a rationality guiding history is not identical to a religious faith in providence, which "does not advance to the determinate; it lacks an application to the whole, to the extensive course of world events."² Hegel's conceptualization of a rational spirit governing world history – his theodicy – focuses on determinate people, totalities, and states. In addition to showing an ultimate purpose behind the often violent, sacrificial development of these subjects, Hegel's

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

¹Hegel, *Lectures*, 85–86. Emphasis in original.

²Hegel, *Lectures*, 84.

philosophy, aiming at freedom, seeks to overcome nonmoral evils (Übel).³ He writes: “But even as we look upon history as this slaughterhouse in which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals are sacrificed, our thoughts are necessarily impelled to ask: *to whom, to what final purpose*, have these monstrous sacrifices been made?”⁴

In *Phenomenology*, Hegel reframes this point from the *Lectures*. While revealed religion presents the reconciliation of good and evil pictorially, Hegel imagines philosophy supersedes it by conceptualizing and actualizing the reconciliation religion could only depict.⁵ In the *Lectures* and in *Phenomenology*, Hegel’s theodicy supersedes religion by centering comprehension of the world’s evils. The question is what the shift from justifying God’s goodness to reconciling thought with evil – enabled by Hegel’s choice of events and his conceptual thinking – suggests about theodicy’s transformation into a modern philosophical concept.

This paper addresses that question in two parts. First, I examine Marx’s materialist refashioning of Hegel in *The German Ideology* and his correspondence with Vera Zasulich, arguing that Marx’s inheritance of Hegelian ideas of historical inevitability and periodization restrict his materialist commitments and compel him to frame history theodically. This focus on theodicy is partly prompted because the only time Marx and Engels mention Hegel’s *Lectures* in *GI*, they refer in passing to Hegel’s description of his thought as theodicy: “Hegel himself confesses at the end of the *Geschichtsphilosophie* that he ‘has considered the progress of *the concept* only’ and has represented in history the ‘true *theodicy*.’”⁶ I am further motivated by the conviction that reading Marx through the lens of theodicy shows how his philosophy of history frames suffering and its relation to communism in ways that limit his empirical aspirations.

To establish my reading of Marx and theodicy, I first define theodicy in modernity by synthesizing the work of Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, and Anthony Paul Smith, who situate theodicy as central to modern thought. My definition of theodicy names the attempt to reconcile thought with evil by subsuming instances of suffering into a rational, singular, and often periodized historical narrative of progress that thereby represents the world as a reliable and meaningful ground for human self-assertion.

In this paper’s second part, I turn to Lee Edelman’s *Bad Education* and Meister Eckhart’s *On Detachment* as examples of non-theodical thought and life, whose thought resists the demand to relativize suffering within a broader historical arch. My juxtaposition of Marx alongside Edelman and Eckhart provides a normative challenge to the many ways present-day political and philosophical thought position the world as reliable and suffering as historically meaningful. Whereas my focus on Marx demonstrates how theodicy influences empirically minded thinkers, Edelman and Eckhart help address a further provocation: if theodicy constrains thought by enforcing a

³This gloss on Hegel’s philosophy of history as a theodicy largely coincides with Chélelat’s reading of theodicy in Hegel’s *Lectures*, though I depart from his claim that the cultivation of ethical life – allegedly enabled by modern Europe and providing a modest means of reconciling oneself with evil – is Hegel’s defining answer to the problem of evil. Given Hegel’s routine attention to world historical events and their telos, it seems clear that his theodicy involves more than the cultivation of an ethical reconciliation of the subject with the negative, though adjudicating this issue is not a central concern of this paper. See: Chélelat, “Hegel’s Philosophy of World History as Theodicy.”

⁴Hegel, *Lectures*, 90. Emphasis in original.

⁵Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, paras. 776–777, pp. 468–70.

⁶Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 61. Emphasis in original.

reconciliation with evil and suffering, can we think and live otherwise, and, if so, what possibilities emerge?

Theodicy in modernity

Though theodicy has a complex history that cannot be fully treated in this essay, we should nonetheless trace its contours. While its etymological means justifying God or justification of God, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz coined the term in *Théodicée*.⁷ Leibniz's theodicy contended that because this world is the best of all possible worlds, God's goodness and omnipotence are sustained. Like Leibniz's use of the word, a theodicy in religious discourses refers to the practice of justifying divine goodness and power in view of evil and human suffering. These practices far pre-date the publication of *Théodicée*. For example, Augustine is exemplary in the Christian tradition, as he sought to vindicate God's goodness and power in the face of evil. Augustine, along with others in the tradition of Western Christianity, argued evil is not a substance within itself, but a privation of the good.⁸ Which is to say, God is vindicated on the grounds that God did not create evil, because evil is positioned as a lack on the precipice of elimination.

However, Hegel stating that his work is a theodicy raises two questions: (1) how did theodicy become a modern philosophical concept and (2) what is the function of theodicy as a modern philosophical concept? This section focuses on the latter, examining the function and purpose of theodicy in modernity rather than its historical development. Hans Blumenberg, in this regard, investigates the modern function of theodicy and distinguishes premodern theological theodicies from modern theodicies. For Blumenberg, modern philosophies of history do not aim to vindicate God's goodness and power but to show that the world is a reliable means of human self-assertion.⁹ "The one interest that the modern age can have in a theodicy," he writes, is "an interest in the establishment of reliability."¹⁰ In lieu of a God guaranteeing meaning and stability, modern European thought must establish the reliability of the world itself.¹¹

Blumenberg situates this argument historically, taking modern Western thought as a second attempt to overcome Gnosticism, the first being Christianity's failed effort to overcome ancient Gnosticism.¹² Medieval Christianity, culminating in nominalism with an emphasis on divine absence, reawakened and rejuvenated a Gnostic impulse that resurfaces in modernity. Thus, modernity and late-antique Christianity share an

⁷Leibniz, *Theodicy*.

⁸This is not to say that all within the Augustinian tradition understand the nature of evil or the problem it poses in the same manner. The many approaches to the problem of evil in the Christian tradition are charted here: Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, chaps. 1–3.

⁹Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pt. 1, chap. 5.

¹⁰Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 58. As Styfals observes, "In [Blumenberg's] unusual interpretation, theodicy was ultimately concerned not with God's goodness, but rather with proving the reliability of the world against Gnosticism. As such, theodicy legitimized the modern world." See: Styfals, "Modernity as Theodicy," 115.

¹¹There is debate on if 'the world' exists. Some insist that the world as a concept does not exist. See: Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*. Others, who I agree with, argue that the world is not just an observable physical entity or material reality that can or cannot be empirically studied, as Gabriel contends, but a totalizing concept that affectively orients desire and limits sociopolitical possibilities. This latter notion of the world is homologous with how Blumenberg understands the world. The literature on the world as a concept is relevant to political theological inquiry, as Lynch demonstrates here: Lynch, "A Political Theology of the World That Ends."

¹²Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pt. II, chap. 1. The proliferation of 20th century German scholarship on Gnosticism – catalyzed in part by the sudden availability of ancient sources on Gnosticism and marked by conceptual ambiguity regarding Gnosticism – is discussed here: Styfals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World*, 7–22.

enemy in Gnosticism. In the Christian era, Gnosticism appeared as a dualist heresy denying God's presence and the world's goodness. In the modern world, it manifests as a refusal to invest in the world.¹³ Blumenberg proposes addressing this refusal through an act of theodicy that modestly affirms the world as a reliable ground for human self-assertion – that is, as a stable and intelligible environment in which suffering and events can be positioned within a historical narrative that justifies labor, self-assertion, and investment in a future. Blumenberg's "a-theological theodicy," then, does not call for theology in the modern world, but rather foregrounds the problem of reliability.¹⁴

Odo Marquard – influenced by Blumenberg and imbricated in the postwar German proliferation of scholarship on Gnosticism – contended that Leibniz's *Théodicée* and German Idealism "are a proceeding, a tribunal, with evils [*Übeln*] as the subject of the accusation and with a corresponding task of vindication, in connection with which man is the accuser and the defender."¹⁵ Unlike Blumenberg, Marquard takes theodicy to be an exclusively modern phenomenon: "the modern age [*Neuzeit*] was the first one in which theodicy became possible."¹⁶ Whereas earlier societies were overburdened with suffering and focused on self-preservation, modernity's relative alleviation of suffering creates the intellectual margin to think about suffering itself. Thus, theodicy is necessary in modernity: "the position of the one who is accused [*Angeklagten*] – a position that God, for reasons of theodicy, vacates – now comes to be occupied by man."¹⁷ Humanity's position as the accused entails that "where there is theodicy, there is modernity, and where there is modernity, there is theodicy."¹⁸

Though there are reasons to criticize Marquard's argument that modernity distanced itself from suffering, his framing is significant for two reasons. First, his insistence that theodicy is constitutive of modernity highlights a new role it may play in modern philosophy. Second, his argument is a materialist one: theodicy stems not from theological speculation but from the social and material conditions of modernity, wherein the reduction of the pressure to survive makes abstract reflection possible.¹⁹ Distanced from suffering, "the starting point of modernity is the promise that the human can 'deal with reality' all on her own."²⁰ As Marquard states, modern philosophy is an unburdening (*Entlastung*) or exoneration of humanity and reason.²¹

Blumenberg and Marquard are not alone in their recognition of theodicy as a feature of modern European thought. Smith's idea of theodicy as a structure shows how certain modern philosophies relativize suffering in ways distinct but related to theological theodicies:

¹³Other readers of Blumenberg's theodical decision to overcome Gnosticism rightly argue that his decision instantiates 'the world' as a new sovereign power that is antagonized by the modern emergence of 'counterworlds.' See: Chepurin and Albernaz, "The Sovereignty of the World."

¹⁴Styfahls coined this term: Styfahls, *No Spiritual Investment in the World*, 199.

¹⁵Marquard, "Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy," 10.

¹⁶Marquard, "Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy," 11.

¹⁷Marquard, "Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy," 15.

¹⁸Marquard, "Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy," 11.

¹⁹Styfahls rightly contextualizes Odo Marquard's argument that German idealism's focus on the autonomy of the subject as a 'theodicy in disguise' was the product of reading Blumenberg and subtly disagreeing with Blumenberg's contention that modernity is absent of theological structures and modes of inquiry. See: Styfahls, "Modernity as Theodicy," 121–23; Marquard, "Idealismus Und Theodizee."

²⁰Chepurin and Albernaz, "The Sovereignty of the World," 94.

²¹Marquard, "Entlastungen: Theodizeemotive in der neuzeitlichen Philosophie," 13.

A theodical structure is one that, at bottom, justifies the experience of suffering by way of a concept of the whole or some concept that functions to subsume everything within it. Suffering is subsumed and given meaning by placing it within a relation, often with a telos that redeems or sublimates the experience of suffering. This takes such a singular experience such as suffering and renders it merely relative to the part it plays within the system of everything.²²

For Smith, theodicy is more than a religious attempt to justify God's goodness, it subsumes suffering and gives it meaning, often within a relation to a telos that sublimates that suffering. In a theodical structure, the potential singularity and incoherence of suffering are incorporated. Given Blumenberg does not consider this imputation of meaning into suffering, Smith's work deepens our understanding of modern theodicies.

Across Blumenberg, Marquard, and Smith, theodicy denotes a trend in modern European thought.²³ My definition synthesizes their usage of the term. Despite differences in tradition and vocabulary, there is a broader trend showing how modern European thinkers reconciled thought with evil by subsuming instances of suffering into a rational, singular, and often periodized historical narrative of progress that represents the world as a reliable ground for self-assertion. Rather than proving this trend outright, I ask whether Marx's thought can justifiably be read along such lines.

The German Ideology and its theodicy

This section demonstrates that although Marx and Engels underscore in *GI* their departure from Young Hegelianism – which takes “conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men” – they nonetheless develop a theodicy by portraying history as a singular, linear, progressive, and periodized course that allows the proletariat to actualize its place in world history.²⁴ *GI*, written by Marx and Frederick Engels in 1845–1846, has a complex composition and publication history that cautions readers against treating it as more than an informal workshop in which Marx and Engels sketched the history of productive forces as a preliminary materialist reformulation of Young Hegelianism. Johnson and Carver illustrate that *GI*'s fragmented composition, delayed publication, and numerous editorial interventions and grafts indicate *GI* is a provisional, not conclusive, text.²⁵ Still, the text shows how, as Marx later surmised, he “openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker [Hegel], and even, here and there ... coquetted with the mode of expression peculiar to him.”²⁶

Marx and Engels argue that Young Hegelianism's abstract and philosophical approach caused it to overlook the way material and social life shapes different forms of consciousness. Though Young Hegelians were politically left, their belief humans should exchange their religious consciousness for a “human, critical or egoistic consciousness,” was,

²²Smith, “Darkened Counsel,” 132.

²³Other scholars argue theodicy is central to modern thought. Susan Neiman and Mara van der Lugt contend that key figures in modern Western thought focus on the problem of evil, with debates on the relationship between subject and object arising from attempts to address the problem of evil. David Blaney proposes that major figures within the tradition of British political economy redefine evil as an economic good, thus framing their economic theories as a form of theodicy. See: Lugt, *Dark Matters*; Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*; Blaney, *Political Economy as Theodicy*.

²⁴Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 30.

²⁵Carver, “‘The German Ideology’ Never Took Place”; Johnson, “Farewell to The German Ideology.”

²⁶Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, 1:102–3.

according to Marx and Engels, a failure to connect its “criticism with [its] own material surroundings.”²⁷ Mistakenly assuming history rationally progressed from period to period through the power of “pure thoughts” to dispel religious illusions, the Young Hegelians, for Marx and Engels, muddled in “literary gossip,” “gave full rein to the speculative steed,” and “eliminated from history ... the whole body of materialistic elements.”²⁸ Marx and Engels reject history as the linear unfolding of freedom through intellectual triumphs, noting history had not “taken place in the realm of pure thought.”²⁹ Thus, they write: “let us liberate [the Young Hegelians] from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away.”³⁰

Rejecting Young Hegelianism’s “idealist humbug,” Marx and Engels hold that ideas should be explained through the material conditions from which they arose; they ground the study of history in the material reproduction of life itself.³¹ As such, Marx and Engels assert that their premise to study the productive forces of history can be “verified in a purely empirical way.”³² While the Young Hegelians speculate, Marx and Engels argue that empirically verifiable facts, conditions, acts, causes, data, and history prove their point: each period’s forms of consciousness stem from its material and practical life.³³

Yet, Marx and Engels’ empirical focus and critique of Young Hegelianism conflict with their singular, progressive periodization of history. Though their references to a “course of history,” “course of development,” or “course of historical development” suggest their effort to connect productive forces with long-term patterns of historical development – and perhaps even a romantic utopianism that posits a *Lauf der Geschichte* culminating in communism – Marx and Engels use of these terms shows their view of history as linearly and unidirectionally progressing through successive periods marked by distinct forms of property and social relations.³⁴

Their periodization of this history rests upon the claim that productive forces – how people interact with nature to sustain their life – largely determine the form of intercourse, or how people relate to one another. As productive forces develop, contradictions arise between them and the form of intercourse: “All collisions in history have their origin ... in the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse.”³⁵ These contradictions create social revolutions, after which productive forces no longer contradict the form of intercourse with the same intensity and another historical period begins.

Marx and Engels argue there are four primary historical periods that follow this pattern: tribal (*Stammeigentum*), ancient communal and state ownership, feudal or

²⁷Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 30.

²⁸Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 56, 57, 62.

²⁹Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 27.

³⁰Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 23.

³¹Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 54.

³²Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 31.

³³The subject index of MECW Vol. IV lists pages where Marx and Engels reference their work as generically informed by the empirical: “1, 35-37, 39, 43, 45, 48-49, 51, 62, 83, 130, 136, 137, 146, 154, 159, 176, 178, 180, 198, 204, 216, 223, 236-37, 246, 250, 256, 260, 262-63, 277, 281-82, 289, 302, 303, 305, 319, 321, 326, 330, 353-55, 537.” See: Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 650.

³⁴To see instances in which Marx and Engels employ such terms, see: Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 31, 50, 55, 60, 78, 133.

³⁵Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 74.

estate property, and industrialized capitalism.³⁶ At each stage, divisions of labor increase. In the tribal period, divisions of labor are an extension of familial roles and property is underdeveloped and agricultural. As tribes form into cities by conquest or agreement, communal property persists alongside emerging private property, though the later remains secondary.³⁷ As private property expands, communal power deteriorates, class divisions beyond the family emerge, and social revolution eventually becomes necessary.

Their proposal of historical periodization critiques the Young Hegelians, who fail to recognize how each period determines a collective consciousness and that tracing its origins must set “out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.”³⁸ Their periodization also historicizes Young Hegelianism, showing that division between mental and material labor allowed consciousness of “something other than ... existing practice” to appear, putting consciousness “in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.”³⁹ Young Hegelianism errs by attributing unwarranted causal power to these forms of consciousness over material life, treating them as more than representations of that which does not exist. Confusing the ruling-idea of a period with the “the Idea” of that period, “it was possible,” for Young Hegelians, “to transform the whole of history into an evolutionary process of consciousness.”⁴⁰ Yet, while Marx and Engels depart from Young Hegelianism by investigating the “empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions,” they retain its linear periodization of history.⁴¹

For Marx and Engels, divisions of labor can place one’s particular interests at odds with general interests: “For as soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape.”⁴² Communism thus abolishes private property and exclusive spheres of activity, which appear to workers as estranging and alien powers existing apart from themselves.⁴³ Yet, for the communist revolution to occur, both large-scale capitalist machinery and the universalization of the proletariat must exist: “Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive force and the world intercourse bound up with them.”⁴⁴ Without a universalized proletariat or widespread depravity, the communist revolution would be only local and thus unsustainable.⁴⁵ If productive forces or machines for material surplus are insufficient, a communist revolution would amount to a “monastic economy.”⁴⁶

³⁶Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 32–36.

³⁷Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 33.

³⁸Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 36.

³⁹Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 45.

⁴⁰Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 89.

⁴¹Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 36.

⁴²Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 47.

⁴³Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 47–48.

⁴⁴Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 49.

⁴⁵Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 48–49.

⁴⁶Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 76.

The proletariat and communism can only exist “world-historically,” as the products of a world market created by large-scale industry and the depravity therein.⁴⁷ Only at this point can

... things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate [*Aneignung*] the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence. ... Only the proletarians of the present day, who are completely shut off from all self-activity, are in a position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity, which consists in the appropriation of a totality of productive forces and in the development of a totality of capacities entailed by this.⁴⁸

The proletariat bridges history’s division between the general and particulars through a revolution in which “the power of the earlier mode of production and intercourse and social organisation is overthrown.”⁴⁹ The proletariat is the subject through which contradictions between social relations and productive forces are conclusively resolved. Marx and Engels insist that “these millions of proletarians or communists think quite differently [than Feuerbach] and will prove this in time, when they bring their ‘being’ into harmony with their ‘essence’ in a practical way, by means of a revolution.”⁵⁰ By claiming that history allows the proletariat to assert and take responsibility for itself, Marx and Engels extend the Young Hegelian’s view of history as a periodized, linear singularity, wherein individual events represent the whole and stem from the action of a world-historical subject.⁵¹

This tension can be understated in secondary literature, with Ball providing a clear example.⁵² Ball admits that “Marx predicted that proletarian revolution, though eventually world-wide, would begin in the more advanced countries and proceed in a fairly definite order” and that Marx saw capitalism as series of “progressive moves, painful but necessary steps that will lead eventually to a more just and nonexploitative society.”⁵³ At the same time, Ball presents Marx as a “political possibilist” rather than a determinist, holding that “not all things are possible at all times,” as when he notes that Neanderthals could not have invented television.⁵⁴ Yet Ball’s political possibilist reading seems at odds with his own description of Marx’s view of capitalism as a progressive force toward communism, which suggests a more determinist stance. Ball’s later observation that Marx’s “view of history as the story of progress seems naive in a century that has discovered the dark side of the human psyche ... the Holocaust, and other atrocities on a massive scale ... None of this Marx foresaw or could have foreseen” adds further complexity.⁵⁵ Setting aside questions about whether transatlantic slavery should have caused Marx to revise his progressive vision of history, Marx himself claimed a foresight regarding the future: communism will triumph over capitalism.

⁴⁷Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 73.

⁴⁸Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 87.

⁴⁹Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 88.

⁵⁰Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 58.

⁵¹Although for different reasons, Löwith and White interpret this aspect of Marx’s philosophy of history as a poetic rejection of realism, which imparts a romantic disposition – and, in Löwith’s view, a quasi-messianic spirit – to the proletariat. See: Karl Löwith, *Meaning In History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, 50–51; White, *Metahistory*, chap. 8.

⁵²Ball, “History.” In addition to *GI*, Ball references the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 and the 1859 preface to Marx’s *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*.

⁵³Ball, “History,” 137, 133.

⁵⁴Ball, “History,” 141.

⁵⁵Ball, “History,” 141–42.

Nonetheless, to understand *GI*'s philosophy of history as a theodicy, we should recall that human self-assertion, for Blumenberg, is "an existential program according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him."⁵⁶ Confronted by a Gnosticism refusing to invest in the world, Blumenberg claimed the world needed a theodicy, it needed a reliable ground for human self-assertion. Marx and Engel's incorporate the proletariat and its commiseration into a singular, progressive, and periodized narrative that stably grounds its class struggle and justifies its investment in the future:

In history up to the present it is certainly likewise an empirical fact that separate individuals have, with the broadening of their activity into world-historical activity, become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them ... a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the *world market*. But it is just as empirically established that, by the overthrow of the existing state of society by the communist revolution ... and the abolition of private property which is identical with it, this power, which so baffles the German theoreticians, will be dissolved; and that then the liberation of each single individual will be accomplished in the measure in which history becomes wholly transformed into world history.⁵⁷

Claiming empirical veracity, Marx and Engels state the proletariat is the vehicle through which the communist revolution occurs, enslavement dissolves, and the liberation of all is achieved. Through this "a-theological theodicy," a singular and progressive vision of world history is embraced and the proletariat's commiseration is relativized through history's final revolution, the communist revolution.⁵⁸ Proletariat suffering only becomes meaningful for Marx and Engels when aligned with history's arc, where contradictions between productive forces and social relations peak in a proletarian resolution of those contradictions.

On this point, Koselleck's argument is germane: by the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans no longer thought of history as an exemplar of individual lessons, but as a collective singularity.⁵⁹ This transformation "made possible the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting."⁶⁰ Marx and Engel's notes on the proletariat represent this transformation. Proletariat suffering foreshadows communist redemption.

The permanence of historical inevitability in the late Marx

Shifting to the late Marx, I argue his empirical reflections on the Russian commune (*obshchina*) illustrate a persistent tension with his periodized view of history, in which contradiction drives historical progression.⁶¹ Although some readers interpret Marx's

⁵⁶Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 138.

⁵⁷Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 51.

⁵⁸Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World*, 199.

⁵⁹Koselleck, *Futures Past*, chap. 2. Koselleck's argument centers around a philological observation that *Geschichte* transformed out of a plural form and into a collective singular form.

⁶⁰Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 35.

⁶¹Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:346–71.

1881 unpublished letters to Vera Zasulich as evidence that he abandoned the idea that all societies must progress through capitalism before communism, I show these drafts reflect a continued methodological struggle rather than a decisive theoretical break.⁶²

In these letters, Marx's wrestles with the tension between historical inevitability driven by necessary contradictions that periodize history and the need to account for technological and political developments in Russia. He notes how Russian technological and political developments allow the commune to adopt capitalist machinery without first passing through a capitalist period. He observes in the first draft:

[The Russian commune] thus finds itself in historical surroundings in which its contemporaneity with capitalist production endows it with all the conditions necessary for collective labour. It is in a position to incorporate all the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks. The physical lie of the land in Russia invites agricultural exploitation with the aid of machines, organised on a vast scale and managed by cooperative labour.⁶³

Further appreciating the unique circumstances of the commune in the second draft, he argues the Russian commune faces threats not from historical inevitability but by state oppression and exploitation by capitalist intruders.⁶⁴ However, in the first draft, he notes "the 'historical inevitability' of this process is expressly limited to *the countries of Western Europe*."⁶⁵ That is, the commune does not embody the fundamental contradictions between productive forces and social relations that Marx considers decisive in Western history.⁶⁶

Yet, Marx's appreciation of the commune's contingencies is limited, as he extends his conception of history as progressive and inevitable in the first draft:

One circumstance very favourable, from the historical point of view, to the preservation of the "agricultural commune" by the path of its further development is the fact that it is not only the contemporary of Western capitalist production and is thus able to appropriate its fruits without subjecting itself to its *modus operandi*; but has outlasted the era when the capitalist system still appeared to be intact; that it now finds it, on the contrary, in Western Europe as well as in the United States, engaged in battle both with the working-class masses, with science, and with the very productive forces which it engenders – in a word, in a crisis which will end in its elimination, in the return of modern societies to a superior form of an "archaic" type of collective property and production.⁶⁷

Marx establishes, without romantic utopianism or revolutionary fervor, that history tends toward collective property. The commune, by developing communal property and abolishing private property, preserves itself and serves as "a direct point of departure for the economic system towards which modern society tends."⁶⁸ The commune's existence, which is not defined by the historical necessity of contradictions between production and social relations that mark different periods of history, suggests Marx should reformulate his ideas of historical progression and linearity. Yet, he does not.

⁶²Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx*, chap. 2; Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*, 6, 172–76; Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, chap. 6.

⁶³Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:356.

⁶⁴Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:362–63.

⁶⁵Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:370. 'This process' refers to the commune skipping the capitalist mode of production.

⁶⁶Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:349–50.

⁶⁷Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:353–54.

⁶⁸Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:354.

Instead, Marx maintains that history – particularly Western history, but to some extent world history – unfolds inevitability and is driven by historical necessities:

The best proof that this development of the “rural commune” is in keeping with the historical trend of our age is the fatal crisis which capitalist production has undergone in the European and American countries where it has reached its highest peak, a crisis that will end in its destruction, in the return of modern society to a higher form of the most archaic type – collective production and appropriation.⁶⁹

Moreover, Marx attributes the present rarity of rural communes to “economic facts which prevented them from passing a certain stage of development,” showing continued adherence to staged historical theories.⁷⁰

Throughout the drafts, Marx emphasizes the need for the commune to be “placed in normal conditions” of development.⁷¹ “Harmful influences assailing [the commune] on all sides must first be eliminated,” Marx explains in the final draft, “and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development.”⁷² Although this assertion highlights the threat of political oppression, it also illustrates Marx’s struggle to theorize the commune’s “unique combination of circumstances,” as he imagines an ideal situation determined solely by contradictions between social relations and productive forces.⁷³ By imagining optimal conditions, Marx fits the commune into his pre-existent framework of property evolution, even as it defies Western historical developments.

Additionally, Marx theorizes the unique yet miserable conditions of the commune, where “capitalist vermin” suck its “already impoverished blood,” by subsuming it into a singular and periodized narrative of progress that represents the world as a stable ground for human action, situating suffering within a historical narrative that justifies the proletariat’s labor, self-assertion, and investment in the future.⁷⁴ Noting the commune is “bled dry and tortured, its land rendered barren and poor,” Marx maintains that “to save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed.”⁷⁵ While Marx’s attention to the commune’s precarity and suffering is commendable, his framework for evaluating that suffering remains ensnared in a revolutionary theory still considerably governed by historical inevitability.

Commentators amplify the stakes of these letters. Tomba reads these letters as Marx’s engagement with unpredictable and heterogeneous temporalities that are not historically inevitable.⁷⁶ Tomba claims the question at hand in these drafts “was not about the different formulations of stage theory but, rather, an alternative trajectory of modernity that was not destined to retrace the stages of European Western capitalist modernization.”⁷⁷ Yet, this conclusion risks overstatement, as Marx continues to portray history as periodized and inevitable and his cautious conclusions about the technologies available to the commune do not revise his ideas of historical necessity and inevitability. Instead of these letters being a full theorization of how the commune illustrates a non-

⁶⁹Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:357.

⁷⁰Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:359.

⁷¹Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:356.

⁷²Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:370.

⁷³Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:349.

⁷⁴Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:355.

⁷⁵Marx and Engels, *MECW*, 24:359.

⁷⁶Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*, 6.

⁷⁷Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*, 175.

Western, alternative trajectory of modernity, they exhibit Marx's struggle to reconcile the periodization of productive forces with technological and political realities that make a non-progressive or non-periodized path conceivable.⁷⁸

Similarly, Althusser argued that "Marx's thought contains, on the question of historical necessity, extremely original suggestions that have nothing to do with the mechanism of inevitability, or with the inevitability of destiny or the hierarchical order of the modes of production."⁷⁹ Yet the letters show Marx's trouble reconciling the supposed necessity of contradictions between productive forces and social relations with the commune's existence, even as he maintains a slightly revised notion of historical inevitability. Althusser's development of aleatory materialism reflects his appreciation for Marx's empirical observations and his disdain for any remaining Hegelian influence.⁸⁰ Althusser's later work confronts what he rightly understood as an idealism at the heart of Marxism, leading him to claim "one cannot be both a Marxist and coherent."⁸¹ Indeed, it remains debatable whether a theory that abandons the historical necessity of contradictions between productive forces and social relations, culminating in successive social revolutions, can still be considered Marxist.

Even if these late writings signify a meaningful break from earlier Hegelian influences, Marx's pre-1870 works – *Capital* and *The Grundrisse*, to name a few – remain, to some extent, dependent upon the philosophy of history in which they were birthed. Those who use Marx's later works to reformulate his philosophy of history must explain how his earlier theoretical formulations are not bound to the historical framework he then held, which is a difficult task for those committed to historicist and materialist approaches.

GI, like these late letters, serves as a laboratory of Marx's thought, showing a thinker continually negotiating empirical commentary with Hegelianism. This suggests avoiding sharp distinctions between an "orthodox" and a hitherto "unknown" or "marginal" Marx, since Marx strained for decades to mesh empirical inquiry with an *a priori* conception of history. Overemphasizing a break between an orthodox and marginal Marx risks becoming an *apologia* that shields Marx from contemporary criticism by obscuring that his *oeuvre* never delivers the theoretical break from Hegel that modern readers desire. For arguments emphasizing the contingency of historical developments, Marx does not provide much direct evidence, as his framework remains constrained by logics of historical necessity and inevitability even when empirical observations complicate it.

Thinking and living non-theodically: Edelman and Eckhart

This transition from Marx's theodicy to Edelman and Eckhart demonstrates how non-theodical modes of life and thought challenge contemporary demands to present the world as reliable and suffering as historically meaningful. While my focus on Marx shows how theodicy influences even empirically minded thinkers, Edelman and

⁷⁸Musto rightly notes, unlike other commentators, that Marx "resolutely refused" to apply this logic to places other than Russia. See: Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx*, 66–67. However, Anderson uses Marx's late work and his notes on Russia as way to reformulate Marx's thought and apply his notes on Russia to elsewhere. See: Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*.

⁷⁹Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 93.

⁸⁰This shift in Althusser is traced in detail here: Althusser, "Translators Introduction."

⁸¹"Conversation Avec Richard Hyland," 5.

Eckhart invite us to think and live in a non-theodical manner. After contending *Bad Education* offers a way to think that does not reproduce a stable world readied for human action or redeem evil, I argue that Eckhart's treatise "On Detachment" models a refusal to justify the world's rationality.⁸²

Although Edelman and Eckhart occupy different discursive fields, I turn to them because they represent a tradition of philosophical and ethical inoperativity that rejects laboring on behalf of any future.⁸³ Situating Edelman and Eckhart within this tradition illuminates an ethical posture in their works and connects their largely negative theories with a normative ethics.

Further, given contemporary scholarship often situates texts within discursive fields and periods that limit or determine their possibilities, I read Eckhart as a non-theodical thinker to disrupt assumptions about medieval thought. As Kathleen Davis argues in *Periodization and Sovereignty*, categorizing and periodizing thought is not politically neutral but often legitimizes modernity's claim to rationality.⁸⁴ By scrutinizing the connections and ruptures between medieval mysticism and postmodern thought, this section shows how medieval thought can shape contemporary intellectual landscapes and challenges how literary periodization can justify modernity and restrict discursive traditions.

A bad education

Though Edelman intricately develops Lacan in *Bad Education*, one need not endorse Edelman's Lacanian presuppositions *tout court* to see how and why queerness and negativity are that which threaten the stability of the world.⁸⁵ The creative reading of Edelman is to incorporate his work into an archive of non-theodical thought.

To start his argument, Edelman rejects a vision of education as "*l'apprentissage humain*."⁸⁶ The survival and stability of this world, for Edelman, "depend on an education that brings us into being as human subjects by bringing us into, then bringing us up in, the order of the Symbolic."⁸⁷ Whereas the apprenticeship model of education transmits knowledge from generation to generation through the suppression of a structural lack that undergirds being, Edelman's bad education uses literature and film to develop queerness as way of teaching us nothing about the gaps and absences of meaning in modern life. Edelman's queer pedagogy rejects any education that normalizes or reproduces capital's cherished figure of the Child.⁸⁸ For Edelman, the Child is not identical with any historical children or sense of childness; indeed, this disjunction is central to the problem, since children are compelled to bear the symbolic weight of innocence and futurity. Instead, the Child functions as a symbolic figure of innocence and

⁸²Edelman, *Bad Education*; Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 285–94.

⁸³A few core texts on inoperativity include: Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, Homo Sacer, IV; Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, vol. 76; Krimper develops this tradition here: Krimper, "Nonsovereign."

⁸⁴Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*.

⁸⁵Edelman concedes this point: "Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance." See: Edelman, *Bad Education*, xvi.

⁸⁶Edelman, *Bad Education*, 1.

⁸⁷Edelman, *Bad Education*, 2.

⁸⁸Edelman, *Bad Education*, 52.

futurity in perpetual need of protection, against which the antisocial, narcissistic queer is cast.⁸⁹

Edelman's bad education resists allegorizing this void or elevating the Child, instead presenting queerness as the disruptive power of the Real – the Lacanian *ab-sens*, the unthinkable void beyond sense-making. In contrast, a good education allegorizes queerness and assists in the reproduction, survival, and coherency of this world. Rather than attributing meaning and identity to queer people and thus allegorizing the no-thing that is queerness, Edelman refuses to allegorize what cannot be said. "By turning the zero into a one, by positivizing the queerness of *ab-sens*," Edelman explains, "these various figures – 'the Black,' 'the queer,' 'the woman,' 'the trans*person,' 'the terrorist,' inter alia – make possible a (mis)representation of what has no being to represent."⁹⁰ Figures designated as queer are incorporated into the realm of the Symbolic, while queerness itself remains that *ab-sens* which threatens the reproductive-futurity symbolized in the Child.

Bad education, Edelman writes, "dissolves a social reality ... , unleashes the queerness that empties out meaning, derealizes being, and forces us to face our facelessness."⁹¹ Unlike a good education, which inseminates future generations with a solidity of meaning, bad education neither allegorizes the non-allegorical nor ensures today's Symbolic is enforced tomorrow.

However, for the first time in Edelman's corpus, *Bad Education* addresses evil. Edelman claims the radically evil act threatens the safety of the Child by occupying queerness' structural position of nothing: "Queerness like the [radically evil] act, derealizes the constituted order of reality by reducing 'what is' to the status of mere imposition or groundless positing. Those read as catachresis of queerness serve to localize its negativity, giving visible form to the menacing force of its radical de-formation."⁹² Though his theory of the radical evil act is complex, it surmounts to being a gesture that destabilizes the order and coherence of the Symbolic.⁹³

Edelman argues that "reading, analysis, and interpretation all seek to redeem that violence through allegorical unveiling, itself the labor of sublimation. That is what meaning means. But the insistence of that violence expresses the queerness of the negativity we view as evil."⁹⁴ To think queerness and radical evil as negativities which threaten the Symbolic is to suggest that the world is to be destroyed, not proved as stable; that the Real is not to be warded off; and that the order of naming should be annihilated.⁹⁵ Queerness and radical evil entail the Real's destruction of the Symbolic's representational and allegorizing logics.

Edelman's bad education ignores reproducing this world, protecting the Child, redeeming evil, or finding meaning. Instead, to think queerness as a negativity irreducible to allegory is to think non-theodically: a bad education delights in useless learning, refuses to train another generation to replicate the same *via* pedagogical apprenticeship,

⁸⁹Edelman, *No Future*, chap. 1.

⁹⁰Edelman, *Bad Education*, 138. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, I note Edelman's structural equivocating of queerness with blackness has been the subject of critique. For instance, see: Marriott, "Ontology and Language (or, Blackness and Language)." To be clear, Edelman does not equivocate the position of people who figure as black with those who figure as queer. Rather, Edelman insists blackness and queerness are structurally similar and interchangeable insofar as they are a void in the Symbolic.

⁹¹Edelman, *Bad Education*, 126.

⁹²Edelman, *Bad Education*, 127.

⁹³Edelman, *Bad Education*, 127–49.

⁹⁴Edelman, *Bad Education*, 161.

⁹⁵Edelman, *Bad Education*, 138, 143.

and remains good for nothing. A good education, in contrast, is “the foreclosure of the nothing the Symbolic calls forth as its excess or remainder – a foreclosure that effectively makes something of nothing, reproducing the world as sense, while, correlatively, imposing on certain persons the burden of figuring nothing.”⁹⁶ In a good education, certain figures carry the weight of nothingness and stabilize the world by anchoring present actions to a legible and desirable future.

“Progress,” says Edelman, “is the serial mutation of who gets assigned the position of exclusion.”⁹⁷ Misnaming certain figures as queer burdens them with the impossible task of representing what is negative and outside the Symbolic while sustaining the fantasy of a rational and benevolent world. Unlike a good educator, who serially misnames and thus sanctions the Symbolic world, Edelman’s good for nothing education frees certain figures from reproducing a future that will never be their own.

Yet, Edelman concedes that insofar as a bad education reconverts “irony into allegory” and “meaninglessness into sense,” it is oxymoronic. Even bad educators may resort to allegorizing the void.⁹⁸ He thus cautions his readers: do not think you can easily escape from misrepresenting the void, for thought itself tends toward theodicy.

The dispossessed who call the world dead

Eckhart’s “On Detachment” shows what it might mean to live a dispossessed life that neither participates in subsuming suffering into a singular, periodized narrative of progress nor construes the world as a reliable ground for human action and futurity.⁹⁹ In short, Eckhart appraises the virtue of detachment above love, humility, and mercy: there is “no other virtue better than a pure detachment [*abegescheidenheit*] from all things.”¹⁰⁰ Detachment alone allows humanity to “most completely and closely conform himself to God ... become that which God is by nature ... and between which and God there was no distinction before ever God made created things.”¹⁰¹ Unlike other virtues that differentiate between created and uncreated, detachment dissolves that division. The detached self – like the Godhead (*gotheit*) and primordial ground (*grunt*) beyond the trinitarian God (*got*) – is undifferentiated.

Eckhart’s virtue of detachment stems from his distinction between the faculties of the soul and ground of the soul. Largier notes the faculties of the soul are “determined in their nature,” while the ground of the soul is “undetermined ... [and] to be seen as a structural moment of identity between the divine and the human.”¹⁰² This univocity of being neither treats the divine as transcendent and inaccessible nor as immanent, but as identical. Detachment separates the self from created properties, reducing the self to a dark nothingness that is the primordial ground of being, speakable only through *apophasis*, unsaying, and unknowing.

⁹⁶Edelman, *Bad Education*, 3.

⁹⁷Lee Edelman, “Discussion on ‘Bad Education,’” March 9, 2023.

⁹⁸Edelman, *Bad Education*, 92.

⁹⁹My thinking on self-annihilation and kenosis in Eckhart is influenced Dubilet’s development of the concepts in a few different outlets. See: Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject*; Dubilet, “An Immanence without the World”; Dubilet, “The Just Without Justification.”

¹⁰⁰Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 289.

¹⁰¹Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 285.

¹⁰²Largier, *Figures of Possibility: Aesthetic Experience, Mysticism, and the Play of the Senses*, 205.

Eckhart writes that “neither this nor that is the object of pure detachment,” but that detachment “reposes in a naked nothingness” (*blößen nihte*).¹⁰³ Having no object, being reposed in a naked nothingness, the detached self wants nothing at all.¹⁰⁴ It loses its name, unites itself with that which is uncreated, and in so doing achieves complete rest.¹⁰⁵ Carried into eternity beyond mediation and labor, it can “call the world dead.”¹⁰⁶ Detachment is a unification with the divine that renders the world dead and empties the self of wishes and wants.¹⁰⁷ To call the world dead is to refuse the order of this world – neither endorsing the world as good nor critiquing the world as in need of correction, but seeing it as making no claim upon the self.

The dispossessed are so detached that the world and all that is created do not “have any savor for him.”¹⁰⁸ The dispossessed stand with an ‘immovable detachment’ (*unbeweglichiu abegescheidenheit*) from the world’s properties and its chances at joy, sorrow, honor, shame, and disgrace.¹⁰⁹ Or, as Dubilet states:

Rather than seeking to save the self and thus partaking in the political-theological machine of salvation, [Eckhart] explores abandoning the self without reserve ... Eckhart gives voice to an uncreated freedom of equality of those who are nothing, in an under-determining refusal of the primacy of transcendence, be it political, theological, or temporal.¹¹⁰

Those who are dispossessed and annihilated are incomprehensible to a world characterized by temporal, theological, and political transcendence. An ethics of self-annihilation does not heed demands to labor on behalf of any future. With Eckhart, laboring for this world – rather than becoming nothing and finding rest – is to reproduce and stabilize the world.

The dispossessed cannot be squared within the world’s order: they call it dead and exist as a void outside its created order. They abandon the world and themselves, give up all properties and attachments.¹¹¹ The dispossessed are dis-invested, to use Dubilet’s idea, of “the self (as site), the world (as created), and God (as transcendence).”¹¹² Whereas Marx sees the world as ensuring human self-assertion, Eckhart’s dispossessed reject this cycle, needing nothing from the world.

Yet, like Edelman’s admission that bad educators inescapably allegorize the void, Eckhart resorts to theodicy: “There is nothing more gall-bitter than suffering, and nothing more honey-sweet than to have suffered; nothing disfigures the body more than suffering, and nothing more adorns the soul in the sight of God than to have suffered.”¹¹³ Yet, rather than dismissing him as a religious thinker incapable of critique, we can read his reincorporating of the body and its sufferings into divine life as exposing

¹⁰³Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 291.

¹⁰⁴Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 287, 292.

¹⁰⁵Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 293.

¹⁰⁶Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 288.

¹⁰⁷Elliot Wolfson notes that Eckhart’s detachment entails “a state in which the heart does not wish for this or that, wanting nothing, not even the desire to not to want.” See: Wolfson, “Patriarchy and the Motherhood of God in Zoharic Kabbalah and Meister Eckhart,” 1064.

¹⁰⁸Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 288.

¹⁰⁹Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 288.

¹¹⁰Dubilet, “The Just Without Justification,” 9.

¹¹¹Geläzenheit is translated as giving up, abandonment, or releasement.

¹¹²Dubilet, “The Just Without Justification,” 11.

¹¹³Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 294. For a summary of Eckhart’s thoughts on the problem of evil, see: Moss, “The Problem of Evil in the Speculative Mysticism of Meister Eckhart.”

the difficulty of thinking suffering outside a historical arc, while still appropriating forms of detachment and dispossession that resist such arcs.

Non-theodical thought and life

These succinct yet decisive readings of Edelman and Eckhart demonstrate what it could look like for thought and life to be removed from the logics of theodicy, no matter the theoretical or practical difficulties. This is not to say that Edelman and Eckhart seamlessly complement one another. Eckhart, a late thirteenth century Dominican, enforces sexuality in a way that Edelman does not. Edelman's psychoanalytic lexicon is foreign to Eckhart. Despite this, the two extol a life absent of any historical or utilitarian determination; they labor not to reconcile themselves and the world with the negative. Thinking non-theodically refuses to impose meaning on the world through a rationalizing and periodizing of suffering, it is to be either so dispossessed that the world is dead or to refuse misnaming what is a void and gap in the Symbolic.

While the proletariat labors for a future determined to be its own, Edelman's queerness frees certain figures from having to reproduce a future that will never be their own and Eckhart's dispossessed are a nothing which render the world dead. Like the proletariat being subjected to work for a communist future, those who figure as queer are subjected to work for a Symbolic future that will not be their own. As people are subjected to labor for a future periodized apart from their own, the justice owed to them is indefinitely deferred. As the proletariat actualizes itself through revolution, it temporally defers justice into a future whose actualization and consummation are perennially delayed.¹¹⁴

Eckhart and Edelman epitomize a tradition that values rest, inoperativity, and a use of oneself not motivated by a broader historical narrative. This tradition shows how the principles of many systems – communist, liberal, Christian, or conservative – are structured to serve a future. For Marx, the proletariat works for revolution and achieves self-actualization in doing so. For Eckhart and Edelman, working for a future temporally and indefinitely defers justice. The dispossessed wait and work for nothing and resist such temporal deferral. Freed from futural demands, they are, like Edelman's bad education, good for nothing and unconcerned with imposing a singularity or stability of meaning on history. As with Nancy's inoperative community that exists for its own sake and Agamben's 'use-of-onself' and 'form-of-life' that synthesize the divisions between potential and act, Edelman and Eckhart offer an ethics whose challenge to the world lies in life being a good unto itself.¹¹⁵ Instead of preserving the present into the future, a detached life and good for nothing education scandalize the imperative to labor for a foretold future.

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¹¹⁴Though Dubilet does not mention the proletariat, this idea of temporal deferral is thoughtfully addressed here: Dubilet, "The Just Without Justification."

¹¹⁵Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, vol. 76, chap. 1; Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, Homo Sacer, IV, pt. 1.

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Religion and Revolt: A Critique of Secular Supersessionism in the Communist Historiography of the Malabar Rebellion

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the political-historical relationship between the Communist Movement in India and the Malabar Rebellion of 1921, an anti-colonial and anti-feudal uprising led by the Muslim peasantry of the region, articulated within a distinctive Islamic framework. Despite being demonized by Colonial authorities and postcolonial elites as fanaticism, early Indian Communists emphatically defended and memorialized the uprisings. I argue that the historiographical bridges constructed by early Indian Communists between this religious revolt and their own beginnings offer a theoretical model for studying religion and revolution. However, the Communists' approach was rooted in an orientation of secular supersessionism, viewing religiously inspired uprisings as the residues of alienation, to be superseded by secular-modern political rationality. But through analyzing historical elements like anti-caste subtraction and heretical messianism, I demonstrate the Rebellion as a case of political experimentation and the invention of revolutionary subjectivity, rejecting its treatment as a transitional inadequacy toward secular emancipation.

KEYWORDS

Communism; revolutionary subject; secular; messianism; Islam; South Asia; subaltern studies

Introduction: insurgent origins

In 1921, in the Malabar Interiors of the South Indian state of Kerala, a popular militant uprising broke out against the British Raj, the colonial government of India. The initial origins of the rebellion, popularly known as the Malabar Rebellion, was a class-caste conflict between Muslim peasantry (*Mappila*) and high-caste Hindu landlords (*Jenmi*); a conflict going back to the early 1800s.¹ But as the political, legal, and military structures of the Colonial State were central to protraction and protection of landlord domination over the peasantry – the anti-caste/anti-feudal rebellion politically evolved into a general anti-colonial political struggle. Before its defeat by the brutal violence of colonial counterinsurgency, the Mappila Rebels had managed to liberate large swathes of territory

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¹A comprehensive historical and political-economic overview is available in, Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836–1921*.

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from colonial control and established their own revolutionary government for a period of 6 months; rendered alternately as *Khilafat Raj* and *Paris Commune of Malabar*.² The revolutionary proto-government, under the leadership of Variyan Kunnath Kunjahamad Haji, had abolished feudal landholdings and revenue extraction regimes and announced the general remission of all debt.

Despite occurring over a century ago, the Malabar Rebellion continues to play a highly contentious role within contemporary Indian politics. For the fascist ruling classes that governs India today, it was incumbent to eject the rebellion from the history of Indian freedom struggle itself, as they framed it as a *fanatic* anti-Hindu uprising, reproducing the Colonial narrations of the rebellion. While Indian National Congress – as the historic leadership of India’s decolonization and a major opposition party in today’s India – maintained an ambivalent relationship to the rebellion, reading it as political event that had just cause, but was ruined by religious fanaticism and propensity for violence (which stood in contrast to Gandhi’s famous philosophy of non-violence).³

Despite the rebellion’s controversial role in India’s mainstream political discourse, the Communist Movement in India, emphatically defended and identified with the rebellion, as early as its occurrence in 1921. In fact, the affirmation of the rebellion can be placed at the very genesis of the Communist Movement in India, wherein some of the historical importers of “the communist hypothesis” in India were either indirectly associated with or engaged with the rebellion in 1921.⁴ Abhani Mukharji, one of the earliest Indian communist intellectuals, wrote a critical appraisal of the rebellion in 1921, and was in correspondence with Lenin, citing the rebellion, as an example of “revolutionary sentiments of the poor peasants and workmen of India.”⁵ Mukherji identified the radical kernel of the rebellion:

[...] the insurgents had a special interest in burning the offices where the Governmental registers and the family archives of the native magnates (capitalists and landowners) were kept, thus destroying the legal evidence of the mortgages and other debts of the peasant population. The first action taken by the *Moplah* Swaraj (Home Rule organisation) was to use a proclamation for the remission of taxation.⁶

This discursive affinity to the rebellion *controversially* continued through the history of the movement, even after its countless splits and tumultuous transformations due to global and local political conditions. In the 1960s, the Communist movement in the state of Kerala revived the historical memory of the rebellion from relative obscurity and challenged its Gandhian and Hindu Nationalist censures. Strongly opposed to the narrative of an anti-Hindu fanatic frenzy, the Communists, who were then the ruling government of the state, defended and celebrated the rebellion as a revolutionary peasant struggle, and institutionalized its memory as a central part of South India’s

²Narayanan and Vijay Prashad, “Introduction,” in *The 1921 Uprising in Malabar: A Collection of Communist Writings*, 48.

³See Ansari, *Islam and Nationalism in India*, 73–93, on the controversial presence of the Malabar Rebellion within Indian postcolonial memory.

⁴One of the historical origins of the Communist movement in India is traced to the “Communist Party of India – Tashkent Group,” founded by exiles and early Indian supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution. Two of its founding members, M.N. Roy and Abani Mukherjee, wrote significant documents on the rebellion in 1921. Other early recruits of the party included migrants (*muhajirs*) associated with the Pan-Islamist Khilafat movement in India, whose Kerala group played a key role in organizing the Mappila peasantry during the 1921 uprisings. See Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 194–20.

⁵Lenin, “Lenin: 498. TO N. I. BUKHARIN.”

⁶Mukherji, “Moplah Rising [The Communist Review].”

subaltern heritage.⁷ This political undertaking was also backed by rigorous historiographical study by many socialist historians and thinkers associated with the Communist movement. The political-scholarly defense of the rebellion, must be read here as fidelity to its revolutionary significance and promise, and simultaneously, the self-articulation of communism as a revolutionary difference, away and against the existing trajectories of colonial and postcolonial modernity (both of which rejected the rebellion). Assessing early communist writings on the Malabar Rebellion, Nitheesh Naryanan and Vijay Prasad writes of early Comintern-associated Indian intellectuals:

Due to this, they saw evidence – since 1917 – in Bihar, the United Provinces, and the Malabar region, of the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry, a capacity far beyond the bourgeois anti-colonialism of Gandhi.⁸

But in the present, the revolutionary difference of Indian Communism has receded, whereby instead of proposing an insurgent alternative to the horizons of bourgeois nationalism and liberal democracy, they have become its most ardent defenders.⁹ This is especially problematic as fascist hegemony, led by the dual power of Hindu Nationalist government and its grassroots movement¹⁰ is intensifying without any radical opposition. Any attempted radical opposition from the declared targets of the fascist movement, namely Muslim minorities in the Indian mainland or occupied territories of Kashmir, are simultaneously decried by the Communist Movement as communal and violation of national unity and secular principals.¹¹ In fact, under the shifting Overton window of fascist hegemony, Communist groups in India have frequently adapted Islamophobic positions and rhetoric, under the guise of secular critique of Islamic political formations.¹² The abandonment or recession of revolutionary politics and appeasement of fascist hegemony are not separate phenomena, but structurally interconnected by the contemporary inability of Communist Movement to articulate its own revolutionary-insurgent difference.

In this context, the case of early Indian Communism and its emphatic affinity and self-identification with an apparent minoritarian-subaltern uprising is highly instructive “as image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.”¹³ How and why did early Indian Communists, a declaredly atheistic movement, affirm a cataclysmic guerrilla uprising, which also had deeply religious-minoritarian character? In order to explore this question, in this paper, I dive into the Communist Historiography of the Malabar Rebellion, and the potentials and limitations of its various articulations of the relationship between religion and revolt. This offers an illustrative case study and a theoretical model for contemporary debates on critical aspects of the relationship between Marxist/Communist politics and religious politics of oppressed insurgencies, past and present, whether it’s in India, contemporary Palestine, or beyond.

⁷For a history on Indian Communists’ engagements with the Malabar Rebellion, see Narayanan and Prashad, “Introduction.”

⁸Narayanan and Prashad, “Introduction,” 31.

⁹Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Surjeet, “Party Programme, Brief History and Evolution.”

¹⁰Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*.

¹¹Kunnummal, “Islamophobia Studies in India: Problems and Prospects,” 33–7.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” Thesis VI.

The Malabar Rebellion: caste, colonialism, and the outbreak

Although the Malabar Rebellion commonly referred to the mass uprisings of 1921, this was a culmination of longue-duree processes of various events and dynamics, that is often traced to the 1830s.¹⁴ The territory of Malabar was conquered and incorporated by the British East India Company in 1792 from Tipu Sultan's Kingdom of Mysore. In order to rule such large swathes of territory, it subcontracted local political authority to High-Caste feudal lords, such as *jenmis* (landholders), *adhikaris* (village officials), and *kshatriyas* (warrior castes). The Colonial State institutionalized their monopoly over land and power, which hitherto were constrained by multiple layers of sovereignty and the non-contiguous nature of pre-modern territory-based power.¹⁵ The unipolarity of colonial sovereignty extended domination of native feudal structures, which was based in large part on the norms of the Caste System. This is a crucial factor to understand in the historiography of the Malabar Rebellion, wherein caste operated as one of the primary subjective infrastructure by which feudal domination was maintained upon the subaltern caste population of cultivators, tenants, and agricultural laborers.

Despite the diverse manifestations and organization of caste systems in the Indian subcontinent, there are certain features that are consistent enough to be considered as general features of the caste system. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit revolutionary and one of the major theorists of caste, provides an analytical departure here:

They could not bear arms, and without arms they could not rebel. They were all ploughmen – or rather condemned to be ploughmen – and they were never allowed to convert their ploughshares into swords ... On account of the caste system, they could receive no education. They could not think out or know the way to their salvation. They were condemned to be lowly; and not knowing the way of escape, and not having the means of escape, they became reconciled to eternal servitude, which they accepted as their inescapable fate.¹⁶

In Ambedkar's analysis, the caste system, as structure and organization, is “not merely division of labor. It is also a division of laborers,” and furthermore, “it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other.”¹⁷ Caste, rather than producing a system of antagonistic domination, akin to class in Marxian schemas, elaborates a system that manages and distributes the tasks of exploitation, exclusions, and extermination on a graded and dispersed system of hierarchy and compliance, which is further fortified and reproduced through the ritual logic of Hindu cultural norms. Caste domination became successful and enduring, despite its brutality, through its ability to create an affective ideology of consensual compliance, whereby antagonistic class/caste consciousness, and consequently the possibility of resistance, is pre-emptively disabled through constructing a system where material compliance and subjective self-identification converges absolutely within the totality of caste order as such.

Colonial Modernity in Malabar did not weaken the Caste System, but in fact strengthened it under the infrastructures of modern forms of homogenizing and totalizing

¹⁴My retelling of the rebellion is primarily sourced from Panikkar, *Against Lord and State* and Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion and its Genesis* and original colonial sources.

¹⁵Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 200.

¹⁶Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Para 17.5.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Para 4.1.

power.¹⁸ The high caste monopoly over land and local authority subjected the subaltern caste population to several abuses, oppression, and general state of dereliction. But despite the frequency of reports and complaints of mass exploitation, eviction and poverty, the Colonial State consistently sided with the *Jenmis*, repeatedly affirming their absolute right over the land.¹⁹ But it is also of importance here that the emergent colonial bureaucracy, police, revenue assessors, and other legal bodies were predominantly recruited from High-caste populations whom the British considered enlightened countermeasures against the influences of the potentially disloyal Muslim populace in Malabar.²⁰

However, in the 1830s the situation began to fundamentally shift wherein the Mappila Muslim peasantry initiated a wave of militant attacks targeting feudal settlements and personnels, which came to be known as “outbreaks” in Colonial discourse.²¹ Although the initial critiques, protests, and appeals against tyrannical powers of landlords came from both Mappila Muslim and non-Muslim peasantry (predominantly made of lower and outcaste population such as *cheruma* and *pulaya*),²² the outbreaks primarily consisted of the Mappila peasant population. The initial outbreaks were primarily personal and localized in nature, but over time, the outbreaks started to have a more organized and collective character by which cells of Mappila peasantry launched spectacular attacks against *Jenmis* and upper-caste bureaucrats. Such attacks also attracted colonial military/police response, whose laws unilaterally favored landlord authority. Thus, the immediate militancy against *Jenmis* consequently became an attack against the colonial state itself.

The primary way in which the early colonial state dealt with the “outbreaks” was through brutal counter-insurgent repression, but the liberal elements of the colonial state, through its legal apparatuses, were constructing a space in which its subjects could appeal for rights and lodge complaints. The escalation of subaltern militancy was enabled precisely by the rejection of the overtures of rights and concessions and thus began to unfold in the Malabar interiors as the suspension of colonial law and order itself. A colonial official notes of this situation: “Nearly every Moplah agriculturalist is a foe to [colonial] law and order would like nothing better than the expulsion of every Hindu landlord.”²³ This anarchic space would come to be known in colonial counterinsurgent cartography as the “fanatic zone.”²⁴ a space where High-caste landlords, Colonial bureaucracy, and the emerging structures of modern power were not just challenged, but militantly refused. Between 1836 and 1855, Mappila insurgent actions began to spread throughout Malabar interior, in all forms and shapes, including through militant attacks against landlords and colonial state, refusal of work and debt, takeover of feudal settlements, practice of social banditry, mass symbolic suicides to avoid state capture. Such actions rarely ever succeeded in its moment of occurrence, as the rebels

¹⁸Panikkar, *Against*, 22–3.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 73.

²¹*Ibid.*, 95.

²²It is common for historical scholarship to identify the subaltern peasantry as default Hindu. However, research into caste and religious identity formation have demonstrated that modern Hindu identity was a late colonial construct to regulate anti-caste separatism and had a sparse empirical basis in pre-colonial periods. See Lee, *Deceptive Majorities*.

²³Quoted in Panikkar, *Against*, 103.

²⁴Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion*, 81.

were almost always killed, persecuted or apprehended by the state. More consequently, the rebels themselves did not engage in the action for *practical* results, but to become shahid (martyr-saint), a rejection of the oppressiveness of worldly existence in favor of heavenly liberation. A colonial correspondence notes:

The prospect of exchanging, by a glorious death, ... an irksome life of labour, discontent, indigence, and indifferent prospects for the sensual and much-lauded gratification of paradise.²⁵

The anti-political logic apparent in the outbreaks can be easily dismissed as futile if the actions are analyzed in isolation rather than as the accumulation of a spectral-insurgent effect that spread throughout the Malabar interiors, addressing its suffering subjects and the colonial-caste rule of law simultaneously, and instituting a “a programme of complete disorder.”²⁶ The collective and enduring insurgencies of the early Malabar Rebellion were disbanded by the brutal measures of colonial counterinsurgency, through the passing of Moplah Outrages Act in 1855, wherein military repression targeted the population base in which they emerged from itself in the form of collective punishments.²⁷ Although this development within colonial counterinsurgency dismantled Mappila rebel activities to an extent, the subjective and ideological tunnels it created under colonial-feudal interiority endured through an underground culture whereby acts of rebellion, rebel-martyrs, and the spirit of refusal were celebrated, immortalized, and transmitted through ballads, shrines, and folktales.²⁸ Marxist historian K.N Panikkar illustrates the spectral and constitutive influence of the memorialization of rebellion on the persistence of insurgency, in the context of its systematic repression by the colonial state.²⁹

The memory politics inhibited the subjectivation machines of colonial governmentality and sustained an antagonistic divide between the Mappila peasantry and colonial-caste totalities. After the forceful application of the collective punishment practices of colonial counterinsurgency, Mappila rebel activity receded, but the rebel-subjectivity remained and flourished underground. In the early 1900s the Mappila peasant populace and its rebellious underground started to find resonances with emerging anti-colonial sovereignties in the form of non-cooperation movements, pan-Islamist Anti-imperialism, and tenants’ rights movements. These resonances converged in an absolutely cataclysmic fashion in the mass upheaval of 1921, consisting of mass militancy and guerilla warfare against British-*jenmi* alliance aimed at achieving an autonomous zone within Malabar. The attempt at revolutionary sovereignty in 1921 should not be understood as an overcoming of the negativity of the early outbreaks, but rather as something rendered possible, precisely through the gap it initially instituted.

The communist historiography of the Malabar Rebellion

The question of the radicalization of Mappila peasantry was already an active subject of analysis and debate for colonial administration, long before it was interrogated within

²⁵Quoted in Panikkar, *Against*, 89.

²⁶Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

²⁷Ibid., 96–7.

²⁸Ibid., 91.

²⁹Ibid.

modern critical historiography. However, a crucial element of the early forms of the Malabar Rebellion, unlike the mass uprising of 1921, was the lack of preoccupation with the question of sovereignty; prompting Marxist historians to identify this as a “negative class consciousness.” The outbreaks of the 1830s offered no alternative vision of sovereign arrangement, but rather a minimum programme for an absolute refusal of domination, positioning itself against caste, landlord authority, and colonialism. I call this a minimum programme precisely because it lacked a positive vision of resolution or reconciliation (such as concession or even a new sovereign arrangement); instead, the ethos of refusal and antagonism itself was positioned as the end point. It was precisely the minimalism of the Mappila programme of refusal that intensified the social antagonisms of caste, religion, and state into the forms of violent confrontation that we parse in its history.³⁰

The colonial analysts were deeply cognizant of the caste/class basis of the rebellion and recognized that the ranks of the outbreaks were made up “Men of the lowest, if not the lowest order,”³¹ who were “in poorest circumstances, with nothing to hope [for] and nothing to lose.”³² But at the same time, the colonial state refused to give credence to the argument that the rebellion arose from any agrarian discontent, due to state policies which granted upper-caste sections of the society absolute power over land and bureaucracy. Here lies a major political and historiographical question of contention: Why did only the Mappila-Muslim peasants rebel? This is particularly important since non-Muslim peasant communities (such as the Cheruma and Pulaya castes) endured the same hardships of landlord oppression, colonial complicity, and mass dereliction.

For the Colonial officials, the Islamic and messianic structures of the rebellion allowed the colonial state to reduce the rebellion to anti-Hindu riots by a group of fanatic Muslims, or “jungle Mappilas.”³³ Initial outbreaks were identified by the colonial state as lunatic frenzies by “rabid animals than of creatures possessing a spark of reason.”³⁴ But as rebellions began to spread and collectivize through a countercultural Islamic theology and subjective identity, the psychological discourses of colonial counterinsurgency converged with a Islamophobic psychopolitics of Western imperialism and began to approach the rebellion as a problem of fanaticism.

The critical and communist historiography of the rebellion was essentially an attempt to undo the hegemonic-colonial analytic of fanaticism in favor of understanding the material causes and the internal rationality of the rebellion. Prominent Communist activists and intellectuals, such M.N. Roy, Samyunderanath Tagore, and A.K. Gopalan read the rebellion as an agrarian and political-economic conflict between subaltern peasantry and high-caste lords aided by colonial state, wherein the religion was merely its *naïve* superstructural and ideological expression. The official line of the undivided Communist Party was that the rebellion was simultaneously enabled and obstructed by its Islamic ideological framework, insofar as it failed to offer a secular-universal vision inclusive of non-Muslim peasantry. Pinarayi Vijayan, the current chief minister of Kerala, and

³⁰Vajid, “ANTI-POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF MAPPILA REBELLION.”

³¹Quoted in Panikkar, *Against*, 70.

³²*Ibid.*, 77.

³³*Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴*Ibid.*

prominent figure in contemporary Indian Communism exemplify the core of such sentiment:

... when the Communist Party took over the struggle, they replaced erroneous methods. At the same time they had a clear vision of creating equality.³⁵

While the rebellion is understood as part of subaltern revolutionary heritage, it is nonetheless identified as “pre-political”;³⁶ a concept developed by Eric Hobsbawm to study the historical subaltern rebel-subjects who lacked the secular and rational vision of modern socialist discourses. This is indeed a historiographical parallel of the Marxian critique of religion as the alienated expression of discontent, which must be overcome by the methodological secularism of modern-rational Communist politics. It was precisely in critique of Hobswamian tendency, Ranjith Guha wrote his seminal work, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, and initiated the scholarly collective of Subaltern Studies, as an effort to restore the political rationality of the subaltern insurgent.³⁷ Although the Hobsbawmian conception of “Primitive Rebels” and its Indian versions attempted to establish an affirmative history of the subaltern revolutionary heritage, it nonetheless does it from a triumphalistic standpoint of political modernity and secular historicist commitment, which renders the praxis and subjectivity of past revolutionary moments unworthy of reckoning with beyond scholarly-historical engagement.

But contrary to Subaltern Studies, my objective here is not historiographical-narrative restoration of the true voices of the rebels, as the colonial asymmetry of the archives inhibits any such empirical aspirations. Rather, the aim is to develop a theoretical-methodological procedure that stays with and extrapolates from the irreducibility and inventiveness of religiously-inspired subaltern rebel-subject formation. Instead of anachronizing these formations as primitive, this approach derives critical challenges and conceptions from existing materials that are relevant to our contemporary context of insurgent impossibility. Namely, wherein present Communist politics, whether in India and beyond, have lost the ability to articulate a programme of revolutionary subjectivation, and the language of religion continues to play a central role in the context of resistance politics of the oppressed globally, the apparent radicality of secular supersessionism is not anymore clear.³⁸ In this context, the relationship between revolt and religion cannot be reduced to an instrumental relation, but rather in terms of its affective and functional capacity in enabling revolutionary subjectivation. This is especially crucial in the grand historical frame of the *Traditions of the Oppressed*³⁹ – the universal and speculative archive of subaltern insurgency – where religiously formulated politics have variously played liberatory roles. It is clear that Secular Supersessionism of Communist

³⁵Vijayan, “Preface” to Narayanan and Vijay, *The 1921 Uprising in Malabar*, 16.

³⁶Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 2–3.

³⁷Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, 170: “...secularism as a kind of methodological atheism – a praxis-centred, materialist and naturalist inquiry ... which, to paraphrase, Althusser, would strive ‘not to tell itself stories.’”; Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.

³⁸This concerns both the Indian context, where radical anti-fascist politics are led by Muslim groups in religious registers, and the current global upheavals caused by anti-colonial/anti-imperialist politics in the Middle East and elsewhere, specifically the Palestinian Resistance movement and the regional network of Islamic Resistance forces. See, Gözl and Volmer, “Narratives of ‘the Oppressed’ – The Dialectic of Resistance Behind the Axis.”

³⁹I borrow this from Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” Thesis VIII. Benjamin’s conceptualization of revolutionary consciousness and a historical materialism adequate to it as rooted in unfinished struggles of the past is central in this reconsideration of secular supersessionism.

Politics has not sufficiently managed to replace this. The challenge here is therefore to build a critical appraisal of religiously-formulated subaltern revolt that does not abandon the autonomy of Marxist framework, but at the same time affirm the critical significance of the upheavals of the oppressed and exploited people of the world, whether religious or secular.

Theory of the rebel-subject

While Communist Movement as a party line continued to champion the Malabar Rebellion as an agrarian revolt, where religion was merely a naive or primitive ideological consciousness, a section of intellectuals within the party began to take the role of religion much more seriously, and produce a set of analysis to that respect. Most prominent of them was E.M.S Namboothirpad, also the first Chief Minister of the Communist-led Kerala Government, who analyzed the Islam as a medium of difference, identity-formation, and egalitarian communal congregation enabled the revolutionary consciousness of Mappila peasantry,⁴⁰ away from the totalizing domination of caste and colonial state. E.M.S' analysis was further developed by prominent Marxist theorist and historian K.N Panikkar, a fellow traveler of the Communist Movement. In his work, *Against the Lord and the State*, Panikkar offers a far more nuanced account of the relationship between religion and revolt, wherein the transformation of the peasant into the feared Mappila Rebel needs to be understood through an analysis of its Islamic religious anchoring, rather than simplistic dismissals characteristic of secular historicism. Panikkar's position is effectively summarized here:

That the Mappilas alone were able to translate discontent into organized action strongly underlines the religious context, not necessarily, religious content, of the uprisings. It suggests a connection between religion and revolt, normally not attributed to the legitimized role of the former. The connection was realized through ideological underpinning of religion: a source of eschatological dreams, juxtaposing eternal bliss against worldly suffering; a system of moral values opposed to inequality and injustice; and a holy war against oppressors who were enemies of or supporters of the enemies of the faith.⁴¹

For both E.M.S and Panikkar, the effectiveness of religion in the context of the Malabar Rebellion, was specifically within its capacity to enable revolutionary subject formation. Following Badiou, it is important to recognize the centrality or even the priority of the question of subject for any revolutionary political programme. Badiou specifically criticizes forms of Marxism which reduces it to a theory of historical development anchored around the determinations of political-economy: "Marxism is the discourse with which the proletariat sustains itself as subject. We must never let go of this idea."⁴² That is, what must be studied and understood as a priority is not the political-economic contradictions that caused the rebellion, but the critical process by which the subjugated peasantry became the rebel-subject.

The revolutionary subject is not a determined product of history, but a rare invention that punctures the totality of subjection. In the respect of its rarity, the use of religion

⁴⁰Namboothirpad, "The Moplah Rebellion [1943]," in *The 1921 Uprising in Malabar: A Collection of Communist Writings*, 75–93.

⁴¹Panikkar, *Against*, 49.

⁴²Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 44.

within the Insurgent Traditions of the Oppressed to enable revolutionary subject formations has to be studied seriously as a critical and experimental process, rather than infantilized as pre-political consciousness. In Panikkar's analysis, the structure of religious discourses, specifically within Islam here, in terms of its transcendental critique of the world through the idea of the afterlife and its articulation of form of life as space of difference and division, in converging with the dereliction of peasant condition, came to be an effective mechanism of rebel-subject formation. However Panikkar is not necessarily endorsing religion as means of revolutionary politics, but rather developing the analysis of the relationship between religion and revolutionary subject, beyond the instrumentalist thesis of political-economic determinism. But while religion's revolutionary role is recognized in the specific historical context, Panikkar still maintains that it failed to universalize itself and build a positive vision of transformation:

The *shahid* [martyr] sought death, sanctified by religion, in pursuit of justice ... the mediation of religion, however, played a dual role. On the one hand, it enabled the peasantry to act against oppression and, on the other, it negated their potential by circumscribing their vision to the pleasures of the other world. To the Mappila peasantry religion was at once an ideology of action as well an opiate.⁴³

Within such an analytical narrative, communist revolutionary politics re-imagine rebel-formation by grounding it alternatively within a secular universality and an immanent appraisal of the world as a horizon of political possibility. In many ways, *Against the Lord and the State* provides several conjunctural parallels to Engel's *Peasant War in Germany*.⁴⁴ In both, there is an attempt to chronicle pre-modern subaltern uprisings within a highly religious context, as part of localized revolutionary heritage, in whose speculative genealogy communist politics positions itself. More significantly, there is also a critical accounting of the "failure" or catastrophic ends of the uprisings within the very "religiosity" which enabled it.⁴⁵ For both Panikkar and Engels, communist politics emerges in this historical genealogy to correct those failures through a rational and secularized conception of revolutionary politics. However, in reducing rebel-subject formation to religion considered generally, rather than paying attention to the array of ruptures that an insurgent theology of the oppressed causes in dominant religious and secular discourses (against caste, state, and dominant religion), both accounts render unexamined the truly constitutive dynamism of subaltern uprisings, such as the Malabar Rebellion.

That is to say, while Panikkar's critical appraisal of the role of Islam in the Mappila Rebellion went further than other socialist historians in understanding its formative function, in reducing such an account into Islam considered monolithically rather than the specific and unique form of theology at play in the Malabar interiors, it does not sufficiently theorize the nature of the insurgent negativity operative in rebel-subject formation. Augmenting Panikkar's theory of rebel-subject formation further through considering other under-examined historiographical problems in the history of the Mappila Rebellion, we can further specify the insurgent negativity of the Mappila Rebellion within an account of its *heretical messianism*, which was and remains incommensurable with all forms of religious and secular affirmations of the world.

⁴³Panikkar, *Against*, 195.

⁴⁴Engels, *Peasant War in Germany*.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 86–90.

The heretical messianism of the Mappila-Rebel subject had both sociological and theological characteristics that were deeply entangled with each other. In the first instance, we can identify the formation and growth of the Mappila community in Malabar interiors themselves as foundational to the development of its collective radicalization. Although the nomenclature of Mappila refers to Muslims in general in Kerala, before the 1800s the Muslim population of Kerala was located in coastal regions and attached to Indian Ocean trade networks. The coastal Muslim population was fully integrated into the caste social order of the region and did not constitute the forms of counter-culture that we see within Malabar interior during the periods of the Rebellion.⁴⁶

The counter-cultural transformation of Islam in the Malabar interior rather has to do with the fact that majority of the population there were made up of peasants and agrestic slaves from the *cheruma*, *pulaya*, and *thiyya* castes, who adjacent to the periods of the Rebellion (and often as a contagious result) underwent mass conversions to a “heretical Islam” (in contrast to traditional Islamic authority on the coast which were subservient to the colonial state and feudal lords and its own class-caste interests). This conversion campaign is often attributed to charismatic mystical scholars in the region who were sporadically critical of caste system and colonial state; however, historians such as Conrad Wood point towards a different interpretation whereby it was an emergent renegade mass that was cultivating both renegade scholars and renegade Islam.⁴⁷ In the Malabar interior, for lower-caste converts to become a Mappila was to be recruited to a negative exteriority, whereby the consensual domination of caste and its interiority, fortified and reproduced through Hindu ritual norms, could be resolutely rejected and refused, and hence consequently appeared as the refusal of caste itself:

In the event of a *Cheruman* convert being “bullied or beaten the influence of the whole Mohammedan community comes to his aid” and that “with fanaticism still rampant, the powerful of landlords dares not to disregard the possible consequences of making a martyr of his slave.” By becoming a Moplah a *Cheruman* labourer or *Tien verumpattomdar* [sharecropper] was recruited to a body which functioned as a self-defense organisation of the rural subordinate whose ultimate weapon in this period was the outbreak.⁴⁸

Rather than attributing Mappila Rebel-Subject formation to an essential liberatory potential of Islam, Conrad Wood’s analysis allows us to understand the ways in which a heretical revolutionary Islam was *invented* by the peasant masses of Malabar by weaponizing Islam’s relative otherness within caste and colonial world to generate the condition for its own self-otherization from the colonial-caste totality. In fact, Colonial anthropologists such F. Fawcett, underscored the distinction between Islam of the Civilized Arabs and the *heretical religion* of the native Mappilas:

The Cheruman and Kanakans, inferior race in Malabar, are submissive to the last degree; in their lives the most harmless of beings, exemplifying many of the virtues which are supposed to be exclusively Christian, and always in peace. But let one of these adopts Islam and he is changed altogether. The psychic effect is marvelous ... So it is with *Tiyyans* and others who join the Mappila faith, but the effort of those of the lowest races is the strongest ...⁴⁹

⁴⁶Wood, “The Moplah Outbreaks: A Discussion Contribution.”

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion*, 135.

⁴⁹Fawcett, “War Songs of the Mappilas Of Malabar [1901],” 503.

The rebel religion is therefore not merely a product of confessional conversion to Islam, but a distinct production of insurgent difference. It therefore must be understood as a form of *subtraction*, as conceptualized by Badiou as the, “the staging of a minimal, albeit absolute, difference.”⁵⁰ Subtractive difference is a mode of negativity, which is neither destruction nor a particularized difference, but a re-constitution of difference via a process of removal from the existing sequences of identity/difference. This is also an essential component of revolutionary subject formation in any historical context. As such, conversion in Southern Malabar, cannot be understood in its historical and social meaning, if it is solely reduced to a confessional religious conversion. In the context of caste and colonial domination, the Mappila rebel communities operated conversion as a form of exit and a break from the structures of its legitimation and continuation, in favor of an antagonistic divide. Conrad Wood’s analysis locates these conditions whereby the Mappila rebel weaponized the horizontal potentials of Islam, both as a religion but also foreign identity to caste norms, to construct a subtracted platform of self-organization against the asymmetric power of landlords and their colonial backers:

I believe that the religion of the Moplahs provided a means, unique in nineteenth-century Malabar, for mobilizing against the *jenmi* power ...

For the Hindu social orders subordinate to the high-caste *jenmi*, there was no comparable form of religious organization on a congregational basis; their capacity to combine was restricted by the observance of the demands of caste hierarchy and exclusiveness. The religion of these sections of the rural subordinate, far from presenting opportunities to resist *jenmi* power, bound them the more securely to their high-caste landlord ... This, I consider, was one reason for the notorious Moplah zeal for proselytizing; conversion curbed the field of power of the high-caste *jenmi*.⁵¹

If there is liberatory potential to religion, it does not belong to religion as a general phenomenon, but it emerges in a distinct encounter between the subtractive objectives of Tradition of the Oppressed and religion as an ethical and communal canvas, which divides religion between, in Bloch’s words, “master-ideologies” and “counter-blows against the oppressors.”⁵² That is to say, liberatory uses of religion cannot be reduced to a structural consequence of alienated humanity but rather as experimental inventions of the subaltern insurgent.

The use of religious conversion to resist caste-system has a long history in India, and it also has been one of the most antagonistic orientations of modern Anti-Caste politics. In his infamous undelivered speech, *Annihilation of Caste*, which retroactively became a manifesto of anti-caste movements, Ambedkar urged his fellow subaltern caste population to reject the identity of Hinduism as a method of rejecting caste domination itself.⁵³

Thus, rather than seeking “concessions” within the internality of caste order, Ambedkar urged conversion to an external identification as the constitutive element of subjective revolution for the Dalit population. The crucial element here is not the religion that is being converted to (Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism have played this role

⁵⁰Badiou, *The Century*, 56.

⁵¹Wood, “The Moplah Outbreaks.”

⁵²Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 12–3.

⁵³Ambedkar, *Annihilation*, Para 24.6.

for Anti-caste politics in different contexts) or that such religions have an inherently anti-caste theological potential, but rather the very act of conversion itself was meant to signify the formation of antagonistic and exteriorizing form subjectivity. This is a necessary element in understanding the Mappila Rebellion, and additionally with Islam, the rebel-subject achieved both the task of exteriorization as well as the re-mobilization of the spectrality of Muslimness within the colonial and caste order as an affirmative declaration of becoming-enemies of the state. The point here is not so much that religious conversion was a tactical move for the rebels, but rather that conversion as a genre of subtraction is one of the foundational elements of rebel-subject formation. This is consequentially under-analyzed by both Panikkar and other Communist historians.

The second crucial element missed in Panikkar's and other socialist and Muslim historical accounts was the centrality of a heretical-messianic theology within the rebellion. The messianic-form in its historical instance concerns a form of theological motif which is oriented towards a divine exteriority that intervenes to negate the oppressive structures of the world. A crucial element to a messianic orientation is its apocalyptic vision in which worldly existence is decried as fundamentally irredeemable and oppressive. The messianic-apocalyptic orientation, as Jacob Taubes formulates it, "points to the turning, when the structure of this world prison will burst apart."⁵⁴ Herein, the spatio-temporality of the world necessitates oppression and injustice as part of the natural and pragmatic order of affairs. But instead of parsing potential within this worldly interiority for justice, the messianic-apocalyptic orientation, "negates this world in its fullness. It brackets the entire world negatively."⁵⁵

The most visible and systematic expression of Mappila messianic-apocalyptic formations could be found in the infamous sect of *hal ilakkam*: clandestine cells of militant mysticism which were active during the early periods of the outbreaks.⁵⁶ The apocalyptic orientation of *hal ilakkam* was apparent within its name itself, which could be roughly translated as "state of frenzy," or analogously, as a "state of upheaval." The psychopolitics of rebel eschatology conceived itself both as an uprising against the normative order of the subject (as madness) and the political order of subjection (as rebellion).

The term *hal ilakkam* could be etymologically traced to local Islamic mystical traditions whereby the adherent of the mystical path would ecstatically unravel itself in a theophanic encounter with divine gnosis.⁵⁷ Historically, dominant Islamic mystical institutions fortified and individualized such radical concepts within its own systematic logic so as to avoid direct confrontation with the secular-social order, although the gnostic encounter implied precisely such a confrontation qua flight from the secular-social. The heretical dimension of *hal ilakkam* sect becomes even clearer when we look at its radical extension of this theophanic logic as an insurgent messianic theology.

The peasant subject usually initiated itself into the sect and become a *halar* by theophanic encounter, wherein either through dreams or other visions of Prophet Muhammed or from Allah, the initiate is compelled to discharge itself from all "secular occupations" (work, debt, and caste obligations) and join itself in an

⁵⁴Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 9.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Panikkar, *Against*, 88; Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion*, 193–7.

⁵⁷Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 41–2.

interminable devotion, often awaiting an apocalyptic insurgency against the colonial-caste order. In other instances, the *halar* would be divinely inspired to lead a militant procession to the mansions of the feudal lords and ultimately embraced martyrdom in such a course:

The band which takes the initiative is composed of men who have through continuous religious devotions assumed an attitude of mind in which the ordinary functions of the brain are stayed by religious ecstasy. The *orthodox* procedure is then to dispose all one's worldly possessions, divorce one's wives, solemnly give up body and soul to God, dress in a long white coat and white cap, and finally to go out calmly in order to seek death whilst fighting.⁵⁸

Hal Ilakkam politically analogizes and supplants the gnostic encounter with the truth, enabled by mystical subtraction from the veils of the world, with a relentless practice of becoming-militant, which became materially antagonistic rather than a transcendental meditation.

It is important to note that Mappila Messianism was not oriented around a singular figure of the Messiah the redeemer, but rather through the subject who initiates “messianic arrest of happening”;⁵⁹ the ordinary peasant who became *the rebel halar* and refused the demands of worldly existence. Benjamin's re-conceptualization of the “messianic” is crucial here. Although Benjamin's mobilization of the messianic has definite theological imprints and references to Jewish and Christian tradition, it was rather rooted in his Communist/Marxist orientation and revolutionary commitments. The theological motif of the divine intervention of the Messiah, as a redeemer and liberator, was mobilized by Benjamin, but in a critically subverted form, which Jacques Derrida has characterized as a “a messianic without messianism.”⁶⁰

In one of his earlier writings on the messianic motif, *Theological-Political Fragment*, Benjamin dismisses the political potential of Messiah, as theocratic category who intervenes to establish the messianic kingdom as historical reality. But rather the messianic, vacated of its theocratic fulfillment, is retained as messianic-form, an articulation of negativity (“terminus”)⁶¹ that destabilizes the profane and oppressive continuum of history. But the messianic logic does not radiate from transcendental or mystical sources, but from the negative force of the insurgent struggles of the past, that is, its discontinuous intervention in the continuum of history. In subverting via immanentizing the messianic, Benjamin re-introduces it as the question of the subject, whereby *messianic splinters* are neither ontological forces of history nor a divine certitude, but a “weak messianic power,” which demands responsibility, attunement, and fidelity, and is further haunted by the possibility of its failure. The notion of messianic-form enables us to conceptualize and delineate the general form of heretical messianism within subaltern insurgency, which rather than concerning theological apparatuses in general, is the historical persistence of subjective and cultural composition of insurgent negativity as the refusal and hatred of the world. Thereafter, the aim is not to propose an Islamic messianism different from or parallel to Benjamin's Judeo-Christian context, but to identify and analyze the constructions of insurgent negativity as generic component of revolutionary

⁵⁸Fawcett, “The Moplas of Malabar,” 293.

⁵⁹Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” Thesis XVI.

⁶⁰Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 74.

⁶¹Benjamin, “Theological-Political Fragment.”

political formation, where messianic refusal of the world provides an illustrative and universally occurring social and narrative form.

The messianic-form in the Malabar Rebellion is two fold, firstly, *Hal Ilakkam* introduced an anti-work qua anti-world theological-terminus into the Malabar interior, which consequently intensified itself in a violent and cataclysmic encounter against landlords, colonial state, and traditional Islamic institutions in the region which disapproved of such heretical developments.⁶² Secondly, while *Hal ilakkam* as a self-proclaimed tendency ceased to exist after the intense repression followed by the legislation of Moplah Outrages Act, the counterculture of refusal and the affirmation of martyrdom as an insurgency against the unjust pragmatism of worldly life continued to *messianically* influence and determine the shape and logic of the Mappila rebel-subject, culminating into the upheavals of 1921.

But as the messianic refusal and ethos of martyrdom is often analytically overdetermined by Panikkar and others as an effect of the eschatological vision of Islamic paradise, one loses sight of the consequential materiality of rejection of the world as the sum of an unjust life which is also operational here. We can tentatively identify this as an anti-political theology, whereby instead of theological and secular categories analogically co-constructing the political world, the gap between theological and secular is widened and antagonistically re-constructed by the heretical messianism from which the rebel-subject emerges.

Such a messianic-form must be placed beyond and against the organized religious tradition and the secular frame, both of which analogically participate in the legitimization, management, and reproduction of the world as an oppressive totality. While Panikkar's Theory of the Rebel-Subject was largely correct in restoring the role of Islam – a sum of eschatological vision, horizontal communal identity, and moral-intellectual tradition – as a crucial factor in the transformation of the derelict peasant to Mappila rebel-subject, the historiographical lack of attention to subtractive conversion and the messianic-form within the formation of the Malabar Rebellion means that it does not comprehensively ascertain how the peasant rebels themselves heretically *invented* a revolutionary negative theology within the Malabar interior, creating stage for the revolts of 1921 and even South Indian Communism. In this schema, the priority is not a general theological or secular conception of revolutionary subject, but the tradition of the oppressed itself, who tactically and heretically seizes upon religious or non-religious grammars throughout its history to articulate its program of refusal.

Insurgent past as critique

In communist interpretations of the rebellion, there is an accounting of the failures of Islamic or other subaltern rebellions, whereby the communist party takes up the role of articulating a secular and modern subject capable of introducing revolutionary politics in its place. This is premised upon Marx's own foundational critique of religion as "an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering."⁶³ In such a schematic, religious rebellions are not dismissed but infantilized, sublated and superseded by a scientific discourse of revolution, which does not require the apparently mythical and

⁶²Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion*, 70.

⁶³Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction [1843]," 54.

alienating structure of religion and bases itself on a materialist and humanist affirmation of the world. However, in missing the heretical messianic form (irreducible to religion) at work in the rebel-subject formation, and in its simultaneous adoption of a secular subject (as both beyond religious difference and as an affirmation of the world) as the corrective to the *failures* of “primitive rebellions,” it fails to do justice to the question of subtraction and negativity inherent within and required of the revolutionary subject.

Insofar as Communist politics retains a concept/practice of insurgent negativity, it is rendered transitional and absorbed into a narrative of world-historical progress, immanent to its own self-understanding as the true inheritors of the secularizing forces of Western enlightenment modernity, which therein ultimately aim to fulfill its future emancipatory potential. Benjamin’s critical analysis of Marx’s secularization of the messianic time is instructive:

It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an “ideal” that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neo Kantian doctrine as an “infinite task.” ... Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity.⁶⁴

But in adopting such a secular futurism, social democratic Communism ultimately betrays and undermines the force of negativity required for the specter of communism, revolutionary subject, or even class war. Benjamin’s critique of Social Democratic Marxism came in the context of the overdetermination of the Communist horizon by a linear historical progressivism, which found within the fulfillment of the “productive forces” the light of the future liberation⁶⁵ – and hence became fully concurrent with the counterinsurgent direction of modernity. Benjamin’s critique of historical progressivism was thus an attempt to restore what he saw in Marx and the beginnings of the revolutionary Communist horizon as an affinity to the revolutionary past – an affinity which could not be faithfully succeeded by secularizing historicism.

This betrayal is parallel precisely to the abandonment of the autonomy and alterity of communist politics in relation to our present state of affairs, and the concomitant gradual interiorization and normalization of communist political tradition into the grammar of the postcolonial-capitalist-imperialist modernity and its historical continuum. In India, categories oriented towards the imperative of revolution, such as that of revolutionary subject, liberation, and the possibility of new social being, were effectively supplanted by the citizen-subject, rights, and the hermeneutics of the constitutional infinity of law. The abandonment of the revolutionary subject and praxis, as well as the inability to engage with Muslim/minoritarian difference through its secular disavowals, may seem like two separate instances in the liberalization of communist politics – but they are in fact intimately linked in historical and logical ways, as a measure of distance from revolutionary insurgent-difference.

Here, the secular demand for the suspension of Muslim and other negativities⁶⁶ in order to assimilate them into the national unity must be read in parallel with the in-

⁶⁴Benjamin, “Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History,”” Thesis XVlla.

⁶⁵Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” Thesis XII.

⁶⁶Kunnummal, “Islamophobia Studies in India: Problems and Prospects”: “neutralizing and circumscribing the antagonism of Muslim political agency to state and society through the secular-communal paradigm, and reasserting the primacy of national unity over questions of social justice.”

operativity of the revolutionary subject in Indian communism, whereby the negativity and subtraction required to construct a revolutionary communist standpoint or its genre of the rebel-subject is similarly made impossible through its entry into the secular, modern, and liberal-democratic form of politics.

Indeed, the history of Communist Party in Kerala, which adopted an agrarian militant orientation in 1948, where Communist difference offered the subtractive and antagonistic space for revolutionary subject formation provides a curious parallel to the history of the Malabar Rebellion. However, the repression of the postcolonial Indian State, forced the Communist Movement to adopt a *pragmatic* stance, which ultimately set the stage for the contemporary deradicalization of Communism.⁶⁷ The secular-modern-rational horizon to which Communist intellectuals belonged and attempted to sublate the religious revolt of pre-/anti-political subalterns could not withstand the sheer asymmetry of modern forms of domination, and categories of rationality, pragmatism and immanence became henceforth concurrent to surrender and deferral of revolutionary politics.

Secular supersessionism as a historiographical orientation, whether in Hobsbawm or K.N Panikkar, initially derived from the Marxian critique of religion, was indeed a coherent narrative project to historically link the religious subaltern insurgent and irreligious communist revolutionary. But today, as the link between secularity and revolutionary politics grows increasingly strained, or even adversarial in many contexts, secular supersessionism requires critical re-evaluation alongside new historiographical and analytical methods. Today theology has returned to the political grammar of the subaltern insurgent in multiple global contexts, in India and elsewhere. Marxist critical theorists, such as Alberto Toscano, have understood such connection as a transitional symptom of the foreclosure of the secular emancipatory horizon.⁶⁸ But what if the foreclosure of a secular emancipatory horizon is indeed the generic structure of the politics of domination? In this case, the theological negativity of the Traditions of the Oppressed, of insurgent difference, messianic refusal of the world, affirmations of martyrdom, are not symptoms of alienated humanity, but genuine political experimentations and inventions against the oppressive interiority and continuum of our world-history. If Communist analysis and politics remains uncritically committed to the logic of secular supersession (especially after its contemporary de-radicalization), rather than the *messianic inheritance* of the unfinished and ongoing battles of the Traditions of the Oppressed, an inspired, comradely, and critical engagement with the insurgent subject of the past and present will be foreclosed, and consequently, the irrelevance of Communism as a political horizon for a large swathes of *the wretched of the earth*.

Conclusion

This inexplicability of revolt, as that which emerges from the outside of the irredeemable continuity of history, finds its minimal explication within the heretical apprehension of the messianic structures of various religious traditions. It is not of insignificance that the tradition of the oppressed across histories and geographies has found its ethico-political

⁶⁷Menon, "A Prehistory of Violence? Revolution and Martyrs in the Making of a Political Tradition in Kerala."

⁶⁸Toscano, *Fanaticism*, xxiv.

coordinates within the messianic-form. In restoring and affirming the messianic-form, we are able to reverse the supersessionist and counterinsurgent relationship between communism and the tradition of the oppressed, and re-establish communism itself as part of the experimentations of a global and transhistorical tradition of the oppressed, wherein each uprising and each revolt constantly returns to and departs from each other in a subterranean affinity.

As such, pre-modern messianic rebellions are not so much secularized by communism, but rather communist horizon is radicalized by its affinity to subaltern uprisings, whereby the refusal of the world as it is, expressed more generally in the messianic-form, come to be identified as the transversal foundation of the tradition of the oppressed. The aim of such a move would not be to discard the Marxist critique of religion and somehow create a theologized Communism, but to reconsider the Marxian formulation that “the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.”⁶⁹ Rather, it is critique of the world, and the negativity that it demands, that must become the prerequisite of all criticism, including the necessary critique of religion as a form of legitimating oppressive worldly existence and its historical continuum.

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⁶⁹Marx, “Contribution,” 53.

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Teleology and Revolution

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In preparing this introductory note, I pulled from my library three books whose titles drew my attention, in search of a point of departure from which to begin this brief introduction. The three texts are *Revolutions* by Michael Löwy,¹ *Revolution: An Intellectual History* by Enzo Traverso,² and *The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin* by Dan Edelstein.³ I could have added others, and of course I had my own *Revolution and Restoration: The Politics of Anachronism*⁴ in mind, but I preferred to limit myself to these three titles.

Löwy's book was originally published in French in 2000 and translated into English by Todd Chretien in 2020. In the "Postscript" added to this edition, Löwy wrote that since the Zapatista uprising of 1994, "no revolution similar to those of the past 150 years has taken place."⁵ However, there were "popular movements," "popular uprisings in Latin America," "popular mobilizations in the form of the Indignados" in Spain and Greece, and "semi-insurrectionist upsurges" in many countries, including the United States.⁶ What is striking in this "Postscript," almost an epilogue, is the rarefaction of the term revolution and its replacement by other terms in which the "popular" replaces the class dimension.

One could say that the term revolution has been stretched to the point of insignificance: there are scientific, technological, literary, artistic, and even culinary revolutions. Alternatively, as in Edelstein's case, the term is treated with suspicion insofar as it has "become increasingly synonymous with violence."⁷ Edelstein's book presents a caricatural account of historical materialism as a simple causal relationship between economic relations and cultural and political ideas.⁸ While this description may correspond to certain reductive versions of Marxism, it is certainly not what Marx does in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. There, rather than offering a universal theory of revolution derived from the contradiction between the economic and the political, Marx develops a

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¹Löwy, *Revolutions*.

²Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History*.

³Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come*.

⁴Tomba, *Revolution and Restoration*.

⁵Löwy, *Revolutions*, p. 531.

⁶Ibidem, p. 532.

⁷Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come*, p. 286.

⁸Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come*, p. 22.

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materialist historiography attentive to multiple temporalities and capable of grasping concrete historical openings for emancipation within class struggle, including the struggle against class struggle itself, while also recognizing both the limits of constitutional procedures and the relative autonomy of the state.⁹

Edelstein emphasizes intellectual debates in redefining political thought, while neglecting, both methodologically and in his reconstruction of historical processes, the concrete conflicts that include not only the theories of canonical thinkers, but also the practices and theories-in-action of a multitude of anonymous insurgents and revolutionaries. For Edelstein, revolution is an idea that, once stripped of the adornments of liberal thought and constitutionalism, inevitably descends into discord and violence. His analysis remains centered on European history, and when he turns to non-European events, it is primarily to confirm the image of the violent degeneration of revolutionary processes, as in the case of the Arab Spring, where “the peaceful protests of massed civilians gave way to brutal civil wars.”¹⁰

The Zapatista movement that emerged in Chiapas – regarded by Löwy as an example of a movement organized not as a traditional guerrilla formation, but as an “indigenous army composed of families or entire villages”¹¹ – is absent from Edelstein’s account. He concludes *The Revolution to Come* by asserting that the events of recent decades “did not introduce any significant changes to the idea of revolution itself.”¹² Yet the Zapatista experiment is neither an instance of liberal constitutionalism nor a violent excess culminating in what Edelstein calls the “red Leviathan.” Instead of being treated as a theory in action capable of reshaping the meaning of revolution through the recombination of modern legal forms and indigenous institutions, it is simply omitted, since it does not conform to the predetermined trajectory leading “into political terror.”¹³ This omission reveals the limits of a liberal approach to the history of revolution.

Traverso’s book, published in 2021, presents an analysis that may be described as symmetrical to Edelstein’s. Despite a fleeting reference to the neo-Zapatista experiment,¹⁴ Traverso argues that “today, a widespread tendency – including amongst left-wing scholars – simply reverses the arrow of the old ‘laws of history’ to depict the defeat of revolutions as their inevitable outcome.”¹⁵ The challenge, then, would be to confront the question of power without reproducing the trajectory that leads to the red Leviathan. Despite their apparent opposition, both Edelstein and Traverso presuppose an intrinsic relation between revolution and violence. For Traverso, violence is not merely a contingent outcome but appears structurally inscribed within revolutionary processes. Both authors also assume a historically specific concept of power whose form remains unquestioned. Their analyses remain centered on European revolutions, while non-European movements appear only as peripheral additions rather than as structurally transformative experiences. What is thereby overlooked is the experimental reconfiguration of power and institutional forms that takes place within revolutionary processes themselves.

⁹Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities*.

¹⁰Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come*, p. 288.

¹¹Löwy, *Revolutions*, p. 529.

¹²Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come*, p. 289.

¹³Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come*, p. 283.

¹⁴Traverso, *Revolution*, p. 30.

¹⁵Traverso, *Revolution*, p. 15.

What does it mean to think revolution as an experiment? It means to rethink it from within a constellation of concepts whose practical relations redefine its semantics. The essays in this volume move in this direction. The task is to think within the tension between the two dominant images of revolution: the circle and the linear progression toward the future. The alternative does not lie between a return to the past and the hasty creation of a better future. Rather, it consists in discerning a direction within the openness disclosed by the revolutionary event itself – an openness that interrupts the given order of time and reconfigures the field of historical possibility. These essays should be read as attempts moving along this trajectory. All these articles address an urgent question of our present: how to open the possible. The task is to think, with Lotte List, human nature as open-ended, in order to overcome the pessimistic anthropological assumptions that lie at the foundation of many political theories; with Isaac Horwedel, to rethink, beyond the limitations of critical theory, the possible as opening and its relation to human needs; with Bogdan Oucharuk, the historical relation of justice as an open question, and the suspension of the political as a way to avoid “totalitarian egalitarianism” and to mobilize different philosophical traditions capable of moving from the abstract formalism of logic toward more concrete, phenomenological, and even religious articulations; with Neal Spadafora, the critique of historical inevitability and theodicy; and, with Abdul Vajid Punakkath, the opening of a theoretical and practical space for revolutionary movements outside Europe that break the script of the French Revolution and its dominant legacy, reactivating messianic forms that exceed and disrupt the secular framework within which modern revolutionary thought has been historically contained.

The contemporary dilution of the concept of revolution, stretched to encompass every form of change, or its assimilation to a trajectory of escalating violence culminating in a totalitarian Leviathan, reveals both the crisis of the concept and the incapacity, within the present, to reconceptualize its historical meaning. In the eighteenth century, the term was employed by the revolutionary bourgeoisie, which reshaped the social order through state power, abolishing preexisting forms of common possession and local self-government in order to establish the centralized state and modern relations of private property. The term was later appropriated by the revolutionary proletariat and used to propel revolution from the political into the social sphere.

In both cases, the concept of revolution functioned as a temporalizing device, marking the succession from the Ancien Régime and feudalism to the new state order and private property relations. This succession could be legitimated and oriented in the name of progress, which operated both as a principle for temporalizing the material of the past and as a legitimating prefiguration of the historical stage to come. Liberal democracy and capitalist relations could thus be presented as progress, relegating everything that did not conform to them to the status of regression or historical residue.

However, when the proletariat appropriated the concepts of revolution and progress in order to legitimate the coming stage of socialism and to reveal the historically episodic character of capitalism, the bourgeoisie responded by shattering the concept of progress itself, rendering it unusable. In its place emerged the great narratives of the crisis of modernity, of natural cycles, and of decline. At the same time, historical material, no longer temporalized by teleology or progress, was fragmented into independent islands. Or, to use Ernst Bloch’s image, history became a kind of multi-ring circus: in one ring clowns

chase one another, in another acrobats perform, and in yet another horses run in circles. Each of these rings was attributed a self-subsisting ontological reality.

In this impasse, where progress is reduced to technological innovation, where the direction of history points toward climatic catastrophe, and where historical material is reduced to ontological fragments in the name of plurality, the sense of being trapped in the present intensifies. By way of compensation, the desire for the transformation of the self, often accompanied by a nostalgic return to an imagined great past, and a vague invocation of openness emerge. The care of the self replaces the transformation of the world, and openness replaces teleology; both function as compensatory forms that sustain the illusion of a freedom always within reach. Yet if a teleology without openness reduces history to pure necessity governed by the cunning of reason, an openness without telos dissolves into a chaotic proliferation of infinite possibilities, often articulated through reductive analogies to quantum physics and empty analogies between quantum and classical behavior.

Periods of crisis share this form of idealism. During the *Vormärz*, the Young Hegelians believed they could change the world through philosophical critique alone. In the crisis of the Aristotelian system and Greek ethical life, Epicurus attained the quietude of the soul by displacing the anxiety arising from the contradiction between the sensible world and knowledge onto reality itself, now conceived as governed by an intrinsic principle of contingency. This is what Marx sought to understand in his *Dissertation*, in order to grasp more clearly the crisis of his own time.

Instead of venturing into consolatory fantasies, critical thought would have done better to think within the tension between openness and teleology – two concepts that must be grasped together rather than opposed as mutually exclusive. Marx moved within this tension. If, in the *Manifesto* of 1848, he employed the language of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the interest of the proletariat, thereby bequeathing to it teleological certainty and faith in progress, the later Marx, in dialogue with the Russian populists, questioned the stagist sequence. In his letter of 1877, he wrote that historical phenomena cannot be understood through “the passe-partout of an historical-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue is to be suprahistorical.”¹⁶ The significance of this affirmation lies in the recognition that the agricultural commune could be reconfigured in communist terms without passing through capitalist accumulation. Yet this possibility is not at the disposal of the arbitrary will of individual peasants. It must be constructed and organized through the combination of class struggle in the West and the resistance of Russian peasants to new forms of property.

This shift in perspective can also be examined in relation to colonialism. If, in the 1850s, Marx spoke of the “great civilising influence of capital”¹⁷ in the colonies and described the “double mission” that England had to pursue in India – “one destructive, the other regenerating: the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia”¹⁸ – by 1881 his position had fundamentally changed. He wrote: “as for the East Indies, for example, everyone except Sir Henry Maine and others of his ilk realises that the suppression of communal landownership out

¹⁶Marx, *Reply to N.K. Michajlovskij*, in *MECW* 24, p. 201.

¹⁷Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, in *MECW* 28, p. 336.

¹⁸*MECW*, Vol. 12, pp. 217–8.

there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards.”¹⁹

There is no theodicy. The evil of colonialism and capitalism remains evil; it is not functional to progress or redemption. Nor is there any apology for “multilinear pathways of development,”²⁰ as if different historical temporalities could or should unfold freely. What led Marx to revise his position was his study of colonialism and anticolonial revolts, combined with his analysis of the functioning of competition among capitals in the global market. If the different temporalities of the market are violently synchronized according to the rhythm of socially necessary labor time, it becomes urgent to oppose to this synchronization another synchronization. As Marx wrote: “The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland.”²¹ The colonial question stands at the center of class struggle in the Western metropolises. To the combination imposed by capital, Marx opposed a political recombination organized by the workers’ movement.

Telos is not rejected in favor of openness. Nor is telos a mechanical or botanical principle that realizes itself through some internal necessity. Telos is that which transcends the present, opening it to the possibility of the novum. If concepts operate by temporalizing historical material, and the capitalist mode of production operates by synchronizing the different temporalities of the market, the concrete telos of emancipation must operate by synchronizing the struggles of the English working class with anticolonial struggles in Ireland. In doing so, it produces a different temporalization of historical material, in which Irish or Indian peasants no longer appear as backward, precapitalist, or premodern, but as contemporaries of workers’ struggles in Europe.

The essay by Abdul Punakkath in this volume is important in this regard. It shows how the Mappila Rebellion, primarily instigated and led by low-caste peasants who converted to Islam, became a form of guerrilla warfare animated by an eschatological vision directed against the colonial state itself. This historical investigation demonstrates, on the one hand, the inadequacy of secularism of the Indian parties, which remains incapable of grasping the intrinsic political force of religious messianism, and, on the other, how secularism itself functions as a polemical concept that confines religion to the private sphere and neutralizes the subversive force of messianism. To counter this theoretical and political neutralization, operated through concepts such as progress and secularization, it is necessary to immerse oneself in concrete history and to show, from within it, the emergence of concrete concepts capable of rearticulating the grammar of revolution and its telos.

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¹⁹MECW, Vol. 24, p. 365

²⁰Anderson, “Writings on Non-Western and Precapitalist Societies and Gender”, pp. 85–6.

²¹MECW, Vol. 43, p. 398.

Modernity (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Revolution and Restoration: The Politics of Anachronism* (Stanford University Press, 2025). He is also co-editor of the journal *Political Theory*. He is currently working on two projects: one on Marx's use of the Factory Reports, and another on the canon of the history of philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION



Between Revelation and Reflexivity: Introducing the Leap of Black Studies

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The first half of our special issue on Marx and revolution is organized around the investigation of a speculative identity: capitalism is theology. This second half works with and against another: capitalism is slavery. Marx, of course, was not a thinker of simple unity. From Hegel, he refined a reflexive relationship to “the identity of identity and non-identity.”¹ Our first set of essays investigates how the internally differentiated unity he called capitalism manifests a topsy-turvy world, where things are not as they seem. Marxist engagements with slavery have taken various shapes within this differentiated totality: (1) the *identity* of “capitalism” and “slavery,” figured through the polemic “wage slave”²; (2) the *negation* of slavery, such that capitalism is “not-slavery,” figured by Political Marxists and value-form theorists alike through the dialectical sublation of “direct slavery” by “abstract labor”³; (3) an *inversion*, whereby “slavery is capitalist,” and primitive accumulation returns us to the world market and a more capacious unity figured by “living labor”⁴; and (4) the proposition of *mediation*, whose figuration in “racial capitalism” returns us to problems of identity anew.⁵ Each form of slavery’s theoretical appearance can be reflected back on the whole, as the “vantage point” not only of a certain articulation of method and politics but also of social relations themselves.⁶ By understanding the social validity of a certain vantage – less covering a truth than expressing a partial one – the Marxist belief is that we can better “apprehend the course of historical development of both individual slave formations and the world economy as a whole.”⁷

While a unified vision of Marxism would see these vantages as interconnected – and, in their interconnectedness, redeemed – the movement from one vantage to another also bears the unanswered weight of Hegel’s stadial theory. The second half of this special issue is an answer back to this weight, through the pressure of bearing nothing, and

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¹Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 51.

²For especially instructive readings of the wage-slavery metaphor, see Robbie Shilliam, “Decolonizing the Manifesto”; Franco Barchiesi, “Precarity as Capture.”

³For an account that unifies Political Marxism and value-form theory, see Samuel Knafo, “Political Marxism.” For the most developed Marxist version of “not-slavery” to date, see Nesbitt, *The Price of Slavery*.

⁴See McNally, *Capitalism and Slavery*.

⁵On racial capitalism, see Go, “Theorizing Racial Capitalism”; Singh, “Black Marxism.” For criticism from within Marxism, see especially Nesbitt, “Racial Capitalism”; Wacquant, “Trap.”

⁶In “Disassembling Capital,” Nicole Pepperell borrows from Bertell Ollman’s analysis of different “vantage points”: “The ‘same’ social process thus makes available multiple ‘true’ perspectives, each valid for a particular aspect of the process, but offering different windows onto the nature of the process as a whole,” “Disassembling Capital,” 234.

⁷Tomich, *Prism of Slavery*, 31. For one of the most sophisticated readings of slavery and capitalism to date, see Lamas, “Slavery.”

from an outgrowth of vantages that can only be called black feminist, even as they disavow, in some necessary way, the violence of their origin. For what social reproduction theory's re-totalizing valuing of sex and gender occludes is precisely the supersessionist dimensions of the slave's appearance, the way the most abstract slave *can never appear*, not as her-self and certainly not for-herself.⁸ In apprehending the singular non-appearance of the racial slave, the articles that follow make a case for why the slave is the swerve to any Marxist vantage. Instead of rendering double consciousness a sort of determinate negation and sublimating black studies through the demands of a dialectical unity, they employ a modality of "second sight" Denise Ferreira da Silva has termed "blacklight."⁹ Unleashing the negativity of blackness as "sociogenic," in Sylvia Wynter's Fanonian sense, they register in the Afro-pessimist "end of the world" a fidelity to the gap between revolutionary vantages, and not their unification.¹⁰ Toward this unthought non-appearance, these articles scramble the coordinates of political theology and revolution, and "leap" from Marxist schemas, if not Marxist politics and Marxist theory entirely.¹¹

Hegel's black flowers

For German Idealism, "slavery" as an abstraction appears for thought only retroactively, to beings yearning to be free: *the need of freedom from need* constitutes the logical and historical presupposition for those subjects who, in grasping that all is not what it seems, can apprehend their free activity as the work of history (and, ultimately, vice-versa).¹² The stakes are the fantasy of freedom and – for select rehabilitations of Hegel, but certainly for Marx – the ways we imagine freedom's social reality to permit us access to some essence. These appearances are rendered "false" at the immediate register insofar as they mask a "truth," a truth collectivized and made actionable through shared inheritances of dispossession, pointing us to some essence apparently torn asunder in primitive accumulation. Hence the litany:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins.¹³

But the content of such "original sin" proves difficult to determine, and the lines between consent and coercion indeterminate.¹⁴ Is it the species-being of the young Marx, a being whose shared activity in labor is supposedly alienated by property relations but can again be made recoverable? Or is the essence itself content-less, and what is shared the form of violence? If consent conceals coercion, how are we ever to make something like freedom

⁸See the essays collected under the heading of "Gender and Capitalism" around Cinzia Arruzza's work.

⁹On blacklight, see Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*; Sorentino, "Shine."

¹⁰On the theological and Marxological dimensions to blackness in Wynter's use of "sociogeny," see Garba and Sorentino, "Blackness Before Race"; Sorentino, "Expecting Blows." On negativity in Fanon, see Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, especially 223–30. On why the "end of the world" means more than the end of capitalism, see Brady, "Cosmic Love."

¹¹On the "leap," as it informs Fanon's engagement with Marx, Lenin, and C.L.R. James, see Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, 237–76.

¹²Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 14. See Sorentino, "With What Must Slavery?"

¹³Marx, *Capital*, 915.

¹⁴On indeterminacy as a theme in black feminist thought, see James Bliss, *In a Field of Static*.

manifest? How to determine, that is, the differences between formal freedom, slavery, emancipation, and revolution without resorting to metaphysical half-measures that now have hardened into the names of race and gender?

The second half of this special issue thematizes the yoke of the indeterminacy between slavery and freedom on revolutionary thought. For the Hegelian and Marxist alike, this indeterminacy poses problems for the perfection of freedom; for these articles, they point to problems in the process we can, borrowing from Anthony Paul Farley, call the perfection of slavery.¹⁵ By the end of the introduction, I position Farley's own use of the identity "capitalism is slavery" in this special issue as an inventive instantiation of a Fanonian leap, its understanding of wild roses exceeding the politics of Marx's "rich totality of many determinations and relations."¹⁶ For now, I draw attention to a vertiginous double movement in the Marxist perfection of freedom (communism). Slavery is perfected, ideologically *and* materially, by disavowing freedom's entanglement in slavery, not only, as Orlando Patterson would have it, by repressing this linkage at the heart of Western culture (whatever that may be), but more so by disavowing its production of a more perfect slave, a slave whose origins are necessarily obscure, whose reproduction is perfect, and whose resistance is illegible. A racial slave, yet to be abolished.¹⁷

Hegel's decision to begin with being, rather than nothing, steps outside his immanent logic in the *Logic* to triage freedom's indeterminacies. His opening address to Enlightenment antinomies outlines the humanist mission's renunciation of "metaphysics" (those inquiries into the "immateriality of the soul, into mechanical and final causes") for the immediate rewards of science and common sense ("feelings, popular practicality, and erudite historiography").¹⁸ Parallax to Wynter's Cesairean insights into "science" as "half-starved,"¹⁹ Hegel observes how Enlightenment thought's reduction to "the pressing situation of the time" elevated science to new dogma and begot "a cultivated people without metaphysics."²⁰ These people only *appear to be* free subjects of modernity. In their fear of dogma, they have succumbed to the realm of immediacy and preemptively banished those theologians, mystics, and monks who, as "custodians of the speculative mysteries," had hitherto prepared the ground for revelation. Such banishment returns us only to first-order insight into immediate existence, a "bright world of flowers – of which, as is well known, none is black."²¹ We rise above empty empiricism and above those whose thought launches, "like a shot from a pistol, from their inner revelation," Hegel advises, by advancing a speculative "philosophical culture" that apprehends the "need to unite the method with the content, the *form* with the *principle*," revelation and reflection.²²

Appearances are masks, but they are masks of our making, expressing partial movements whose form we participate in and can shape.²³ As Hegel's *aufhebung* recuperates

¹⁵Farley, "Perfecting Slavery."

¹⁶Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100.

¹⁷See Patterson, *Freedom*.

¹⁸Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 8.

¹⁹Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 64–65.

²⁰Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 8.

²¹*Ibid.*, 8.

²²*Ibid.*, 45–46.

²³On the mediating work of appearance for what goes by the name of critical theory, see Abazari, *Hegel's Ontology*, especially 15–43.

the black realm of mystery, nothing becomes the path for becoming, as does Africa for Europe. This last point, where Africa, “lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night,” has now become the preoccupation of critical readings of Hegel.²⁴ But the blackness of mystery actualizes freedom, so this second half of the present special issue argues, by materializing the blackness of slaveness, a mask hiding nothing but vacancy. Drawing from the work of Rei Terada and Denise Ferreira da Silva, our authors detect real problems for apprehending the philosophical dimensions of Hegel’s racism without reproducing the same illogics of freedom that necessitated slavery to begin with.²⁵

Marx’s not-slavery

Slavery is made more perfect, not less, in Marx’s remixing of Hegel through laboring activity. In re-reading *Capital*, as my co-editor Mikkel Flohr invites, as a “critique of economic theology,” we can see first how structures of revelation give way to reflexivity. Take the polemical term “wage slavery” which, on its face, clarifies only the register of immediate identity. The most synthetic Marxist moves beyond first-order vantages to recognize that the truth of coercion is not “merely” concealed in consent; it is also *revealed* in consent and, when reflected upon, *redeemed* in revolution. With this open revolutionary possibility comes the hope that we could, as in Robbie Shilliam’s critique of the *Manifesto*’s deployment of “wage slavery,” “redeem the prophecy.”²⁶ But redemption-through-revolution will never come for the slave. Black theologians may repurpose Christian gospel, but by doing so within a framework of loss, what Amaryah Armstrong calls their “heretical appropriation of theological materials” works from within to force “the revelation of the rupture that the terms of redemption (and) history attempt to suture.”²⁷ As with black theology, so too for black Marxism. The slave’s second sight is less the synthesis of two vantages on the retroactively traced road to revolution than it is the immanent inhabitation of the impossibility of such synthesis to begin with. The work of becoming people without metaphysics is outsourced to slaves, whose cultivation of the empty space once reserved for revelation is consumed in and reflected upon as the worker’s freedom.

Marx’s oft-quoted “slavery is an economic category of the highest importance” is preceded by the claim that “*Freedom* and *slavery* constitute an antagonism.”²⁸ This antagonism is resolved by bracketing investigation into the distinct social form of racial slavery, whose structure Marx elsewhere has to presuppose as being “drawn into the whirlpool of an international market dominated by the capitalistic mode of production” only *accidentally*.²⁹ Between the wage slave, who has nothing to lose but his chains, and abstract labor, whose vantage is fetishized, is a supersessionist story not unlike the Christian logic of fulfillment through annulment, one that dissolves direct dependence into “a general form” in which “individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended

²⁴Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 109. See James and Knappik, “Exploring the Metaphysics.”

²⁵See Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea*, 69–90; Terada, *Metaracial*, 1–59.

²⁶Shilliam, “Decolonizing the *Manifesto*,” 210.

²⁷Armstrong, “Losing Salvation,” 332.

²⁸Marx, “P. V. Annenkov,” 675.

²⁹Marx, *Capital*, 260.

on one another.”³⁰ Of course, violence does not disappear in a great blaze of abstraction and equivalence. But it is nonetheless from the vantage of mediated, rather than direct violence, form rather than force, that Marx begins to pry open new levels of analysis, moving to a mode of presentation adequate to the reflective demands of social theory. Capitalism is slavery insofar as it appears to be “not-slavery,” formal freedom providing conditions metabolized through revolutionary action. From immanence is generated transcendence, from our social practices another world.

As any thinker of “racial capitalism” knows, so-called transition debates are the vehicle through which problems of gender, race, and class are laundered. But it is the misunderstanding of what to do with “not-slavery,” its nondigestible remains, that has propelled subsequent thinkers into ever new syntheses of appearance and essence, political Marxism and world-system theory, production and exchange, necessity and contingency. We now have extracted from Marx a sophisticated “philosophical anthropology” which poses the “corporeal roots of *freedom* as an ontological quality of human beings, regardless of how oppressive any concrete configuration of human society may be.”³¹ Building freedom’s possibility into the mediations of social form means, however, that the slave has no vantage in a differentiated totality – not without contorting into ontologized forms of appearance that must remain external to her (the wage-worker, living labor, the mother, the human). The slave, we know, cannot see herself because the master does not want recognition. But this also means the slave cannot free herself because she cannot be herself, nor can she reflect herself. The revolutionary is decidedly not the slave. Even when it comes to revolution, blackness appears in forms that are not itself (“borrowed institutionality” or “structural adjustment”).³² “For the black man,” Fanon writes, “there is only one destiny. And it is white.”³³

This destiny marks a disjuncture relevant to this special issue: for the Marxist, capitalism’s sublation of theology and slavery together give rise to the appearance of freedom, the actuality of domination, and the possibility of emancipation. Formal freedom veils coercion but promises “production by *freely associated men*.”³⁴ But for black radical thought, slavery and theology are not sublated in the same way: one produces a figure of human emancipation adequate to the demands of the present, the other a recurring threat of subjection to alien power. It is only insofar as one develops what the social form of this threat entails – engaged across the articles that follow as indeterminacy, negativity, minor revolutions, destituent power, and wild roses – that one begins to appreciate the political rhetoric of “wage slavery” in Marx’s famed “Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in the black skin” as a singular sort of supersessionism.³⁵ Slavery does not veil an enslaved person waiting to be recovered from beneath its violences. Its *vel* is nothing but the “unsovereign,” the *damned* now stalking the earth.³⁶

³⁰Marx, *Grundrisse*, 164. On the Christian logic of supersessionism as the self-imposed fulfilment and annulment of the Jewish covenant, see Snediker, *Figural Interpretation*, especially the chapter on Hegel and hints of its relevance for Marx.

³¹Mau, “Karl Marx,” 13–14.

³²See Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 38–40.

³³Fanon, *Black Skin*, 228.

³⁴Marx, *Capital*, 173.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 414. On supersession’s critical relevance for black thought, see Armstrong, “Of Flesh and Spirit.”

³⁶On the Lacanian ‘vel’ as the false choice of freedom structuring the unsovereignty of blackness, see Jared Sexton’s “Vel.”

Black studies' singularity

In fidelity to the negativity involved in “not-slavery,” a fidelity that is not-not-comradely, but will perhaps always lack a proper name, the first two articles survey the intellectual currents that expose the fetish structure of freedom: the way Hegel and Marx’s “people without metaphysics” build a metaphysics into their freedom. For Tia Trafford and Anisha Sankar, however, freedom’s metaphysical backdoor provides entry into spaces beyond those surveyed by “wages of whiteness” and the ruses of “race”; it is the threshold for the movement of history – a structural nothingness (blackness) that, consisting of its effects, history compels subjects not to be. The next two articles, by Adam Banks and Ahura Sultan and by Alex Dubilet, stay with the difficulty of the slave’s revolutionary vantage, asking what sort of logic can understand a figure whose modes of resistance are always conscripted against itself and following the question to its *non-messianic* conclusion. Read together with theology and revolution, blackness-as-nothingness-as-slaveness reconfigures the “absent cause” we call God, and mediates it through slaves, the first Christian creatures whose conversions can never manifest emancipation on earth.³⁷ Marxist materialisms can never wrangle the antagonism under dialectical control, can neither sublimate slavery’s specter nor wake from freedom’s dreams, because, as Farley works through in closing, slavery’s violent processes have become (identical to) the infinite stuff of our unconscious. Converging in non-events that refuse the promise of self-annihilation, these texts read the as-if-ness of freedom as an expression of “anxieties,” as Franco Barchiesi writes in his sharp response below, over the translation of “‘revolution’ into a ‘call to order’ demanding *proper* political agency.”

If the libidinal quality of this anxiety has gone underappreciated here, a special issue with its sights on psychoanalysis could not miss that black women, as Banks and Sultan’s engagement with Hagar begins to touch, must labor to reproduce the conditions of their own nullity. The black woman consolidates living labor and abstract labor, logic and history, not, as social reproduction theorists show, because her unpaid work is essential to the movement of value and is, in its exclusion, proto-revolutionary, but because her sexual violation, as Patrice Douglass carefully parses, enforces the “paradox of fertility without maternal capacity.”³⁸ While the formal freedom of the contract secures one-sided terms for reproductive and productive capacity and for the fuller project of abolishing the family and labor, the black woman is incapacitated by forms of possibility whose legibility is inscribed from without.³⁹ Her violation does not cross the imagined threshold of consent that potentializes the resistance of the wage-slave or wife-slave because “the cause of the sexual violability of the slave is the opacity of its condition.”⁴⁰ To render Margaret Garner “mother” means, Douglass writes, to refashion violence “as her potential rather than her unmaking.”⁴¹ Marxist reflexivity teaches the worker to labor in the production of possibility at the same time that black women, laboring to resolve freedom’s indeterminacies, prepare the ground for the impossible.⁴² Between revelation

³⁷See, generally, Barber, “The Creation of Non-Being.”

³⁸Douglass, *Engendering Blackness*, 107.

³⁹See Kaplan, *Tourism as Mastery*; Hartman, “Belly.”

⁴⁰Douglass, *Engendering Blackness*, 2.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 104.

⁴²On “indeterminacy” as a theme in black feminist and Afro-pessimist thought, see Bliss, *In a Field*. On “impossibility,” see Murillo III, *Impossible Stories*.

and reflexivity, beyond the pleasures of the freedom principle, is the secularizing drive to manifest a slave whose reproduction of nullity infinitizes *aufhebung*, splintering teleology from its telos and reoccupying the slot of sin at all registers. Between Hegel and Marx, Hagar blinks into view.

The authors below contribute to the chorus of thinkers who refrain from making the slave speak and from possibilizing the impossible. They articulate the “singularity” of slavery through “quantum” leaps between political theology and political economy, determinant negation and negativity, freedom and fugitivity, Afro-pessimism and black optimism, between Jared Sexton’s meditation on the “social life of social death” and Ferreira da Silva’s “*wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*.”⁴³ In his response to the first half of this double special issue, Massimiliano Tomba diagnoses the politicizing of “quantum” analogies as a sign of an under-mediated relationship between necessity and openness, where the privileging of the latter “dissolves into a chaotic proliferation of infinite possibilities.” Sexton seems to echo Tomba when arguing “slavery must be theorized maximally if its abolition is to reach the proper level”: anything less, he writes, involves succumbing “to the forces of mitigation that would transform the world through a coalition of a thousand tiny causes.”⁴⁴ But Sexton persists in configuring the slave through “singularity,” occupying both the place of determinant *and* non-recuperable negativity in such a way that her emancipation can never be achieved. The slave appears either as object or, occasionally in the eyes of the law or hands of the historian, as subject to the spectacle of her sexual violation. Either way, she appears through regimes that convert suffering into legible human grammar, legal or otherwise.⁴⁵ But unlike the worker’s or the woman’s violation, the racial slave never appears on the scene; beyond the event horizon that would tie the origin of her capture to any known cause, the slave’s infinite “saturation of violence” is an ongoing extinction event in which emancipation never arrives.⁴⁶

These articles do not, then, revert to liberal essentialism or American exceptionalism, as so many class-first critics claim of black studies. The perfection of slavery comes neither through the indirect slavery of the wage worker, nor through the concretization of slavery in the prison, as stories of the thirteenth amendment might have it, nor through the immersion of the housewife, as Marxist feminists might.⁴⁷ Anti-blackness is neither necessary nor is it contingent: it is the way the universal problems of inequality, difference, and exclusion, which is to say the impossibility of reproducing freedom through social order, are mediated through a readily definable figure whose features are both plastic and immutable. Anti-blackness not only makes contingency necessary, setting in play the triumph of reflexivity over revelation; by materializing a slave whose origins are illegible and whose emancipation is impossible, the slave makes critical theory possible. As the swerve in the world-historical non-identity of idealism and materialism, mysticism and science, freedom and determination, the slave is nothing but the quotidian spectacle, as Farley affords us, that is “white-over-black” and the negation of life at all registers.

⁴³On the figuration of the slave’s “singularity” for modern forms of violence, and its import for “fugitivity,” see Sexton’s “Social Life” and on “quantum” as a resource for black life, see Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 158–59, 261–63.

⁴⁴Sexton, “Social Life,” 33.

⁴⁵See Hartman, *Scenes*.

⁴⁶Douglass, *Engendering Blackness*, 2.

⁴⁷On problems with formal abolition, see Teed, “Whither Abolition.” On the woman as “the slave of a slave,” see MacKinnon, *Toward*, 19–26.

Contributions

Turning Marx against himself, Tia Trafford's "Freedom as Fetish" walks us through the crisis induced by the failure of both false consciousness and fetishism to penetrate the problem of slavery. Trafford provides an incisive exploration of how freedom's double-bind – both normative horizon and practical enactment, real and contingent – pushes revolutionary actors and revolutionary theorists into a kind of "homeostasis." If Marx is to avoid essentializing human autonomy under the sign of "capacity," then he must account for the generation of a real appearance that can differentiate workers from their commodity labor-power. Self-ownership is capitalism's precondition, not only objectified through enclosures, but subjectified, Marx writes, "in the eyes of the worker himself."⁴⁸ Trafford takes the practical reality of freedom in Marx seriously. It is precisely because Marx is attentive to the ways freedom can feel like compulsion and vice-versa that so many Marxists conscript themselves into a metaphysics stamped with the guarantee that "we are not the sort of being that could ever be or have been enslaved." Read alongside Afro-pessimist interrogations of political ontology and Wynterian sociogeny, Trafford's corrective makes the history that rendered blackness as "*legitimately enslaveable*" freedom's "*practical* transcendental presupposition."⁴⁹ Prior to ideological capture and prior to thought, this practical presupposition zones capitalism through "commensurated inequality," instead of the arbitrary and unmediated violence of slavery. Insofar as a world of "mastery without masters" does not mean a world of slavery without slaves, anti-blackness continues to produce non-equivalences irreducible to available readings of the "wages of whiteness," whose fascist undertow is rejuvenated in, not resolved by, contemporary attention to "impersonal domination." In Trafford's hands, the identity and non-identity of slavery and capitalism perpetually reanimate blackness as a condition of incapacity, through spectacles of violence reinscribed "in every seemingly free act."

Like Trafford, Anisha Sankar's reading of Hegel and Marx in "Revolution (The Hand of God at Work)" identifies how an oscillation between contingency and norm has, as its raw material, the body of blackness and the stuff of history, both structuring the material capture of slavery. For Hegel, as for Marx, gaps and indeterminacies between slavery and freedom (otherwise inscribed as nothing and being, science and history) are part of the self-movement of spirit, where doubts along the "slavery-to-communism" continuum are promised to be revealed by the passage of time. This prophetic quality to immanent critique is the result, for Sankar, of the migration of Hegel's eschatological structure into the realm of world history, where the "hand of god" is expressed in the "cunning of reason." Communism is downstream, then, of a vicious cycle, in which "The consequence is the cause: the end of the world will be when we truly know God." For Sankar, even the most radical revaluations of teleology in Marx – most especially the anti-Eurocentrism of his late manuscripts – cannot be rescued from the ways communism's "speculative kernel of freedom" builds racial abstraction into the dialectic under the sign of slavery's necessity. Through Sankar we deepen our discernment of how the open essentialism of Marxist analysis – the self-narrating, because self-reproducing and immanently self-abolishing,

⁴⁸Marx, *Capital*, 274fn4. See Lamas, "Slavery," 517–18.

⁴⁹While "legitimately enslaveable" is Wynter's phrasing, see also the uses of the "in/eligibility of enslavement" underscoring Wilderson's understanding of "political ontology" in *Red, White & Black*, especially 55–57.

subject of history – is the most dangerous of all. Expanding from Ferreira da Silva and Terada, Sankar casts Hegel's relegation of Africa to nature and Engels's rigid developmentalism not as rhetorical flourishes or external hindrances but as expressions of a theological hostility to negativity sustained by and deepened in Marx's materialist inversion. Introjecting the hand of God into the movement from natural slavery to racial slavery to wage slavery leaves Sankar with a stunning conclusion: "race remains unthought in Marx because God is unthought in Marx." Like Trafford, too, this unthinking requires more slavery, whose "specter" is reanimated in spectacles of anti-blackness serving as living proof of God.

Between Christian allegories of redemption and Marxist allegories of revolution, Adam Banks and Ahura Sultan's "Minor Revolution" taps into the key issue animating this special issue: the supersessionist impulse by which black skin reaches the world of liberation, the self-abolition of labor, by committing to theological and revolutionary universality. They first read "major revolutions" in black liberation theology where, as with James Cone's uptake of Marx, the active force of human freedom promises to deliver redemption from suffering. They observe that black radical faith can only be "allegorically" resolved through a destructive encounter with Marxist faith, for the "self-abolition of labor is liberatory but when made analogous to racial subalternity it calls for the destruction of blackness." Reading Armstrong's Hagar alongside Saidiya Hartman's Esther Brown and her "revolution in minor key," Banks and Sultan identify how access to such redemption is impossible for black women, whose liminal banishment bears the weight of reproducing impossibility. We can extend Banks and Sultan's insightful claim that historical materialism "renders the racial subaltern suicidal," into ways black women are conscripted into obliterating, sadomasochistic infanticide.⁵⁰ At the boundaries of kinship and outside the "general strike," black women's rebelliousness can only ever be heretical, performing an ongoing disruption of the world from within, even as she is cast to the wilderness without.⁵¹ Staying with the wayward in the theological register affords Banks and Sultan a method for reading "minor revolution," not as eschatological event but as excess and disruption, exposing "freedom as a type of bondage without erecting another speculative figure of freedom at the same time." Whether or not these disruptions are doomed to terminate in ever new configurations of sovereignty and enslavement is the open question of all authors gathered here, a question Banks and Sultan see embodied in black women's spiritual gestures and conjurings of impossibility.

Alex Dubilet's "Unrealizing the Revolution" routes this impossible question to one of its most spectacularized sources: the Haitian revolution and its historiography. Seduced by determinant relations, where leaders determine masses, and masses also determine leaders, readers of C.L.R. James's 1938 *Black Jacobins* have themselves methodologically reproduced, Dubilet argues, sovereign cycles of capture and enclosure.⁵² Grasping the movement of "slaves-turned-insurgents-turned-*cultivateurs*-turned-peasants" neither through universalizing projects of living labor nor through determinant negation, Dubilet accomplishes what Marxists cannot: an actual focus on slaves. James's belated

⁵⁰See Douglass, *Engendering Blackness*, 96–144, as well as forthcoming work by Taija McDougall.

⁵¹On the limitations of the general strike, see Hartman, "Belly."

⁵²As when, in Nesbitt's reading, the "chaotic rebellion" is rescripted into the "first instance of a consciously conceived and successfully implemented proletarian revolution," *Price of Slavery*, 133.

addition of footnotes on anonymous Black insurrections, Dubilet recognizes, would involve “nothing less than rewriting *The Black Jacobins* as *The Black Sans-Culottes*.” This is an activity too radical to be thought in advance of or after its deeds, not necessarily because the Bossale insurrectionist awaits a final thought (their “destituent abyss ... reduced to a narrative caesura”), but because their withdrawal into the hills continues to undo all coordinates. Insofar as this activity remains illegible and untimely, Dubilet reaches towards an immediate parallel – those “destituent” twenty-first-century articulations of mass upheavals meant to apprehend the failure of positive forms of human subjectivity. Instead of claiming the human’s revolutionary horizon of possibility has failed the late-stage capitalist worker as much as it has the Haitian revolutionary, Dubilet stays with the Bossale insurrectionist, insisting that, “rather than leaving destituent power unchanged, the encounter with Black popular insurgency affects the very form, scope, and genealogy of the concept.” With “no way forward and no way back,” with even less to lose than chains, the uncompromising movement between armed rebellion and withdrawal expresses a total critique of plantation order. Attending to insurrection’s “immanent effects of a destituent form of life” drives interpretation into “a vertiginous katabasis,” Dubilet writes, whose Black beginning in “anarchic destitution” deranges modern order and orientation, as it fights revolutionary and historiographic temporalizing that retroactively encloses and forecloses its own impossibility.

Anthony Paul Farley’s “Bread and Roses” follows dream-logic, instead of dialectical logic, and returns us to our original questions. Formal freedom is conjured as a dream, the dream of law, renewed through repetitions that tell us who owns what and why. Farley’s free associations on bread and roses, necessity and contingency, worm their way through political theology and political economy to refract the refrain “capitalism is slavery.” While slavery and capitalism, in Farley’s writing, seem to share the same source, the story is more “constellated” through features of race than a Marxist differential unity admits, unless, that is, we also reckon with the imaginations doing the constellating. A dialectical reading might see Farley arguing race to be a second-order compensation that divides revolutionary unity and cuts off shared access to the garden. A constellating view might pry open enough discontinuities to reconfigure a more capacious ecology. But formal freedom and equality don’t simply cover the loss of “abundance”; the “trauma” of originary accumulation, in Farley’s psychoanalytic swerve, is also “beyond comprehension,” its truth gleaned, but not revealed, through violent repetition. As with Trafford, Farley’s singular attention to “white-over-black” positions race as a fetish that persists despite its unreality. In its remixing of Marxist, biblical, poetic, and popular culture lexicons, and in playing with the prophetic, Farley’s focus on violence and death and his theorization of the “spectacle of race” as, citing Guy Debord, “a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself” point us to the problem of anti-blackness in the “navel of the dream” of communism. The repetition of “white-over-black to white-over-black to white-over-black” across his writing is an expression of an antagonism whose durability across socio-historical context confounds method and of his own reckoning that “one cannot argue with a fetishist, one cannot argue as a fetish object.” The fetish of freedom ensures Hegel’s flowers and Marx’s roses can never be black.

If political theology questions acts of revelation, and if political economy grounds this revelation in reflexive mediation, the articles gathered here exemplify how thinking about

political theology, capitalism, and slavery along the thematic of “revolution” does more than turn Marx on his head. Critical black studies demands a third option: the impossibility of the slave, whose “spaghettification” of space and time bursts forth with human possibility and freedom.⁵³ What is impossible for theory remains non-identical to what is impossible for politics.⁵⁴ In the language of leaps not revolutions, neither the invisible being made visible nor possibility actualizing itself, what cannot be found, in neither necessity or freedom, bread or roses, major or minor revolutions, is what Dubilet’s reading of a “poverty of common abundance” calls the “impossible-yet-real.” Insofar as political theology marks the space of Christianity and its renewal, critical theory tends toward freedom and its renewal. While “communism,” Sankar observes, is “the full bloom of what begins first with slavery as its seed,” the Marxist telos misapprehends the speed and position of its wayward and destituent emergences. Echoing Sankar’s plea for a telos without teleology, Farley likens his form of freedom to a “wild rose”; for even though beholden to identity (“A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”), roses constellate Thomas Jefferson, the crucifixion, communism, Ancient Roman ritual, May Day, scripture, Robert Frost, and we can witness seeds as surprises rather than “dead repetitions of the same flower.” When Farley repeats the identity “capitalism is slavery,” then, we now have a fuller sense of its meaning. Like Fanon, who sought to “stretch” Marxism, and like Wynter, who proposed finding “the secret of capitalism ... not in the factory but in the plantation,” Farley leaps beyond his frame.⁵⁵

If Italian varieties of wild rose have proved too vitalist, as Dubilet and Barchiesi each caution, the black studies ones will always appear moribund. For if the specter is a fugitive, it is not a specter that will, with adequate reflexivity, find its way to revolution. Revolution invites reflexive redemption, with freedom as its fetish, and the “landless inhabitation of selfless existence” of black politics cannot, in this world, be redeemed.⁵⁶ Wild roses grow and, in so growing, thorns and black spot and pests may linger. These growths may, indeed, prove to be, as in Aimé Césaire’s poetic rendering of the end of the world, “venomous flowers flaring in fury-filled prairies.”⁵⁷ Whether this rewilding is better or worse than so-called native ecology is only for God to say.

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⁵³On spaghettification, see Murillo, *Impossible Stories*, Chapter two.

⁵⁴See Wilderson’s reading of the “two trains” of radical theoretical orientation and reformist politics running “side-by-side” in “Inside-Outside,” 18.

⁵⁵Fanon, *Black Skin*, 40; Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis*, 582.

⁵⁶Sexton, “Vel,” 109.

⁵⁷Césaire, *Notebook*, 22; Brady, “Cosmic Love,” 107–16.

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Freedom as Fetish

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ABSTRACT

Recent Marxist political theory has foregrounded freedom as normative commitment. This paper re-stages the break between slavery and capitalism through which slavery's natural bondage is supposedly superseded by the compulsions of market dependency. Capitalist social practices depend upon our freedom whilst inculcating a system in which domination and freedom are interdependent. But this interdependence leads to a double-bind: if freedom is reducible to social practices, we acquiesce to unfreedom; if not, we appeal to an ahistorical essence. I consider whether the double-bind can be diffused by exploring freedom's fetish character as a *real* phenomenon enacted in practice because we are implicated in the commodity as both free and passive object to be exchanged. But I suggest that slavery is not then excisable but remains as fetish character *internal* to the freedom of the worker as presupposition: freedom for the worker is guaranteed by the practical enactment of slavery's impossible negation.

KEYWORDS

Marxism; political theory; capitalism; slavery; freedom; fetish; Lukács; Afropessimism

[...] the worker, who is denied the scope for such illusory activity, perceives the split in his being preserved in the brutal form of what is in its whole tendency a slave without limits. — György Lukács

[...] the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even [...] No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on). — Jared Sexton

Capitalism as slavery's universality

György Lukács argued that, in contrast to the slave, the worker is transformed by capitalist production by being “forced to objectify [their] labour-power over against [their] total personality and to sell it as a commodity.”¹ Marking-out the specificity of this transformation puts focus on capitalism's reliance on, and inducement of, a form of freedom even in our “compulsion to objectify [ourselves] as a commodity.”² Recent Marxist theory builds on this duality of freedom and compulsion bringing renewed attention to freedom as normative commitment. Acknowledging Marx's debt to Enlightenment thought,

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¹Lukács, György. (1968). *History and Class Consciousness*. Livingstone, Rodney (trans.), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 168.

²Lukács, *History*, 169.

Werner Bonefeld, for example, suggests that “human history would begin once social relations existed in which humanity would no longer be held in bondage as a living means for the accumulation of capitalist wealth, but in which humanity would be a purpose, an end in itself.”³ In this light, perhaps, as William Clare Roberts suggests,

The principled commitments of socialism, according to Marx, are not to equality and community, but to freedom – conceived as non-domination – and to the association that secures and expresses this freedom.⁴

Implicit here is an articulation of freedom as both contingent and real. Freedom as both norm and practice is rooted in specific social contexts, and so any commitment to freedom cannot have recourse to ahistorical essence or romantic humanism.⁵ Our collective self-determination is differentially actualized across the unfolding of specifically instantiated forms of life, and in our immanent capacity for their transformation.

Woven-in to this intervention is the claim that capitalist social practices depend upon our freedom whilst also producing the conditions of our unfreedom as a self-reproducing system of domination. Freedom under capitalism is not illusory – it is a real form of life actively required by market transactions to willingly sell our labor-power rather it being taken by force. The thought is that, whilst our social forms are produced by (and reflexively determinative of) our free activity, these forms nonetheless instantiate “economic compulsion” (Bonefeld); impersonal domination (Moishe Postone; Roberts), “alien autonomy” (Lukács) “mute compulsion” (Søren Mau) or “invisible threads” (Marx) rather than the *personal* chains of slavery.

Elaborating the role played by freedom in these interventions, I want to re-stage the break between slavery and capitalism through which slavery is abstracted and universalized in capital’s impersonal domination. This re-staging is made thinkable in following Afro-pessimism’s engagement with racial slavery as calibrating the possibility of freedom by indexing the nexus of total incapacity and totalized power.⁶ By unfolding the aporia’s generated by racial slavery Afro-pessimism allows us to make explicit the machinery through which Marxist thought is able to articulate how slavery’s “natural” bondage is supposedly superseded by the compulsions of market dependency. According to the Marxist account, this compulsion is an abstracted and “perfect[ed] slavery,” which returns in the form of universal subjugation in a “world without masters.”⁷ Indirect and impersonal relations of power are supposed to override and displace slavery’s unmediated violences through the fetish character of capital’s “real appearance as self-valorizing value.”⁸ Where the slave is characterized as subject to external determination by arbitrary force, capitalism’s formal freedoms hold within them the latent capacity for

³Bonefeld, Werner. (2023) *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion: Wealth, Suffering, Negation*, New York: Routledge, 1.

⁴Roberts, William Clare. (2017). *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory Of Capital*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 241.

⁵Only because there is no transhistorical human essence is capitalism possible as contingent social form, see Mau, Søren. (2023). *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. London: Verso.

⁶For an indicative example of Afro-pessimism, see Wilderson III, Frank. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); for discussion of its centring of incapacity and capacitation, see Sorentino, Sara-Maria. “Abolish the *Oikos*: Notes on Incapacity from Antiquity to Marxist Feminism, Black Feminism, and Afro-pessimism”. *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 32, no. 1 (2023): 199–243.

⁷Roberts, *Marx’s*, 133, n.141.

⁸Best, Beverley. (2024). *The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx’s Capital*. London: Verso, 48 (in epub version).

the actualization of the “possibility of a free life,” which as Mau suggests is “known as communism.”⁹

Afro-pessimism moves us to attend, not to this supposed supercession of racial slavery, but rather to how the “law of racial slavery is pervasive, regardless of variance or permutation in its operation across the better part of a millennium.”¹⁰ If racial slavery is required for the duality of freedom and compulsion to coalesce in the “figure of the self-possessed,”¹¹ this threatens to scupper any dialectical resolution of Marxism’s double-bind. That is, without appeal to an ideal version of human autonomy, Marxist freedom is caught in a dilemma: if our potential for emancipation is reducible to actual social practices there seems to be no surplus capacity available to realize that potential; if it is not reducible we risk the return to essentialism by positing some form of human capacity that transcends its specific instantiation.

In what follows, I begin by first articulating how the *real* interrelationships between freedom and compulsion lead to this double-bind. I then decompose two possible responses. The first, emphasizing norms, attempts to rescue freedom without appeal to ahistorical essence, suggesting that we can divine freedom’s logic as immanent but not reducible to capitalist social relations. This, however, pushes the problem downwards by requiring appeal to normative criteria to discern where that logic begins and where capitalism’s compulsions end. Without this we risk simply extracting from contingent social conditions a normative commitment that conceals the character of the social form through which that norm is constituted.

The second, emphasizing practice, appeals to determinate social practices to immanently ground a normative commitment to freedom. The problem of labor-power as commodity is that workers “must share the same physical body with their own commodities,”¹² as Nicole Pepperell writes, and so we are necessarily implicated in the commodity as both free (to sell our labor-power) *and* passive object to be exchanged (in our labor-power). This split in the being of the worker, as Lukács suggests, preserves “what is in its whole tendency a slavery without limits,”¹³ and without which, passivity could be totalized and freedom impossible. But then freedom cannot be grounded in our practices since it is written-in as a practical constraint on practice itself. Unless we are prepared to write-in a metaphysics of human autonomy, freedom for the worker would seem guaranteed only insofar as we are not the sort of being that could ever be or have been enslaved.

I end by considering how the articulation of a freedom that cannot recognize its own self-positing indexes a fetish character that coagulates across specific sociohistorical contexts. Insofar as freedom is a *real* social relation, it seems that capitalist social forms are made possible insofar as *racial* slavery can be contained and definitively negated, whilst this (im)possibility requires its violent repetition. So, my question in what follows is, if it is a fetish-relation that recapitulates slavery in its supposed negation, why would freedom emerge as a normative commitment at all?¹⁴

⁹Mau, *Mute*, 325.

¹⁰Sexton, J. (2010) People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery. *Social Text* 28(2): 31–56, 36–7.

¹¹Hartman, *Scenes*, 123.

¹²Pepperell, Nicole. (2010) *Disassembling Capital*, Doctoral Thesis, 150.

¹³Lukács, *History*, 166.

¹⁴ attempt to exacerbate the “speculative overcorrective” identified by Sara-Maria Sorentino that draws us along a trajectory to question – not how capitalism came to be grafted-on to slavery and its afterlives – but to analyse “capitalism

The real interdependence of freedom and compulsion

Notwithstanding their significant divergences and emphases, the work I am interested in orbits around the claim that capitalism induces the “emergence of a social relation of mediated/indirect coercion, characteristic of wage labour.”¹⁵ Both the historical supersession and logical *inversion* of slavery is required for the universalization of this social relation through wage labor as the “continuity of domination in general and an inversion of its specific mechanism.”¹⁶ This articulation of capitalism’s transformation of labor as no longer “mediated by social relations but, rather, constitutes itself as a social mediation,”¹⁷ as Postone puts it, is ultimately traceable to Marx’s notion of double-freedom:

[the] worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e., he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization of his labour-power.¹⁸

Here, workers must become their own masters insofar as capitalism requires their formal freedom and equality to dispose their own labor-power as commodity:

In order that its possessor may sell it as a commodity, he must have it at his disposal, he must be the free proprietor of his own labour-power, hence of his person. He and the owner of money meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities, with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both are therefore equal in the eyes of the law.¹⁹

This initial equality and freedom to dispose of our labor-power leads us to become entwined with processes that dominate and exploit us. We are compelled to dispose our labor-power for the sake of our own reproduction, and this “endeavour to make a living furnishes society as a compelling abstraction with an independent consciousness and a will.”²⁰ Whilst the common value of human labor-power is the precondition for commodity exchange, this makes possible the characteristic form of capitalist violence as *impersonal* domination – “the domination of people by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute.”²¹ Through this process, as Marx put it, “the mute compulsion of economic relations seals the domination of the capitalist over the worker.”²²

This impersonal domination presupposes freedom and equality, since it is “solely through market transactions that capitalist exploitation can occur.”²³ On Mau’s reading we impose the rule of capital upon each other through reciprocal compulsion, and so we are dominated through our compulsion to reproduce the strictures that dominate us. Through our labor-power we become interwoven with the power of capital:

as a component of slavery” Sorentino, Sara-Maria. (2022). “Expecting Blows: Sylvia Wynter, Sociogeny, and Exceeding Marxist Social Form”. *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*, Vol.1:2, 25.

¹⁵Best, Beverley. (2023) “Marx’s Critical Theory of Slavery”. *Historical Materialism*. 10.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷Postone, Moishe. (1996). *Time, Labour & Social Domination*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, p123.

¹⁸Marx, Karl. (1990). *Capital*, Volume 1, translated by Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin, 272–3.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 271–272.

²⁰Bonefeld, *Critical*, 3.

²¹Postone, *Time*, 30. See also Mau, *Mute*, 191; Best, *Marx’s*, 5.

²²Marx, *Capital*. 272.

²³Abazari, Arash. (2020). *Hegel’s Ontology of Power: The Structure of Social Domination in Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 42.

The fact that parts of the human body can be concentrated as property in the hands of other members of the species has the consequence that power can weave itself into the very fabric of the human metabolism. Instead of attaching itself externally to the metabolism and violently pumping out surplus labour like a leech, the dominant part in a power relation can inject itself into the heart of social reproduction.²⁴

Then, as Mau writes, “not only does the capitalist market rely on relations of domination, it is itself nothing but a form of domination.”²⁵

Capital is, for Mau, an emergent property of our social relations that becomes fixed through social practices whilst becoming reciprocally unresponsive to activities seeking to unmake it. Pepperell articulates the mechanics of such compulsion within the entire complex aggregate of social processes and practices to explain how our free actions give rise to dominating social relations:²⁶

[...] social actors “relate” to one another by enacting complex macrosociological patterns that they are not attempting to produce, and are not aware of producing, and so confront as patterns that have arisen spontaneously, beyond human control.²⁷

Our normative concepts – such as freedom – are posited by the collective practices that create them, whilst then coming to “exert a determining force on activity going forward, expressing the objectivity of its now systemic character.”²⁸ The emergent patterns of social behavior manifest as a tendency that becomes entrenched and naturalized (in the appearance of necessity) as social form where the social practices that are in turn sculpted by it become essential for our forms of life.

But, as such, the fetish character of the commodification of labor-power is a “form of social interdependence that is genuinely – not illusorily – impersonal,” as Pepperell suggests.²⁹ Our domination by impersonal social structures is explicable by their starting to work “as if they were natural ones, with a sort of *sui generis* causality.”³⁰ There is a causal retroaction of social practices through which social form will “turn upon us and dominate and subjugate us,” where that form is the complex and spontaneous effect of all of our social practices (rather than only labor).³¹ Since there is no immediately obvious mechanism through which our social practices generate social form, the latter is able to *appear* objective and even necessary.³²

This retroactive and recursive production of social form through aggregate social practices allows us to articulate the “reality” of the fetish relation.³³ Since norms are emergent from social practices and relations, and fetishism concerns social relations,

²⁴Mau, *Mute*, 115.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 190–1.

²⁶I do not attempt to account for distinctions between these approaches, preferring to draw together their convergences. My intent is to take the strongest version of the thesis via Pepperell’s approach, which can deal with tensions between totalisation and specificity that others are particularly concerned to avoid.

²⁷Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 96.

²⁸Best, *Marx’s*, 5.

²⁹Pepperell, Nicole (2018). “Beyond Reification: Reclaiming Marx’s Concept of the Fetish Character of the Commodity”. *Contradictions: A Journal for Critical Thought* Vol. 2(2): p33–55, 33.

³⁰Testa, Italo. (2020). “Spirit and Alienation in Brandom’s “A Spirit of Trust”: Entfremdung, Entaeusserung, and the causal entropy of normativity”. *Reading Brandom’s On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. London: Routledge, 140–165, 160.

³¹*Ibid.* 153.

³²Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 105.

³³*Ibid.*, p118.

any immanent critique would seem required not to unveil and disarticulate ideological appearance from those relations, but rather to articulate the generative conditions of appearances. As such, we ought to be interested in working through the sort of social conditions and practices that are presupposed through our implicit assent to those norms that are themselves implicit in the social forms we are considering. Complex patterns are not reflected at the level of “appearance” because they cannot be observed in examining *specific* social practices. However, we might yet consider emergent tendencies and patterns, where those patterns are both objective (in the sense that they are not reducible to specific social origins) and subjective (in the sense that they result from nothing other than social practices). Moreover, we can start to explain the “reality” of phenomenal experience without posing a contradiction between reality and appearance, nor of a “warping” of reality through the mediation of our relations (thus fetishizing immediacy).

Reality and appearance are thus conjoined whilst disarticulated – the “real” here is enfolded within, and inextricable from, our social practices *including* the way that they appear to us. So, for example, where Arash Abazari suggests that capitalism cannot exist “without the belief of people that they are free and equal,”³⁴ this belief is not an ideological veil or illusion because it is emergent through our social practices, whilst we recursively act on the basis of our freedom. Freedom is rather practiced as a *real* form of life entangled with domination through “the impersonal compulsion of market dependency.”³⁵ In this sense, this “system of abstract, impersonal domination,”³⁶ is, as Sara-Maria Sorentino describes, “formative of capitalism’s social mode of mediation itself and the key to commodity fetishism.”³⁷

For this reason, we might think of the fetish character of the commodity as an objective characteristic of social relations *insofar* as they coalesce into relations of domination. In fact, as Roberts puts it, fetishism is a real relation that *just is* “the impersonal domination suffered by members of commercial society.”³⁸ The seeming contradiction in which capitalism depends upon our freedom whilst generating our unfreedom would thereby be understood as a marker of the autopoietic structure of our social form – wherein “capital is a self-maintaining and self-reproducing social system that is able to generate (‘posits’) its necessary presupposition.”³⁹

From double-freedom to double-bind

Whilst felt differently than the worker, free competition and markets also bind the capitalist into relations of domination. The worker, required to valorize capital for their own reproduction, is subject to its impersonal power, whilst the capitalist is dominated through the coercion of competition itself. Thus capitalism’s social forms are, for Marx, “the most complete subjection of individuality under social conditions which assume the form of objective powers, even of overpowering objects of things independent

³⁴Abazari, *Hegel’s*, 18.

³⁵Roberts, *Marx’s*, 201.

³⁶Postone, *Time*, 125.

³⁷Sorentino, Sara-Maria. (2019). “The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx’s Method.” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 96, 17–37, 23.

³⁸Roberts, *Marx’s*, 85.

³⁹Abazari, *Hegel’s*, 42. But see Banaji, Jairus. (2010). *Theory as history. Essays on modes of production and exploitation* Leiden and Boston, 137 for why we might tread carefully with the use of the term unfreedom.

of the relations among individuals themselves.”⁴⁰ The subjection of social life to the imperatives of value ensures that capitalism’s form of life constitutes a “commensurated inequality.”⁴¹ As detailed above, this unequal commensuration is embedded within specific practices and norms of freedom and equality required for capitalism to function as a system of mastery without masters. In distinction, for contexts in which Aristotle marked-out *natural* slavery, those people with freedom (citizens) were presupposed to have the capacity for self-rule. Freedom could then be understood as a trait of citizens that was grounded in a relation of mastery within the household (including rule over slaves), which then “eased tensions among different economic strata of the free population.”⁴² That is, natural slavery upheld the capacity for commensurated inequality but *only* for the subset of people engaged in mastery.

The endurance of mastery in a “world without masters” requires this commensurated inequality to be universalized because everything becomes mediated by capitalist relations of production.⁴³ Mastery – as with sovereignty – is supposedly displaced by “capitalist relations of power,” since otherwise we would be left with an “abstract, essentialist, and ahistorical conception” conception of power and freedom.⁴⁴ The concentration of power within a master or sovereign purportedly abstracts away from the concrete form of capitalist production, whilst mistakenly articulating that power as *self-positing*: “as something which stands above society, something that is based only on itself.”⁴⁵ This is to say, sovereignty (or mastery) and slavery must have already been dissolved by the force of capital since “we” are all required to (re)produce the social systems that dominate us (albeit unequally).⁴⁶

In part because we are no longer allowed this appeal to transcendence (sovereignty or mastery) to explain our domination, we are led toward a problem in which any normative commitment to freedom appears to be both reduced to its sociohistorical realization *and* to reach beyond it. The difficulty in holding both of the two above commitments is that (a) our social practices and norms are interdependent, contingent, and real; (b) freedom is not an unrealized capacity or ahistorical essence in excess of its current sociohistorical realization. Since our social practices generate social norms (and institutions), and our practices are generated by them in turn, unless this operation itself also generates a functional surplus capacity (that is, a capacity that is not only undetermined, but impossible to determine *within that social form*), we could not move beyond a homeostasis in without the capacity for social transformation. But, as Tatiana Llaguno succinctly poses this problem, we seem to be left with a situation in which:

⁴⁰Marx, Karl. (1993). *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 652.

⁴¹Drumm, Colin. (2021). *The Difference That Money Makes: Sovereignty, Indecision, and the Politics Of Liquidity*. Doctoral Thesis, 488.. See also Mau, *Mute*, 151. On the Aristotelean roots of commensuration in Marx’s work, see Espeland, Wendy Nelson, and Mitchell L. Stevens. (1998). “Commensuration as a Social Process.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, 313–43.

⁴²Nyquist, Mary (2013). *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 24.

⁴³Mau, *Mute*, 150.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 147–8. See also Roberts, *Marx’s*, 132–3.

⁴⁵Marx, Karl. (1974). *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader, Van Gorcum, 329f.

⁴⁶For discussion of expansionist approaches that attempt to enfold slavery within capitalism as exception to the latter, see Sorentino, *Abstract*.

[...] we are the creators of our social relations and hold the power to transform them; yet, at one and the same time, we are objectively dominated by them and structurally impeded to change them.⁴⁷

The double-bind that results is this: if freedom is reducible to our actual social practices then it looks as though we must simply acquiesce to unfreedom since there can be no surplus capacity to realize our own emancipation; if freedom is not reducible then it looks as though we must appeal to an ahistorical essence in which freedom must transcend its actual instantiation. I want to explore two (complementary) ways of potentially avoiding this double-bind, broadly emphasizing norms and practices of freedom respectively.

Reading-away compulsion, writing-in freedom

We might seek to rescue a normative commitment to freedom – even whilst that commitment is ostensibly reducible to contingent social practices – by articulating a normative core that can be extracted from compulsion. This is difficult because we have abjured appeals to self-intimation whilst also requiring that our normative categories are norms of *actual* social relations. It would seem that there can be no such normative core to discover (or unveil) since our practices *as a whole* give rise to normative categories. This is to say, the objective fetish character inherent in the structure of the capitalist economy is *practically* constituted, and capitalist power is completely interwoven with our social practices.

Perhaps the supposition of a normative core could rely on the more minimal claim that our social practices and relations are in some sense defective because the social form is no longer appropriately responsive to practices. This need not articulate double-freedom as the *suppression* of our freedom under capitalist social forms, instead emphasizing the vitiation of that initial freedom as an “inner ideal that is regarded as somehow essential and necessary to the very practices that deviate from it.”⁴⁸ This defectiveness could be handled by appeal to the structure of sociality, with the question of freedom then interwoven with the way our relationships are given shape by capitalism’s social forms. However, with attention thus shifted toward the structure of our common social form, we will then tend to treat capital “as an independent causal force, which imposes its own pattern onto underlying social practices.”⁴⁹ Formulating both how our practices are defective (such that we are dominated), and also how our social relations may be re-formed to better sustain our free activity, then seeks to articulate the internal and yet “quasi-autonomous” logic of this pattern of imposition.⁵⁰

Bonefeld considers this focus on the “categorical character of the capitalist political economy to understand the logic that holds sway in it,” suggesting that the determination of an internal logic as an analytic core is like an “Hegelian idea imposed on reality.”⁵¹ We can clarify this point by drawing attention to how the search for an internal logic has

⁴⁷Llaguno, Tatiana (2024). “Alienated Dependence: The Unfreedom of our Social Relations”. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 12.

⁴⁸Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 7.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁰Postone, *Time*, 14. Whilst arguing against Postone, Mau arguably repeats this position in repeatedly suggesting that “capital manages to hold on to its status as the social logic everyone has to obey in order to live” (*Mute*, 11).

⁵¹Bonefeld, *Critical*, 8–9.

available, as its analytical material, only the actual social practices that we have to hand. But, famously, any attempt to “read-off” an implicit logic from regularities in social practices runs into gerrymandering problems – we can force any finite set of practices to conform to infinitely many rules. Moreover, any practice judged to be “defective” according to those rules can equally be made to cohere with some other rule or other. So, the idea that we could read-off a set of rules from practices would seem to end-up with our writing-away all those occasions in which we do not act according to the rules that are supposedly implicit in our practices. As Robert Brandom writes, “there simply is no such thing as *the* pattern or regularity exhibited by a stretch of past behavior, which can be appealed to in judging some candidate bit of future behavior as regular or irregular, and hence, on this line, as correct or incorrect.”⁵² There is no way to make sense of what is the same among performances of a practice, or how that could be maintained across iterations of that practice, let alone determine its internal logic. The attempt to distinguish between practices that are defective from those that are not would then quickly break down. Making any such distinction then involves judging our social relations by normative claims whilst supposedly making explicit an immanent logic through which those norms could be better realized.

This approach cannot rescue us from the problem of identifying the normative with those regularities that are instituted in our actual social practices. Without appeal to transcendent categories (such as sovereignty and mastery) or transhistorical essence, we are left with the problem that our social practices are interwoven with the capitalist social forms that give them shape, and so which we unwittingly consolidate. How, given this interrelationship, could we follow Ray Brassier’s suggestion that we need:

[...] to discriminate those institutions, customs, or norms to which we are subjected and which have become mechanically compulsive for us, from those through which we are able to exercise our free conscious activity?⁵³

This disentangling of genuine norms from compulsions becomes particularly intractable for Marxist political thought insofar as it is committed to an account of the naturalization of social institutions. Since the reification of social institutions functions to consolidate and conceal the exercise of their power over us, the possibility of determining where that subjection ends and our freedom begins would seem to *already* rely on an implicit ontological distinction between freedom and compulsion.

Arguably we find this latter reliance in Mau’s (via Althusser) rejection of any vestige of romanticism in early Marx, combined with an emphasis on a “radical split between life and its conditions.”⁵⁴ The suggestion is that whilst grounded in their corporeal (natural) existence, human beings are “caught up in a web of social relations mediating their access to the conditions of their reproduction.”⁵⁵ This social relation to nature and our bodies is the basis of capital’s power insofar as it mediates between our sociality and our dependence on nature. Both labor and nature (and so presumably life) thus take on an “ineradicable autonomy,” for Mau, as obstacles against which “capital has struggled for

⁵²Brandom, Robert. (1994). *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 28.

⁵³Brassier, Ray. (2019). “Strange Sameness: Hegel, Marx and The Logic Of Estrangement”. *Angelaki*, Vol.24:1, 102.

⁵⁴Mau, *Mute*, 130.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 100.

centuries.”⁵⁶ Marking-out labor as irreducible to any specific social organization to “express features that material production would possess for any human community”⁵⁷ affords it the status of an externality that could ground the distinction between human and nature.

However, in placing this externality beyond social and political contestation, Mau is then faced with two equally undesirable options. If Mau insists on “refusing the possibility of a transcendent anchor for the critique of capital,”⁵⁸ then this externality looks like a metaphysical conjecture that spins in a void unconnected from the social mediation it supposedly makes possible. If it were to provide an anchor for critique, then it *either* relies on the kind of self-positing excess that Mau finds objectionable, *or* it is not extricable from social practices and political contestation and so cannot ground our normative commitments any more than any other socially mediated category.

Against his protestation to the contrary, Mau then appears guilty of relying on what Pepperell describes as a “socially-transcendent material perspective that is posited as intrinsically irreducible to any particular society, and therefore seen to provide a firm ontological anchor for critical distance from any specific social form.”⁵⁹ The issue, Pepperell suggests, is that any ontological distinction between material and social realms belies the fact that both are historically specific and their division socially inscribed. Ultimately, labor, nature, sociality, and life function as *a priori* categories that both repress and presuppose their own conceptualization. Then, as Bonefeld suggests more generally, we effectively write-in those categories whilst “unwittingly serv[ing] to conceal their character.”⁶⁰

For instance, in making the cleavage between human and nature a condition of the possibility of capitalism, Mau writes-in a minimal ontology of human autonomy as the explanatory ground that could give rise to a normative account of freedom. This is to say, autonomy is required to play a foundational and irreducible epistemic role. Moreover, this ontology makes possible the basic critique of capitalism as depriving “people of control over their lives.”⁶¹ But this assumes the basic frame of European humanism – in marking-out the capacity for self-determination against extrinsic force – whilst not unpacking how this frame determines the conditions of Mau’s own thought. If we want to explain freedom as normative commitment, we should refrain from writing-in a specific conception of freedom to a basic ontology that is supposed to be secure from critique and contestation.⁶²

The assumption of this basic ontology is necessary for Mau’s account because capitalism is not supposed to just “prevent the worker from following their will” but rather, since our will is not transparent to us, capitalism also “facilitates a certain way in which they can actually follow that will.”⁶³ Without appeal to transhistorical autonomy,

⁵⁶Ibid., 254; 294.

⁵⁷Ibid., 41.

⁵⁸Ibid., 118.

⁵⁹Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 42.

⁶⁰Bonefeld, *Critical*, 12.

⁶¹Mau, *Mute*, 24.

⁶²It should be noted that there is reason to think that, whilst this is the case for Mau, it is not true of Marx (thanks to Sara-Maria Sorentino for this point).

⁶³Mau, *Mute*, 134.

our capacity to “extract reasons from causes,”⁶⁴ would unravel into scepticism that again enfolds us in the double-bind. Transcendence thus reappears in a faith in the possibility of delineating where norms begin and compulsions end. This faith is, moreover, grounded in an ontological exterior that is necessarily insulated from political contestation, and so cannot ground normative freedom without writing-in those norms to their own ground (so consolidating their fetish character). Deprived of this, however, we are left, on this account of freedom, without an ability to determine the point at which our free activity ends, and domination begins – and so, how could we ever know that our freedom is our own?

A split within the subjectivity of the worker

We are returned by this line of thought to Lukács’ problem with which we began. Capitalism requires there to be a gap between the commodity and the subject, but it also requires our labor-power to be a commodity since it is exchangeable on the market. The sale of labor-power as a commodity transforms part of my self into an object that is subject to determination by forces that appear to be both external and objective. As such “we” become a commodity, but we cannot be “swallowed-up” by the commodity since then the gap between the commodity and subject would collapse and we would be slaves. There is a seemingly ontological divide, then, between material and social – nature and human – made necessary to distinguish freedom from determination so that capitalism can function as a system of commensurated inequality rather than an adjunct to slavery.

The above line of argument requires that this divide cannot be written in, however, since our normative standards contingently arise through ordinary social practices. Our attention should be focused on the practical generation of seemingly ontological categories, neither as unassailable nor as epistemically veiled, but rather as the entrenched outcome of determinate and contingent interactions. We can unpack this a little by considering Marx’s famous passage:

If commodities could speak they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.⁶⁵

Superficially this might be interpreted as recapitulating the requirement that commodities are given value by us (through their exchange on the market) since if commodities had value independent of exchange then they would be persons since the only kind of thing that can have value in itself is a person. This reading suggests that commodities cannot speak, so the passage is a kind of counterfactual *reductio*, because the commodity is a mere “thing.” This seems to be confirmed by Marx:

Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities. Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Brassier, *Strange*, 112..

⁶⁵Marx, *Capital*, 175.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p178.

The problem with this reading is that labor-power “possesses a human form,”⁶⁷ and so the distinction between commodity and subject must be internalized within the practices of the human subject itself. As Pepperell suggests, since workers “must share the same physical body with their own commodities,”⁶⁸ there is no physical separation between commodity and owner and so Marx’s analysis of the commodity’s externality seemingly breaks down.⁶⁹ Marx is of course aware of this, suggesting that capitalism’s continuation requires instead that:

[...] the proprietor of the labour-power must always sell it for a limited period only, for if he were to sell it in a lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity.⁷⁰

But, now we are returned to the problem of marking out the distinction between capitalism and slavery by means of the freedom and equality required for capitalism to function. There is a kind of syllogism at work here: commodities are the sort of thing that are externally determined (and so can be neither persons nor free); our labor-power is a commodity since it is exchangeable on the market; we are persons and therefore we cannot be reducible to our labor-power. However, the distinction between commodity and subject then looks as though it is simply written-in by the requirement that labor becomes a commodity, with the free capacity to separate one’s self from one’s labor thus enabling the distinction between labor and slavery:

The capitalist epoch is therefore characterized by the fact that labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property; his labour consequently takes the form of wage-labour. On the other hand, it is only from this moment that the commodity-form of the products of labour becomes universal.⁷¹

But, whilst it looks as though we are again granted only a circular account of the inextricability of capitalism and freedom, there is an important sense in which Marx is focused on how part of my self being carved-off as potential labor-power emerges as a specific ongoing *practical* requirement.

For example, as Pepperell suggests, Marx quickly appears to undermine the idea that commodities are passive, by suggesting that if “they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them.”⁷² So, on the one hand the commodity is an external thing that can be objectified as a matter of its owner’s will, and if it resists the owner may possess it by force; on the other, commodity owners are to treat one another as fellow subjects who cannot be engaged instrumentally.⁷³ The seeming contradiction, Pepperell argues, requires a specific enactment of self in which our own labor power must be treated as our own property:

Sellers must, in other words, sunder themselves in two – with part of the self stepping forward to operate as an active agent – a commodity owner while another part of the self is positioned as the passively represented object that is the subject of the sale [...]

⁶⁷Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 120.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 249.

⁷⁰Marx, *Capital*, 271–72. See also Roberts, *Marx’s*, 139.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 274n4.

⁷²Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 178.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 147.

enacted just as other commodities are: treated in collective practice as a passive material object that is offered up for exchange. Since this passive material object inhabits the owner's own body, the owner enacts themselves as a split subject – as an active consciousness and will, conjoined with a passive material body – as a ghost in the machine.⁷⁴

This split in the being of the worker, building on Lukács suggestion, preserves “what is in its whole tendency a slavery without limits,” and without which, passivity could be totalized and freedom impossible. Moreover, it is only because of this split that is “induced in man by the compulsion to objectify himself as a commodity,” Lukács writes, that the worker “can be made conscious,” so gaining a foothold toward “objective structural change.”⁷⁵

So, now rather than being written-in as a transcendent or normative criteria, this distinction between freedom and determination is a socially specific and practical enactment of subjectivity “that splits off social characteristics first discovered in the interactions of material objects, from characteristics associated with the uncoerced mutual recognition of subjects.”⁷⁶ Since this repetition and practical articulation of the distinction between self and commodity can neither be assumed nor written-in as a normative commitment to freedom in distinction from determination, the latter must simply emerge through those social practice of splitting proper to capitalism. For this splitting to be practically enacted, the portion of my “self” open to determination must just be that part that is commodified as labor-power, in distinction from that part that is understood to be free. So, the strict ontological break between subject and commodity is rather a contingent social relation that may require us to “use force” to enact.

The convictions of freedom and equality are *done* prior to being *thought*. We perform ourselves as free and equal as an “historically-contingent enactment,”⁷⁷ that emerges through the complexity of practices involved in splitting ourselves into commodity owner and passive object. For example, Marx situates the distinction in the context of the practical requirement to recognize one another as owners:

Things are in themselves external to man, and therefore alienable. In order that this alienation may be reciprocal, it is only necessary for men to agree tacitly to treat each other as the private owners of those alienable things, and, precisely for that reason, as persons who are independent of each other.⁷⁸

The seeming ontological split between subject and commodity is here both dependent on and emergent through mutually validating (and so self-reinforcing) social practices. If explaining how freedom emerges cannot invoke an originary unity divided by capital (such as a human essence), then splitting must be a practice that happens *within* social relations that is concealed in the process of labor's commodification. Treating our labor-power as a commodity that can be split-off within our subjectivity is simply a practical attitude that is mutually validated within social relations.

The possibility of commensurated inequality (of mastery without masters) then requires us to constantly enact this splitting-off of our own self-mastery. Freedom as a

⁷⁴Ibid., 249.

⁷⁵Lukács, *History*, 168; 169.

⁷⁶Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 250.

⁷⁷Ibid., 259.

⁷⁸Marx, *Capital*, 182.

normative commitment may well be emergent through this antagonism but only insofar as freedom is practically enacted in the first place. As such, the repetition and externalization of this practical antagonism constitutes social form insofar as it ramifies across complex social processes to produce a system of dependence. It is through this practical enactment that the norm of freedom emerges even whilst our freedom is bound-up with compulsion – with capitalism therefore articulated “as a non-foundational system of social relations predicated upon and sustained by power.”⁷⁹

So, the attempt to cash-out freedom through practical enactment – without recourse to transhistorical essence, purified normative core, or practical ground – must be repeatedly and recursively produced through that same practical enactment. But if our initial freedom to sell our labor requires us to freely enact our split-subjectivity, then how could freedom emerge through those practices given that it appears to be their prerequisite? That is, freedom (as practice) is required for entry into the commensurated social co-ordination through which freedom (as normative commitment) is supposed to emerge. Freedom would need to be already inscribed within our social practices, acting as a kind of *practical* transcendental presupposition even whilst it is supposed only to emerge normatively through those same practical attitudes. For example, if freedom is to emerge as a normative commitment that could move us beyond its socio-historical instantiation, there must already exist *some sort of barrier* between freedom and determination even if this is practically enacted. Otherwise, there is always the possibility that we *could* be fully determined: there would be no gap between our selves and our commodities, and so freedom could never be emergent through our practices let alone coalesce into a norm that calls us beyond its capitalist form. We must assume the subject to have the capacity to enact the split between themselves and the slave (self and commodity) in order to enter the social relations at all. The subject must always already not be a slave.

Then, this account does not explain how freedom as a normative commitment emerges. Nor can it ensure that we do not acquiesce to capitalism, since we would seem left in the throes of a circularity that reads back from the fetish character of our norms into our practices. The latter are not only non-transparent to us, but they are also not even transparent *as* practices, rather appearing as naturalized categories. As such we are led back to positing a transhistorical essence to ensure that our practical enactment can in fact determine a distinction between freedom and domination *unless* we practically enact the guarantee that we are not slaves. Built-in to the split subjectivity of the worker is the requirement that we are not the sort of being that could ever be or have been enslaved. But, without recourse to transcendence beyond our practice this requirement can only be repeated within our practices, and so the distinction between the worker and the slave must be (re)constituted in every seemingly free act.

Freedom as the (real) fetish

The above line of thought suggests that the fetish character of freedom – as a real phenomenon that is enacted in practice – is constitutively obscured because of the way that we are “implicated in our object,” the commodity which thereby “possesses a

⁷⁹Brown, Nathan. (2021). *Rationalist Empiricism: A Theory of Speculative Critique*, New York: Fordham, 230.

human form.”⁸⁰ Our split subjectivity is thus enacted in a context where freedom and equality are *experienced* as entrenched and unassailable boundaries buttressed against capitalism’s vitiating force. Thinking about our social forms as inextricable from their contingent historical development, we should consider what is required of them for these boundaries to be so entrenched as to appear necessary. Since capitalism’s social forms are brought into being through our social practices (which are recursively given shape by them), the line of thought prompted by the double-bind suggests that the capitalist world is made possible insofar as it is both practically distanced, and necessarily negated, from slavery.

The slave is figured by Marx as labor-in-itself: the slave is a commodity in full, and so is determined completely from the outside. Capitalist value measures a social capacity in which the freedom of the worker to participate in exchange is “explicitly characterized against (as the dialectical negation of) the enslaved worker as ‘labouring machine.’”⁸¹ So, the free worker is free insofar as they are not fully determined, and so can split-off their own labor as a commodity that can be exchanged. We can split-off our labor insofar as we are not slaves; we are exploited insofar as we are not slaves; we are unequally commensurated insofar as we are not slaves.⁸² Whilst this “not” is so entrenched to appear as an ontological necessity, our generalized freedom (even insofar as it is bound-together with compulsion) is emergent as a practical capacity insofar as the negation of slavery is also iterated in practice.

This is a difficult pill to swallow, however, because the slave who provides capitalism with its negative ground must be abstract and contingent. Plantation slavery – even if it forms the “historical compost out of which the free worker emerges,” as Beverly Best puts it – can therefore only be understood as “anomalous” and contingent.⁸³ For instance, Best argues that “slavery as production relation must be eradicated for the capital fetish to emerge.”⁸⁴ But, if slavery is understood as *necessary* for this capitalist inversion, its racialization cannot be. Otherwise racialization would presumably also become built-in to capitalism’s social forms through its negation and so capitalism would be possible only insofar as race (or Blackness) is also negated. It is not clear, however, that race and slavery can be so easily torn asunder since the plantation-world, as Sylvia Wynter suggests, had already made natural slavery equivalent with Blackness. Nascent racial slavery was significant both for setting in motion plantation economies that formed infrastructures of colonial capitalism but also symbolically in marking out Blackness as:

[...] the liminal category whose mode of excluded *difference*, based on the hereditary slave status of its members as the only *legitimately enslaveable* population group, they would also generate the principle of similarity or of conspecificity that would come to bond, if on the terms of sharply unequal relations, the incoming Spanish settlers with the indigenous peoples.⁸⁵

⁸⁰Pepperell, *Disassembling*, 120.

⁸¹Best, *Marx's*, p18.

⁸²See Sorentino, *Abstract; Expecting*, and Garba, Tapji, (Unpublished). *Slavery as Social Form: A critical theory in outline*.

⁸³Best, *Marx's*, 24, 13.

⁸⁴Best, *Marx's*, 30.

⁸⁵Wynter, Sylvia. (1995). “1492: A new world view”. In V. L. Hyatt & R. Nettleford (Eds.), *Race, discourse, and the origin of the Americas: A new world view* (5–57). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 11.

Sorrentino, drawing on Wynter, thus directs attention away from the figure of the slave as “labouring machine” negated by the worker, and toward a *racial* slave negated by the human.

The reduction of slavery to the nadir of exploitation enacts what Jared Sexton calls the “dreadful elision of the permanent seizure of the body essential to enslavement.”⁸⁶ The racial slave is rather forced to index the “nullification of capacity,” which had long been “perfected in [natural slavery’s] collision with blackness.”⁸⁷ The slave is not a person transformed into a laboring machine, but a fungible thing that can be wasted, “a domestic animal that is determined solely by the will of the owner,” as Kant had earlier written.⁸⁸ Sorrentino thus suggests that the racial slave – as freedom’s seeming antithesis – represents the “inversion of human value.”⁸⁹ In Wynter’s language, the racial slave is thus the figure that commensurates all others in virtue of a negation from the category of the human – as those on the “right” side of the line between free and enslaved.

Putting this thought together with the above consideration of the practical basis of social form suggests that this inversion – the supposed negation of slavery – cannot be fulfilled since it provides the form of the social its coherence as well as requirement to maintain that negation. In a context of slavery’s fusion with Blackness, the formal abolition of the former (and not the latter) leaves Blackness as the condition required to naturalize distributions of power against the background of an incapacity of self-mastery.⁹⁰ The double-bind argument pushes us toward an approach to this negation as a practical project that is both ongoing and without foundation, and so requires us to repeat the violences through which it is constituted. This negation, to follow Sorrentino, thus “falters in the face of the continued compulsive brutality of anti-black violence.”⁹¹ In fact, without this practical project, the worker would be left without the necessary surplus capacity – which is *written-up* as freedom – that provides the guarantee inherent within commensuration and so also the condition of possibility for the capacity to produce surplus value. But, as such, anti-blackness, and more specifically anti-black violence, is required to maintain the supposedly unassailable line between human and slave; subject and commodity; free and determined.

This is to say, if the distinction with slavery is inscribed in all our practical actions such that they can be considered free, then freedom cannot be immune to the fetish relation that it is supposed to ground through the structures of impersonal domination. Perhaps for this reason we are driven toward freedom’s transcendence such that our capacity to overcome capitalism’s social forms inevitably recapitulates our condition. But, insofar as capitalism would then seem to require slavery – reproducing the figure of the slave in a practical negation that cannot be negated – slavery is routed across social form, and

⁸⁶Sexton, Jared. (2016). “The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign”. *Critical Sociology*, 42(4–5), 583–97, 586.

⁸⁷Sorrentino, *Abolish*, 209.

⁸⁸Kant, Immanuel. (2016). “Reflections on the Philosophy of Right”. In *Lectures and Drafts on Political Philosophy*, edited by Frederick Rauscher. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–72, 19: 556. This articulation of slavery as total incapacity appears close, then, to Saidiya Hartman’s articulation of slavery in terms of the “fungibility of the commodity [that] makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel” Hartman, Saidiya. (2010). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 21.

⁸⁹Sorrentino, *Expecting*, 24.

⁹⁰Garba, *Slavery*.

⁹¹Sorrentino, *Expecting*, 4.

capitalism might be better understood as a “component of slavery” rather than its overcoming.⁹²

1. 5. Why freedom, then?

Let me sum up the above. Freedom is a fetish character that occludes the slave as that which cannot even be thought, and so conceals the violences that commensuration requires. The extraction of a specific form of freedom as normative standard recapitulates and conceals the character of our social practices whilst writing-in that which we seek to explain.⁹³ Whilst instead we might appeal to complex and determinate social practices to give rise to our normative commitments, freedom cannot be so grounded since it is written-in as a practical constraint on practice itself. It is by pushing further through a Marxist commitment to the immanent and pragmatic constitution of the fetish relation, put together with Wynter (and Afropessimism more broadly) that we can conceive of the possibility of freedom’s fetish as a real social relation that is nonetheless sociopragmatically generated. As such, practices identified as freedom – insofar as they cannot appeal to a transhistorical essence that ontologically separates workers from slaves – are tasked with the violent repetition, and attempted negation, of slavery. The sociohistorical conditions of racial slavery are systemically occluded, and their continuation is required for our freedom to appear as a natural capacity.

If the self-reproducing character of capitalism’s social forms holds within them a mode of violence and power not captured under exploitation, we might shift focus to the concomitant social antagonisms relevant to the coherence of the entire socio-political structure.⁹⁴ The basic practical requirement of an iterated antiblack violence is unthinkable as impersonal domination – the latter’s immanent power cannot but fail to comprehend the dispersal of mastery and possession manifested in the explicit life-and-death-shaping violences through which sovereignty continues to operate. What is concealed under immanent power is the continuation of a mastery that operates directly on the body of Blackness such that mastery can appear as both internalized and dispersed across the body of capitalist society.

Commensurated inequality is held together not in mastery’s abjuration but in its concealment through the practical enactment of commensuration itself. That is to say, the social structures to which we become responsible are not produced simply as abstract or impersonal systems but as the legal, policing, and normative frameworks *required* by the practical and conceptual apparatus of freedom as necessitating constraints on self-mastery in its practical exercise.⁹⁵ This is coupled, nonetheless, with an abjuration of responsibility for violence insofar as immanent power is “a system of all-around

⁹²Ibid., 25.

⁹³There are interesting parallels with a trajectory of thought pursued in Chu, Andrea Long. (2018). “Black Infinity: Slavery and Freedom in Hegel’s Africa”. *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 32(3), 414–25, who questions freedom as structuring critical and political practice.

⁹⁴See, for example, Marx’s distinction in the Grundrisse which focuses on the relation of domination as confronting direct forced labour.

⁹⁵For example, to follow Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, if ownership of institutions, assets, and corporations allows for the consolidation of hierarchical power, then this also includes the right of command as the capacity both to set norms as well as the means through which that capacity is legitimated. See Nitzan, Jonathan & Bichler, Shimshon. (2009). *Capital as Power: A Study of Order and Creorder*. New York: Routledge.

domination, that is responsible for these evils, not the individuals dominated by capital.”⁹⁶ In diagnosing capitalism as a system of impersonal domination that nonetheless holds the immanent capacity for freedom, we therefore commit to a project that unwittingly consolidates that which we are attempting to undo. The question is then: why we would expect freedom to be rescued from its fetish character within the immanent practices constitutive of capitalism's social forms at all?

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⁹⁶Roberts, *Marx's*, 3; "The power of capital includes a set of mechanisms to which everyone, including the capitalists, are subjected" Mau, *Mute*, 24.

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Revolution (The Hand of God at Work)

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers racial slavery to be a problem for the Marxist philosophy of history. I begin with an exploration of the “peculiar historicity of race” in the way racial slavery is accounted for in the value-form. Then I read for how Marx (and Engels) rely on a teleological ‘necessity’ to describe the revolution between slavery and communism. This is followed by engaging Marx’s “positive debt to Hegel” qua the latter’s speculative theology. In inheriting this debt, racial abstractions at work in the Marxist philosophy of history emerge as an obstacle to theorizing the racial quality of racial slavery, accounting instead for only its historiographical and/or economic conditions, which implicates how communism is thought. To conclude, I argue that a return to Hegel surfaces the way that race comes to constitute the very substance of historical movement itself: race is the condition of possibility for history at all.

KEYWORDS

Philosophy of history; Marx; value; racial slavery; teleology; communism; negativity

The “peculiar historicity of race” in the slavery-value relation

One of the most commonly cited moments in Marx on the relationship between racial slavery and capitalism – owing perhaps to the clarity of its formulation – is found in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.¹ Here, Marx writes that

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.²

This framing of slavery anticipates a world-systems theory by directly relating its historical emergence to global expansion and value production specific to capitalism. It is clear that Marx understands the plantation to be capitalism’s condition of possibility, but while the passage above offers evidence that slavery is central to Marx’s writing on capitalism, the discussion must return the passage to its original context. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx is reproducing the basic and fundamental knowledge that even bourgeois political economy understands of itself, legible on the terms of its own self-knowledge. The passage itself makes no intervention, except insofar as Marx intends to use the question

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¹See, for example: Bellamy Foster, Holleman, and Clark, “Marx and Slavery”.

²Marx, “The Poverty of Philosophy,” 203.

of slavery as a direct attack on what Lenin might have called the “stupid materialism” of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, for whom economic contradictions are too simple, vulgar, or crude, as though a contradiction could be as easy to grasp as a coin with two sides, one good and one bad.³ Marx’s critique of Proudhon hinges on a distinction between contradictions as categorical – what happens when you pull economic categories out of relation with each other to examine them only in their specificity – and contradictions as symptomatic of the unity that binds them together. For Marx, then, Proudhon retains “nothing of Hegel’s dialectics but the language,” since his consideration of slavery (among others: the division of labor, credit, money) as an economic category lacks any engagement with the substance (in the Hegelian sense) of history at all. This is how Proudhon ends up with what Marx condemns as a “metaphysics of political economy.”⁴

What Proudhon – and bourgeois political economy – misses is a theory of history. Gillian Rose, on the question of what it might mean to say Marxism “has a method,” suggests that a Marxist method “traces mediation” such that “it apprehends the totality and does not take the abstract units into which that totality is divided in capitalist society as given.”⁵ Mediation, then, is the key between method and history, at least in so far as one can only be thought through the other (even if, in my account, they can never quite touch). In Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, mediation is logic’s *modus operandi*, the way that scientific method understands the inseparability between being and nothingness, both pure immediacies which are mediated precisely by their own inseparability. Hegel anticipates Marx’s critique of Proudhon on the basis of “not dialectic but sophistry,” a method which proceeds on the basis of “absolute separateness.”⁶ A theory of history, for Hegel as for Marx, cannot be strictly historicist or historiographical in nature, since it must be more concerned with mediation than determination, the latter of which belongs to historicism.⁷ This is a point elaborated by Massimiliano Tomba, for whom historicism is constitutionally incompatible with a Marxist philosophy of history precisely because a historicist philosophy of history prioritizes the logic of subsumption, giving way to a discourse of “tendencies,” “remainders” and “uneven development.”⁸ Tomba follows Hegel in so far as the latter suggests, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, that crude historicism is a matter best left to the professional historians, a gesture that leaves a gap wide enough to procure a reading of Marx in which racial slavery is not abandoned to history by value, but rather synchronized and intensified by its social form. Hence: “the crack of the whip of the slave-driver, then just as now, is synchronized with the rhythm of the world-market.”⁹

Many scholars have reproduced the kind of dogmatic distinctions characteristic of Proudhon in considering the relationship between racial slavery and capitalism, resulting in the failure to “assume the entire conceptual constellation as given.”¹⁰ This is a point similar to that made by Louis Althusser, for whom the separation of political economy

³Ibid., 203.

⁴Ibid., 201.

⁵Rose, “Does Marx have a Method?,” 6.

⁶Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 105.

⁷Ibid., 107.

⁸Tomba, “Historical Temporalities of Capital,” 45.

⁹Ibid., 63.

¹⁰Ibid., 45.

from a philosophy of history is doomed to fail in its understanding of the “present conjecture.”¹¹ Although Marx’s critique of political economy strives precisely to unveil the “laws of motion of capital”¹² – those movements that reconstitute the semblance of capital as a complex social totality – such accounts result in what Tomba describes as a “meta-historical theory of value.”¹³ Following Tomba’s argument – that historicism is in fact incompatible with the Marxist philosophy of history – I want to think about what happens when we suspend the relation between these when theorizing how racial slavery and capitalism are mediated in Marx. Even where his critique of Proudhon hinges on a Hegelian method that sees the connection between separability and inseparability, the gambit of this paper is that Marx does not cross this threshold himself *in relation to the question of slavery*. That even though his understanding of racial slavery engages its economic and historical significance in relation to capitalism—carving out the grounds upon which to stake an ethical claim—the question of slavery’s relationship to history remains an ambivalent one. Marx forfeits a consideration of racial slavery’s relationship to abstraction, which concerns the most fundamental character of capitalism: the self-valorization of capital that comes to constitute a world that is “ruled by abstractions.”¹⁴

That Marx fails to account for racial slavery’s abstract forms is a point made by Sara-Maria Sorentino, who argues that while Marx certainly *thinks* slavery historically, he *unthinks* its theoretical significance in relation to capitalism.¹⁵ Sorentino produces an immanent critique of Marx’s value-form, excavating the “abstract slave” – a radicalization of Marx’s abstract labor – from Marx’s amalgamation of slavery and labor in the concept of “wage slavery,” which he uses to make a normative claim in which the slavery of the worker depends upon a twofold kind of freedom in relation to labor: to both possess and sell one’s own labor in exchange for a wage. For Sorentino, Marx uses slavery as an analogy to explicate the violence of wage labor, but in doing so, collapses the qualitative difference of blackness, the racial signifier corresponding to the figure of the racial slave, so that blackness is “naturalized apart from the economy, [and] slaveness [becomes] contingent on broader relations of production.”¹⁶ In this account, “wage slavery” is a metaphor, one that constitutes slavery’s unthinkability, since analogies “signal how possibility and actuality coordinate nature and history in ways that call forth and foreclose the incapacity philosophically marked by the slave. Analogies flow into and out of slaves as their constitutional condition.”¹⁷

In one of the first expositions of his economic theory in 1847, Marx begins with the question, “What are wages? How are they determined?”¹⁸ Here the inquiry does not open as it will in *Capital* with the commodity, but with the description of the worker’s relation to wage labor as one of slavery. From here, he unravels the worker from the relations in which he is found – the relations that give him meaning – by distinguishing

¹¹See the chapter, “The Errors of Classical Economics: Outline of a Conception of Historical Time” in Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹²Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination*.

¹³Tomba, “Historical Temporalities of Capital,” 49.

¹⁴Marx, *Grundrisse*, 164.

¹⁵Sorentino, “The Abstract Slave,” 17.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷Sorentino, “Slave/Animal/Labour,” 46.

¹⁸Marx, “Wage-Labour and Capital,” 249.

the worker's labor from the commodity he produces. The wage is key to the way this distinction is made, because it allows Marx to demonstrate the basis of the exchange: "Labour is, therefore, a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to capital."¹⁹ This exchange demonstrates the way that the worker's labor constitutes a commodity in itself, but importantly, it does not produce the worker *as a commodity* in the same way as slavery. Marx relies on separating the worker from the slave to establish this, on the basis that "the slave, together with his labour, is sold once and for all to his owner [...] He is himself a commodity, but the labour is not his commodity."²⁰ If it is the case that the wage-worker is only constituted as such because he is different to the slave, then a paradox emerges, in which Marx analogizes slavery while using it to demarcate the difference between the slave and the worker, a difference which is nonetheless internal to the comparison – or, perhaps even its source.

The latter aspect of this contradiction is elaborated by Beverley Best, for whom it is not analogy but sublation that marks the relation between racial slavery and wage labor in Marx's "critical theory of slavery," which constitutes the subtext of *Capital*.²¹ For Best, slavery is capitalism's historical presupposition, the conditions that must have occurred in order for the worker to be assembled precisely as "free" at all. Slavery anticipates wage labor by setting up a contradiction (between slavery and freedom) that becomes reconfigured as something like the *slavery of the free worker*. Thus, "wage labour (as a category and as logical comportment) is the inversion and dissolution of modern enslaved labour (as category and as logical comportment)."²² The slavery of the wage worker is a necessary formulation that emphasizes a line of continuity between slavery and wage-labor. Value, in Best's account, is contingent on this sublation, since it is the dissolution of slavery produces the conditions through which wage-labor becomes universal, itself a condition that makes abstraction unique to capitalist relations.

Importantly, for Best, Marx's critical theory of slavery bypasses teleology in favor of a properly historicist account of the slavery-capitalism relation, making sense instead of historical fact – Sorentino, referencing Robert Miles, will say an "anomalous necessity" – since there is a "whole series of economic systems [that] form the compost from which springs the modern world," and therefore "if capital has emerged as historical fact, it must have come from somewhere and something that precedes it."²³ Race, in Best's account, is conceptually dissolved even though it may (and does) endure on an empirical, experiential, and real-world register. Sorentino understands the problem with this formulation to be one that consigns slavery to the realm of its "domestic-economic configuration," such that slavery can only be understood through its immediacy (its proximity to direct violence), which assumes that slavery "cannot produce anything except the materiality to which it has been consigned."²⁴ For Sorentino, the "focus on what slavery produces *for* capitalism, not what produces slavery, [results in] the ricocheted return to the material assumption of its content."²⁵ Two different accounts of abstraction are at work here, that distinguish the work of Sorentino and Best. For

¹⁹Ibid., 250.

²⁰Ibid., 251.

²¹Best, "Marx's Critical Theory of Slavery," 125–57.

²²Ibid., 3.

²³Ibid., 26.

²⁴Sorentino, "The Abstract Slave," 19.

²⁵Ibid.

Sorrentino, there is something like a “dialectics of the abstract and concrete” which, conditioned by the real separation of slavery and wage labor, cannot be actualized in the case of racial slavery. For Best, there is only “abstraction in the final instance,” a position that sees abstraction as a historical process which reconfigures it as “*real* abstraction” the trick by which capital absents its own determinations.

Best’s account of Marx’s critical theory of slavery captures Marx’s methodological reflexivity in a way that is useful to my intervention, since it will also form the basis of my attempt to “think the unthought in Marx” with respect to this reflexivity.²⁶ If Best’s account characterizes a historicist reading of the slavery-value relation – that is, a historicist reading of sublation – it is also precisely that which I want to suspend, in order to see what might get illuminated in the gesture of suspension. Sublation, for Hegel, is perhaps the most interesting of all philosophical concepts, “a delight to speculative thought” since “what is sublated is at the same time preserved, it has only lost its immediacy but it is not on that account annihilated.”²⁷ An account of this sublation, from racial slavery to wage slavery, that leans into the speculative rather than historicist register, could perhaps make room to see what happens to the “racial” of slavery. In this line of inquiry, I depart from the position in which race is thought to be history’s excess or remainder – a position which Denise Ferreira da Silva has worked to critique, since it consigns race’s “temporality of permanence” to the terms of classification given by social scientific projects, which rehearse and formalize “Natural History,” those nineteenth Century anthropological classifications in which race is still sutured to its biological conceptualization. Instead, da Silva calls for a change in the terms of inquiry: rather than focusing on “the fact that ‘race’ resists the Arrow of Time (the winds of Progress)” (i.e., that race endures despite its conceptual dissolution in capital’s apparatus) we must “ask about race’s peculiar historicity regarding its relationship to the onto-epistemological markers, namely Time and Space.”²⁸

It is precisely “race’s peculiar historicity” to which I turn my attention in this paper. I will argue that race does not only resist what da Silva calls “the Arrow of Time” but is constitutive of its very possibility, such that slavery – in what we call “world history” – is subjected to an infinite process of emancipation (emancipation is what history *is* to slavery, and vice versa). To build to this conclusion I suggest that Marx’s philosophy of history, even though its reflexivity is precisely its strength, cannot avoid the deadlock of retroactive reconstruction, and that this is most explicitly evidenced by considering Marx on the questions of slavery, race, and revolution altogether, as they surface in the slavery-communism relation. According to Andrew Sartori, the question of Marx’s retroactive theoretical approach is not teleological, but rather a methodological manoeuvre in which capitalist society is seen as “being given to the production of abstractions that can retrospectively be made to grasp – but always ‘only with a grain of salt’ – the heterogenous and logically distinct concrete forms of the precapitalist past.”²⁹ It is the “grain of salt” of interest to me here, at least in so far as something always escapes the “gesture of universalization”³⁰ (to put it in Žižekian-Lacanian terms) that is internal to

²⁶Tomba, “Historical Temporalities of Capital,” 46.

²⁷Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 107.

²⁸Ferreira da Silva, “Notes for a Critique of the ‘Metaphysics of Race,’” 140–41.

²⁹Sartori, “Genealogy, Critical Theory, History,” 70.

³⁰Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 129.

the positing of any presuppositions, *especially* to the presupposition that the “racial” of racial slavery is sublated into the wage-relation, and thus, to value, or otherwise remains legible only on the terms of the empirical.

I turn now to the role of revolution in Marx to distill a more explicit philosophy of history in order to first formulate the problem as such: Marx’s appeal to progress (especially if this appeal is largely inconsistent and at times disavowed) relies on a teleological notion of history – da Silva’s “Arrow of Time” – in his consideration of slavery as it relates to communism. More specifically, this theorizes communism as the full bloom of what begins first with slavery as its seed: a formula of historical movement emerges in which a line of continuity can be drawn between communism and slavery. Following this I return to Hegel, whose speculative theology unveils the theoretical origins of a philosophy of history that mobilizes racial abstractions as evidence of the hand of God at work in the very substance of history. In my reading of the slavery-communism relation in Marx, it is Hegel’s speculative theology at work that is the cause of Marx’s slippage into teleology in theorizing the slavery-communism relation. I conclude with comments that outline the task ahead: on retaining the communist hypothesis while abandoning its telos, that is, a philosophy of history adequate to communism’s promise.

Communism the apple, slavery the seed

In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche wrote that “‘Progress’ is merely a modern idea, that is to say a false idea,” but as Étienne Balibar points out, not even Nietzsche (!) can wholly avoid the appeal to progress in the end.³¹ Brought forth to contemporary debates, this irony – perhaps even a contradiction – mars much of contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century critiques of progressivist historical, indeed teleological, thinking. Thus, such critiques are undermined by the structure of history to which they are legible, in so far as they are aimed towards transformative social change. For the Marxist philosophy of history, this contradiction is constitutive of its conception of history’s form, content, and motion. The problem can be articulated in the following terms: that the critique of an overdetermined structure of history’s arc undermines revolutionary aims which here are contingent on the abolition of class, such that it develops a programmatic view to which this abolition corresponds. It is in light of this problem that communism – what Marx in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* famously called history’s riddle *solved* – constitutes a problem that oscillates between scientificity and rupture.

The strength of Marx’s intervention lies precisely in being “able to realize the paradox of having as its constant object the very history whose scientific knowledge it inaugurated”³² but even here, for Balibar, it encounters a limit in the absence of any corresponding and instructive definition, since Marx never laid out a theory of historical materialism. As a result, much ambiguity remains as to what exactly constitutes both science and history in the sense of their particular relationship to each other. It is true that the science of history draws much from the history of science – a consequence in no small part belonging to the elaboration of this idea by Engels in texts like the *Dialectics*

³¹Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” 487; Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 91.

³²Balibar, “The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism” in *Reading Capital*, 359.

of *Nature* – but much work since has been done to quickly correct the more vulgar aspects of this relationship in a way that has at times obscured the consequences of their connection.³³ Here, something like a formal distinction between nature (the domain of science) and history (the domain of the social) in the Marxist canon proves arbitrary to the extent that it reproduces a significant omission of places in Marx and Engels where this distinction collapses entirely. I am thinking, for instance, of the formal separation of nature and history that appear in the humanist accounts of alienation in Marx, for whom a return to man's natural means of subsistence is possible.³⁴ Marx himself, for the most part, does try to distance himself from making normatively humanist claims that would support this dichotomy between nature and history. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, for instance, he argues that it is the (bourgeois) economists who rely on a very rigid distinction between the natural and the artificial – that feudalism, according to the classical position, is artificial, but capitalism is natural – and therefore, “every religion which is not [that of bourgeois economics] is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God.”³⁵ For this Marx it is not “nature” but “naturalization” in question, since capitalism is a mode of production that must naturalize itself through its “gentrification” of the mechanisms of culture, ideology, and social reproduction.³⁶

Marx's appeal to history intends to reveal the artifice of naturalization. This methodological move makes the distinction between science and history necessary at least in so far as it seeks to problematize the way that bourgeois historiography comes to naturalize its own internal laws. Considered alongside Marx's methodological claim in *Capital* that “reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development” and therefore “reflection begins *post festum*, with already established givens”³⁷ that are the result of this development, there is a reading of history to be made that suggests historical reflection, at least in the terms of Marx, is akin to a scientific recuperation of the charge of the past in any present moment, against the bourgeois historicism that would suggest that “there is no longer any history” at all.³⁸ For Althusser, it is precisely this moment in *Capital* in which Marx is at his most historicist of all his later texts, since the pulled quote – “*post festum*” – suggests that “the object of all of the social and historical sciences is an evolved object” and further, that “the activity of knowledge which is applied to this object, too, is defined by *the present* of this given, by the current moment of this given.”³⁹ Any science of itself, one capable of its own self-criticism, can only develop with the level of abstraction present in capitalist development (it is for this reason, Marx says in *Capital*, Aristotle could not locate “the secret of the expression of value”⁴⁰). But Althusser warns of the results in taking this observation through to its conclusion, as Gramsci does, in what he calls an “absolute historicism,” that collapses science

³³See: Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*.

³⁴I am thinking of a humanist tendency endemic to elaborations of eco-Marxism, for instance, John Bellamy Foster's emphasis on a dialectic between “freedom and alienation” as key to Marx's science. See: Foster, *Marx's Ecology*.

³⁵Marx, “The Poverty of Philosophy,” 121.

³⁶Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 129.

³⁷Marx, *Capital*, 168.

³⁸*Ibid.*; Marx, “The Poverty of Philosophy,” 116.

³⁹Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 271.

⁴⁰Marx, *Capital*, 152.

into history completely.⁴¹ In this account, “men make their own history” such that politics, praxis, and history become indistinguishable.

The motivation behind the move to an “absolute historicism” is, Althusser notes, a response against the economic determinism of the Second International, but a move in the opposite direction is equally strained in its theoretical consistency. In the Althusserian account, a return to determinism undermines the productive ambiguity internal to Marx’s theory of history, reproducing the mistake of Engels, who Althusser has problematized for applying to “the concepts of the theory of history a *coefficient of mobility* borrowed directly from the concrete empirical sequence (from the ideology of history) transposing the ‘real-concrete’ into the ‘thought-concrete’ and the historical as real change into the concept itself.”⁴² For Althusser, Engels’ mistake is to ignore “the basic distinction Marx was careful to draw between the object of knowledge and the real object, between ‘the development of forms’ of the concept in knowledge and the development of the real categories in concrete history.”⁴³ The result is a confusion between logical and historical development, one that resigns, on the one hand, abstraction to political economy, and on the other, concreteness (empiricism) to history.

While taking seriously the terms of Althusser’s critique, I am also interested in the places where Engels and Marx *do* reproduce this problem, since it surfaces explicitly, in my reading, in the problem of the slavery-communism relation. Put differently: where Marx and Engels approach communism as an object of history’s realization, it is accompanied by the specter of slavery. As such, the historical role of communism recalls a natural referent latent in the science of history, in so far as it is presented as capitalism’s “death knell” or the “negation of the negation,” even if Marx and Engels represent – at least in Althusser’s read – two different accounts of development. On the one hand, Engels represents communism as a historical inevitability, and on the other, Marx understands it to be the task of the proletariat to realize it. There is, however, little doubt about a slippage between the two. In *The Communist Manifesto*, for instance, the slippage is notable in its formulation of revolution as one of inevitability because it is produced from the conditions established within capitalist class relations, and hence the claim emerges that “what the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers.”⁴⁴ I am interested in the possibility of a structural problem behind this slippage, one that emerges in the *Manifesto*’s “figural presentation” of the specter.⁴⁵ Marx and Engels open with the remark that “a specter is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism.”⁴⁶ The use of specter is revealing: it is not the ghost we know, an entity killed, whose insistence on, or attachment to, life prevails over its death; rather, it is the case that this entity has been created but not yet borne. This turns the temporal logic of history around from its intuitively linear sense (i.e., the charge of the past in the present), emphasizing instead the charge of the future in the present, or even (when stretched to its logical conclusion) in the past itself.

⁴¹Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 268.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 263.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁴Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” 231.

⁴⁵The “figural presentation” of the specter is a phrase I take from Derrida, *The Specters of Marx*, 55.

⁴⁶Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” 221.

This claim in the *Manifesto* is further expressed in Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, in which Engels argues against the position of Eugen Dühring's emphasis on the political role of power and domination as the fundamental determinants of history, rather than any strictly economic and material factors. To make this critique, Engels insists instead on the role of historical necessity, whereby necessity emerges as the guiding category that can provide evidence of something like a science of history. In a gesture that exemplifies an extreme position against absolute historicism, necessity sublimates "politics" and "power" by re-configuring history's internal arc according to the social development of its corresponding mode of production. To illustrate this, while taking it to its most generalizable conclusion, Engels makes a productive and organic connection between the history of what Aristotle deemed "natural slavery" and the inevitability of communism. Engels translates this into a historical narrative in which a line of continuity is drawn between "natural slavery" and the capitalist mode of production. He writes,

It was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a larger scale, and thereby also Hellenism, the flowering of the ancient world. Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art and science, without slavery, no Roman Empire. But without the basis laid by Hellenism and the Roman Empire, also no modern Europe. We should never forget that our whole economic, political and intellectual development presupposes a state of things in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally recognized. In this sense we are entitled to say: *Without the slavery of antiquity no modern socialism.*⁴⁷

In the matrix of history presented by Engels, the line from slavery to modern socialism traces the material changes wrought by the structural relations produced by the slavery of antiquity as they arrive to the present moment, the modern economic condition, but he also extends this line into the future too, in the final line. For the Engels of *Anti-Dühring*, the specter of communism begins with the seed of ancient slavery.

The terms of the slavery-communism relation are not moral but based squarely in historical necessity. In this account, slavery remains a moral reprehensibility on the register of politics and/or social feeling, but its economic role is conscripted into the progressive arc of historical development. In this way, Engels reproduces what Marx had accused of Proudhon – that economic categories can have a good side and a bad one – but supplements this with a theory of history that relies on necessity to an extreme degree. For this reason, Engels can justify the claim that "when we examine these questions, we are compelled to say – however contradictory and heretical it may sound – that the introduction of slavery under the conditions prevailing at that time was a *great step forward*."⁴⁸ At work in this formulation is a linear, evolutionary explanation of social forms, which are not determined by working themselves out in phases of contradictory development, but rather, determined by an element of speculation that worms its way into an analytic claim that reifies the specter of communism. I am interested in the speculative kernel of this claim, one that presents a faith in the determinacy of a preordained communism – a claim that has convergence with the theological implications of Marx's Hegelian inheritance (I return to this in the next section of this text).

I read in Engels a determination of racial slavery in the terms of ancient slavery in two ways. First, on the account of the linear shape of this historical arc: if natural slavery

⁴⁷Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 195. The emphasis is mine.

⁴⁸Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 196.

begins as what ends with communism, then all that comes before is subsumed into the process of its development. In this way, natural slavery is worked out into racial slavery worked out into wage-slavery, what comes before amounting to the organic material (the “compost” in Best’s terms) in which capital emerges.⁴⁹ Secondly, and this point supplements the first, Engels identifies later on the same section of *Anti-Dühring* a generalization that can be made in “all historical antagonisms between exploited and exploiting, ruled and oppressed classes” which frees one class of labor at the expense of the other. If “pure force” or “immediacy” is the quality that characterizes (all kinds of) slavery, then it implied in Engels’ invocation of the (his) present to make the following claim:

it is only now, therefore, that every ruling and exploiting class has become superfluous and indeed a hindrance to social development, and it is only now, too, that is will be inexorably abolished, however much it may be in possession of ‘direct force’.⁵⁰

That race does not make an explicit appearance in this text can be further supplemented by reference to others in which its reference certainly does emphasize linearity. For instance, Marx’s 1853 writings on colonialism in India bears witness to this point on historical necessity’s role in world-history, as it concerns modes of racial domination, in which colonialism, like racial slavery, is reconciled into phases of contradictory development that are working themselves out. Here, he presents a very explicitly teleological arc in relation to colonialism’s role in communism and revolution. Marx argues that colonialism in India is a necessary part of bringing India from its historical nonplace of “Asiatic despotism” into modernity, which, despite colonialism’s violence, wretchedness and moral reprehensibility, still provides a formula of revolution in which such wretchedness might be justifiable. For example, Marx writes,

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is: Can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.⁵¹

The reference to India’s colonization as the “unconscious tool of history” in relation to the overall objective of mankind fulfilling its destiny reads, at best, as Marx commenting on the totalizing and universalizing historical arc of capitalism itself, refracting bourgeois ideology through this arc back to us (because “capitalism everywhere attempts to destroy all modes of production and previous relations of production, and to substitute its own mode and its own relations for them”).⁵²

Theorists like Pierre-Phillip Rey have made use of Marx’s later works to argue that “one need not take this theses of this period very seriously” and as Gregory Slack notes, we should be careful to not place too much emphasis on Marx’s epithets, reading them in the context of his rhetorical and often reference-filled mode of writing.⁵³ With reference to Marx’s later works (from 1857 onwards, including his political writing on India and China, and the beginning of the work that stems from

⁴⁹Best, “Marx’s Critical Theory of Slavery,” 26.

⁵⁰Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 197.

⁵¹Marx, “Extracts from ‘The British Rule in India’ and ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India,’” 205.

⁵²Rey and Becker, “Class Alliances,” vi.

⁵³Slack, “Did Marx Defend Black Slavery?,” 135–158.

*Grundrisse*⁵⁴) this perspective argues that the later Marx can be read to revise his earlier teleological thinking, in which the Asiatic mode of production is figured as “wild, aimless, [and] unbounded.”⁵⁵ For Kevin Anderson, such comments should be read in the context of an “overall sketch of the achievements of capitalism in Western Europe and North America, a sketch that is followed by a withering critique.”⁵⁶ In Anderson’s account, the problems that remain in these texts are not intensified but redeveloped in later work, including those with a closer examination of colonialism’s economic life – including pauperism and land tenure – and culminates in the later part of the 1850s with his focus on Indian national liberation movements.⁵⁷ A note is made to de-link Marx from Hegel on this point: where Hegel’s comments in his *Philosophy of History* concern race, Marx’s comments “are no mere recapitulation of Hegel” insofar as Hegel “focus[es] on religion as the determinant,” for Marx “the peculiarities of Indian culture were really themselves the consequence of Indian social organization.”⁵⁸ Two things are of note here: the first, that the early Marx has not been so easy to dispel for others; and second (and relatedly), that the Marx-Hegel relation presents an opportunity for a way to rethink the category of German idealism in Marx’s philosophy of history.⁵⁹ Frank Ruda, for instance, has characterized two significant approaches to the Marx-Hegel relation, exemplified by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, in the attempt to “remember Marx” (which is to repeat Marx’s “argument with Hegel”), the stakes of which are the very categories of negativity and the dialectic.⁶⁰ These concepts mediate two equally significant versions of Marx, on the one hand, the question of “real communist action,” and on the other, a dialectics of “reason” in the productive forces of capital.⁶¹ Both converge in the “the underlying logic of the theme of revolution” in Marx.⁶²

If “today the word revolution is completely obscure”⁶³ – an observation made by Ruda on the basis of what Badiou has called a “crisis of negation”⁶⁴ – then the return to Marx’s philosophy of history holds the key to “the communist hypothesis.”⁶⁵ For Badiou, Engels’ work on the German Peasant Wars of the sixteenth century exemplifies the limits of an “indecisive” approach to the question of “who, then, is a communist?”⁶⁶ Thomas Münzer is the figure that hangs in the balance, having developed a communist program before the conditions of history were able to receive it. Engels provides a class analysis “that confirms to the indications of *The German Ideology*, directly attach[ing] the appearance of revolutionary ideological resistance to the constitution of a revolution class (and the peasants do not by themselves form such a class).”⁶⁷ The result of Engels’ analysis is the assignation of “communist ideas to the two extremities of universal history: primitive agrarian communism on one side, communism realized by the dictatorship of the

⁵⁴See the chapter “Colonial Encounters in the 1850s,” in Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*.

⁵⁵Marx, “Extracts,” 205.

⁵⁶Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 10.

⁵⁷Kevin Anderson, “Colonial Encounters in the 1850s,” in *Marx at the Margins*.

⁵⁸Anderson quoting Irfan Habib in *Marx at the Margins*, 14–15.

⁵⁹Ruda, “Remembering, Repeating, Working Through Marx,” 293–319; see also Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity*.

⁶⁰Ruda, “Remembering, Repeating, Working Through Marx,” 297–302.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 309.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 307.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 307.

⁶⁴Badiou quoted in Ruda, “Remembering, Repeating, Working Through Marx,” 308.

⁶⁵See: Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” 29–42.

⁶⁶Badiou and Balmés, “Excerpts from ‘On Ideology’ (1976).”

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

proletariat on the other. The colossal transition which separates these is that of private property” since peasant revolts that and agrarian communist “variants” are devoid of “active historical substance.”⁶⁸ Such is the characterization of Münzer as a figure of “tragedy,” since the inevitability of his failure is the greatest of tragedies that can “befall a leader of an extreme party is when he is compelled to assume power at a time when a movement is not yet ripe for domination of the class he represents.”⁶⁹

For Badiou, this Engels is the same as the one who insists on the historical necessity of slavery in *Anti-Dühring*, the effect of which is twofold: first, Engels’ relies on a “phantom proletariat” in order to resolve the contradiction between a communist insurrection and a plebian-peasant one; and second, the implication is that Münzer’s program – and of all non-proletarian mass revolts – hinder, rather than progress “real” communist revolutions. Engels does not allow Münzer to “be” a communist, in the sense of a historical agent. The Peasant War, in the Engelsian narrative, is a continuation of the same logic applied to the “great slave revolts of antiquity,” in a way that casts a “shadow” on the peasant wars, and the proletarian ones today, that is, of the “uninterrupted resistance of slaves.”⁷⁰ Taking – as I do – the reference to natural slavery to fold in racial slavery in its teleological arc, then another problem emerges at the point where resistance to transatlantic/plantation slavery constitutes obstacles to, rather than in favor of, revolution’s ruptural force. This is a point Badiou infers through a reference to Moses Finley, for whom the slavery of antiquity can be in literature “matched, passage by passage, from the American South” in the doubt that slave revolts constitute “anti-slavery” aspirations.⁷¹

If the phantom proletariat haunts the peasant revolts, it haunts too the racial slave, without which it cannot find the conditions through which to emerge. An example of the limit to this logic is found in the work of Susan Buck-Morss, whose analysis of the Haitian Revolution ends with a comment on the events in 1804 – the massacre of whites by the militants under Jean-Jacques Dessalines – as a “retreat from universalist principles,” rather than an insurrection on the terms of negativity.⁷² Read together with Engels on the peasant wars, the problem is one in which capitalism’s relationship to insurrectionary revolts by oppressed masses come to constitute obstacles to revolution, rather than revolution’s driving force. The implication is that there is a correct time to resist, and a correct time to succumb to history. At stake is the concept of negativity itself, against which – through which – the dialectic emerges.

God in everything, especially the theater of world history

In *Capital Vol. 1* Marx had demonstrated that, due to the technological advancement of the industrial revolution, “Progress now had a new face: the face of children working fifteen hours a day in the mills and the mines.”⁷³ He adds to this image of progress the faces of black slaves, indentured workers, and the deaths wrought by the brutality

⁶⁸Ibid.; See also: Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*.

⁶⁹Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 135.

⁷⁰Badiou and Balmés, “Excerpts from ‘On Ideology’ (1976)”.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Susan Buck-Morss as quoted in Ciccariello-Maher, “‘So Much the Worse for the Whites,’” 22.

⁷³Georges Canguilhem, “The Decline of the Idea of Progress,” 316. See also: Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 354.

of slavery and colonial regimes, as well as the conquest of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and worldwide, all framed as collateral damage for history's forward march. To think about rupture – rather than scientificity – in relation to the revolts characteristic of these regimes puts them within the frame of Badiou's "communist invariants," but this is a gesture that leads to another problem: the antagonism between contingency and necessity – of becoming and being – that complicates the method. This returns me to the speculative idealism of Hegel, since necessity forms the basis of the "tautological gesture of retroactive performativity."⁷⁴ For Žižek, "the dialectic of contingency and necessity" is a movement, a transubstantiation of one into the other. This is because the "passage of contingency into necessity is an act of purely formal conversion, the gesture of adding a name which confers upon the contingent series the mark of necessity, thereby transforming it into the expression of some hidden ground."⁷⁵ Reflexivity stages necessity in a primarily methodological account, then, which produces the question of subject and substance (being and becoming) through the fact of negativity, through which it (subject/substance) acquires its positive content.

Negativity in Hegel figures as both determination and its absence, but I want to suggest – and this follows the work of Rei Terada – that reading negativity within the Marxist problematic of the slavery-communism relation, *through* Hegel, can probe the contingency/necessity relationship in a way that is attuned to the racial, making Marx's inheritance of this problematic explicit. Hegel's speculative theology stages necessity in the drama of history which merges the question of subject and substance (this is absent in any explicit or systematic account in Marx).⁷⁶ Reading Marx through Hegel, then, yields a reconstitution of his philosophy of history in which revolution (the supposed break between slavery and communism) can be examined in terms of the substance of history. Hegel's speculative theology is produced in contradistinction to Aristotle's physico-theological formulation, as an alternative *proof of God*. For this reason, Badiou calls Hegel "the modern conjurer of this ecclesiastical question."⁷⁷ But his evidence necessitates racial abstractions in service of it: the theological quality of Hegel's mapping of world history's emergence is central to the way his philosophy is thought – at least in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* – such that his philosophy of history, as Peter Hodgson writes, produces "an ontological matrix that binds together God and history."⁷⁸

The question of teleology in Hegel is the grounds of a far from resolved debate. Althusser, for instance, identifies Hegel's "expressive causality" as one inadequate to the transformations of the dialectic in the hands of Marx, where others, Rose and Raya Dunayevskaya, for example, argue that the return to Hegel's emphasis on negativity and the Absolute opens rather than closes Marx's dialectic.⁷⁹ But the conclusions of these positions all still rely on the same relation: Marx's positive debt to Hegel, which involves either clarifying the role of teleology or eliminating its eschatological significance.⁸⁰ It is significant because it makes a connection between "natural history" and physico-

⁷⁴Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 150.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Althusser, *For Marx*.

⁷⁷Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 5.

⁷⁸Hodgson, *Shapes of Freedom*, 1.

⁷⁹See Althusser, *Reading Capital*; Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* and Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity*.

⁸⁰See Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 112.

theology – evidence of God in nature – that in part hands over agency to a God who assigns purpose to his creations. In particular, physics as the science of motion becomes evidence of God's will or purpose, as the thing that drives something from potential to its given form. The immanence of this pursuit of form – i.e., that there is no other realization of form that an object of natural history might take, that this pursuit is both singular and predetermined – is governed by the “regulative hypothesis of teleology [which] is that ‘nature knows’ (the flow of events does not follow ‘blind’ mechanistic causality; it is guided by some conscious purposefulness).”⁸¹ This hypothesis marks the character of much Enlightenment thought, despite various iterations that shed its more explicit theological references. From the origin of the teleological project as God's work (in nature), the teleological arc is lifted from its natural pattern and into the realm of political philosophy. There are, however, postcolonial suspicions of this move. Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Sanjay Sabrahmanyam demonstrate that “interferences between historical and eschatological discourse appear far more prominent and efficacious in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and they appear to already presuppose the vocabulary of historical teleology.”⁸² It is the genealogy of teleology's development that allows us to identify, in philosophies of history, the work of the appeal to God in any theory of immanence or singularity between process and outcome. Hegel exemplifies this move, because of his notion of history as a process that does unfold into a specific outcome: the realization of spirit's freedom.

Aristotle provides a clear blueprint of this physico-theological formulation, which is key to understanding Hegel's deviation from it, and the basis for what the speculative theological content of history's substance constitutes. It is true that for Hegel, there is a comparison to be made between the movement of history and the natural development of a tree/plant. He writes,

World history is the exhibition of Spirit, the working out of the explicit knowledge of what it is potentially. Just as the germ of the plant carries within itself the entire nature of the tree, even the taste and shape of its fruit, so the first traces of Spirit virtually contain all history.⁸³

Here, the reliance on the metaphor between the germ of the plant and its qualities as a fruit reproduces a formulation first given by Aristotle, whose articulation of “four causes” (of how something comes into being) references as the fourth cause the determinative and developmental process of a thing – precisely its telos. Aristotle uses the example of the development from fruit – seed – plant to describe the teleological causality that can be ascribed to its final form (the plant). But for Hegel, this is not a neat metaphor, or rather, it is *only* a metaphor (and therefore an admission of the metaphor's constitutive inadequacy). One way in which the metaphor works is to insist that is only by supplanting the process of teleology from nature to history that he can make the claim that history should be realized in the state, the ultimate realization of freedom, and its corresponding ethical subject. Consider, for instance, when Hegel writes that it is the “divine principle in the state is the Idea made manifest on earth.”⁸⁴ Here he is referencing the movement of history as it culminates in a political principle that corresponds to

⁸¹ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 49.

⁸² Trüper, Chakrabarty, and Sabrahmanyam, eds., *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*, 5.

⁸³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 21.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

individual freedom, but this could still be considered teleological specifically because the Idea holds in its shell its own determinate pattern of development.

The seed metaphor fails, however, where Hegel departs from the Aristotelian formulation: in the introduction of transition in his sketch of world-history. Where, for Aristotle, the natural world is proof of the work of God, for Hegel it is precisely history's departure from the laws of nature that he cites to make the same claim. This differentiation is often made explicit. For instance, he writes that

changes in the natural world, no matter how great their variety, exhibit only an eternally recurring cycle; for in nature there is nothing new under the sun, and in this respect its manifold play of forms produces an effect of boredom.⁸⁵

History, on the other hand, produces novelty that cannot be accounted for by any natural design, thus the claim emerges that world historical "development, therefore, is not just a harmless and peaceful process of growth like that of organic life, but a hard and obstinate struggle with itself."⁸⁶ The question of struggle is the key intervention here. It is significant that the language of providence, for Hegel, cannot be isolated to the question of reason, or an individual experience of the hand of God at work (what he calls "the trivial faith in providence"). Rather, it is precisely in being able to locate the evidence of providence in its application to world-history that Hegel is able to assert that "true humility consists precisely in recognizing and revering God in everything, *especially* in the theatre of world history."⁸⁷ He elaborates,

That the union of the universal substance, which exists in and for itself, with the particular and the subjective, is the sole truth, is a speculative proposition which is dealt with in this general form by logic. But in the actual process of world history, seen as something as yet incomplete, we find that the subjective element or consciousness is [not] yet in a position to know the true nature of the ultimate end of history, the spirit.⁸⁸

Supplanting the development of the spirit into the movement of world history marks a change not only in how history is thought, but also the structure of providence itself. For Hegel, the arc of providence remains, while its driving imperative (God) has a direct relation to "the cunning of reason": the drive towards perfectibility and the extermination of contingency, which also is another way of asserting the necessity of contingency for history's movement in the first place (and the contingency of necessity). This is the nature of *struggle*, the constitutive aspect of history's movement (the quality absent in Aristotelean teleology), that is, a dialectic motivated by speculative theology makes possible Hegel's intervention in existing philosophies of history. Further, it is precisely the uncertainty of the "ultimate end," marked by history's incompleteness, that proves the hand of God at work in world history. The consequence is the cause: the end of the world will be when we truly know God.

Hegel's identification of the work of God in world history relies on the mobilization of racial abstractions, which produce the very particulars that are bound together by the substance of unity (God himself). That those particulars are identified through racial distinctions is not, I think, a matter of (only) rhetorical or discursive significance, but rather,

⁸⁵Ibid., 124.

⁸⁶Ibid., 127.

⁸⁷Ibid., 37.

⁸⁸Ibid., 74.

a matter of metaphysical speculation that uses race as the substantive fodder through which history emerges. In what Hegel deems the “natural context” of world history, he finds its abstract determinations inform what appears to us as “world history” at all; that is, the designation of racial distinctions form the geographical points that join the line of world history together, uniting both spatial and temporal elements. Take, for instance, Hegel’s designation of world history’s “course,” which can be identified through various epochal shifts that are experienced differentially across the globe. The way these differentiations make sense is through the way that Hegel attaches sequential maturity to various “worlds”; here the development of the spirit is spatialized, and this corresponds to a teleological argument about consciousness, in relation to the way different stages of historical maturity reach the kind of self-consciousness that can be called “freedom.” In his discussion of the “the Oriental world,” for instance, Hegel claims that the generalized state of a kind of unity with nature doesn’t yet have the capacity for any kind of self-sufficiency. The relationship to what Hegel is calling “nature” forms the basis of this claim. On the other hand, in “the Christian world,” the individual is bestowed with this very capacity: the spirit is realized in the individual, a subject determined by an absolute freedom, and thus capable of truly, ethical civil life.

Tellingly, “Africa proper” is totally outside of history, characterized by a kind of stagnancy that encloses it off from world history. Not only on the register of “nations” but also, says Hegel, its inhabitants have “not yet reached an awareness of any substantial and objective existence,” that is, the content of ethical life.⁸⁹ More specifically, he cites the unity of the African continent with nature, producing a kind of primitivity or animality (interesting, a state of “innocence” in Hegel’s words) that, until severed, remains pre-historic (a proto-theory of the metabolic rift is at work here, in a conservative iteration). Here, the master-slave dialectic rears its head in the form of an explicitly racialized relation – “the premise of all slavery is that man is not yet conscious of his freedom” – which relies on a contradiction coming to a head when “slavery has awakened more humanity among the negroes.”⁹⁰ This antagonism (between “the slave” and humanity) takes on a historical character as Africa (and Africans) become “unenclosed” only through their encounter with the West. The nature of this contact (we could call this “struggle”) explains the fundamental condition of Africans being brought *into* history only *through* slavery. Thus, Hegel writes, “the only significant relationship between the negroes and the Europeans has been – and still is – that of slavery.”⁹¹

Some commentators object to the emphasis of Hegel’s *Lectures* on the grounds that they are the “most maligned of his works,” being made up of “passages that combine his written lecture notes with student summaries and commentaries, presenting both together as the Hegelian text.”⁹² Timothy Brennan, for instance, argues that as a result of their internal inconsistency, any “judgements” drawn from the *Lectures* are “rendered without a close reading of Hegel’s work or textual support,” even if they do reproduce “Hegel’s (or his students’) deployment of the offensive language and attitudes of sensationalist travel literature of the time.”⁹³ For Brennan, Hegel’s *Lectures* can be

⁸⁹Ibid., 177.

⁹⁰Ibid., 183.

⁹¹Ibid., 183.

⁹²Brennan, *Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies*, 98.

⁹³Ibid., 100 and 103.

re-contextualized in order to procure a more “balanced” view, by recognizing that “at a time when it was much rarer to do so, [Hegel] sought an appreciation of difference, rather than that he imposed an unwavering European norm.”⁹⁴ In a similar vein, Terry Pinkard argues that Hegel’s application of philosophy to politics in the *Lectures* is nothing more than orientalism at work in Hegel’s writings. Pinkard uses “Hegelianism against Hegel” in order to recuperate Hegel from this orientalism, which finds its most explicit expression in the formulation that underlies the claim that history can work itself from “East to West,” an arc that allows Hegel to claim that contingency and externality are forces that would need to be eliminated in order for history to culminate in the world’s “rational design,” precisely this is the “*cunning* of reason.” As such, where Hegel emphasizes contingency and externality, there is still an internal consistency in the racialized “a priori structure of history to which empirical reality must correspond.”⁹⁵ That spatialized racial difference marks this “a priori structure of history” means that the evidence of God’s work is found in the power of history to assimilate racial difference into the fold of “the world” (of world history). This is what allows Hegel to say, for instance, that.

world history travels from east to west; for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning. World history has an absolute east, although the term east in itself is wholly relative; for although the earth is a sphere, history does not move in a circle around it, but has a definite eastern extremity, i.e., Asia. It is here that the external and physical sun rises, and it sets in the west.⁹⁶

But perhaps a different understanding of race can help to reformulate the problem. To this end, I want to assert that the formulation of views like Brennan or Pinkard’s makes the question of race into one of discursive representation of non-Europeans at work in Hegel. I am suggesting that is a reduction of the problem, and that the question of race in Hegel *structures history* itself.

This argument that follows Rei Terada, who shifts the critique from Hegel’s “racism” to his “antiblackness” through an interrogation of the anxieties that haunt his conception of negativity. Terada argues that “radical negativity” in Hegel is “made possible by [the] speculative destabilization of identity,”⁹⁷ but what makes Hegel a characteristically non-identitarian, non-teleological thinker – precisely negativity – is also what requires the suppression of “racialism” in order for his non-identitarianism to anticipate the “geographical materialism” of his *Lectures*. This is because negativity, in so far as it is “the capacity to be torn by non-relation, foundational of relational capacity” in the *Lectures* is also what “figures as black Africans’ liminality to relation and imperviousness to non-relation.”⁹⁸ As such, non-identitarian non-relation is the “live element” of history but only in opposition to the racialism ascribed to the “overvaluation of kinship [and] attachment” that configure African relations by “their lack of openness, their lack of access to and/or disinterest in relation, their failure to be properly disturbed by non-relation.”⁹⁹

⁹⁴Ibid., 107.

⁹⁵Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 131

⁹⁶Ibid., 197.

⁹⁷Terada, “Hegel’s Racism for Radicals,” 15.

⁹⁸Ibid., 17.

⁹⁹Ibid., 16.

Terada's is not the usual critique of Hegel's eurocentricism, since she is interested more in what makes negativity possible for Hegel: a repression of antiblackness that is then rearticulated on the terms of "relation" (read: antiracism). For Andrea Long Chu, it is negativity, articulated through the "commitment to freedom in his philosophy of world history," that marks the *Lectures* "remarkable stomach for slavery."¹⁰⁰ This commitment underlies a philosophy of history in which transatlantic slavery is "justice, historicized," since Hegel envisions transatlantic slavery as liberating Africa from its own self-enclosure. Africa demarcates for Hegel a realm of "absolute slavery," a deadlock that transatlantic slavery breaks by bringing Africans – "world history's remainder"¹⁰¹ – into the fold of world history. Freedom, in Chu's account, is the regulative principle of Hegel's world-history, but is itself informed by a logic of antiblackness that culminates in Saidiya Hartman's notion of "travestied emancipation," described by Chu as "emancipation as a political reconfiguration of the relations of slavery rather than their abolition."¹⁰² Read together, Terada and Chu challenge the dismissals of Hegel's *Lectures* by insisting the dialectic's core principles are far from unmediated immediacies, but themselves mediated by a logic of antiblackness through which categories like difference and relation can be thought.

If the political outcome of Hegel's commitment to a negativity is *more slavery*, then negativity is engendered by its commitment to freedom, twisting in on itself through its constitutive commitment to necessity.¹⁰³ This version of negativity is preserved through its theological inheritance, in which the repetition of different kinds of slavery (African slavery to transatlantic slavery) emerges as a proof of God, and without the interrogation of the role of the racial in thinking this proof, there is only repetition, and not sublation proper. Such repetition was anticipated by Hegel himself, even if not on the terms of a self-critique. Engels once wrote:

it really seems as if old Hegel in his grave were acting as World Spirit and directing history, ordaining most conscientiously that it should all be unrolled twice over, once as a great tragedy and once as a wretched farce.¹⁰⁴

But in Hegel's *Lectures*, repetition is key to history's becoming, since it is "by repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence."¹⁰⁵ But this can only be theorized as repetition without end, slavery as exemplary of "the sorrow of finitude."¹⁰⁶ Insofar as this inheritance – a teleology compromised by its own negativity – remains uninterrogated in Marx, the rhetorical power of communism is compromised: where slavery is the tragedy, communism is the farce.

Communism is a metaphor

This paper has argued that Marx and Engels' positive debt to Hegel includes the latter's speculative theology, in which world history, as proof of God, mobilizes racial

¹⁰⁰Long Chu, "Black Infinity," 416.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 422 and 418.

¹⁰²Chu, "Black Infinity," 417, citing Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, 115–24.

¹⁰³Long Chu, "Black Infinity," 423.

¹⁰⁴Engels, "Engels to Marx. 3 December," 505.

¹⁰⁵Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 403.

¹⁰⁶Translated as "the sadness of finitude" in Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 130; see also, Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 102.

abstractions in service of this proof. Even if Hegel has radicalized the potential of what is considered to be teleological, he can only do so through racial abstractions. The bind of history to race, I argue, is inherited by Marx and Engels, who fail to work through Hegel's speculative theology, thus unconsciously reproducing this bind in their own philosophy of history. In other words: race remains unthought in Marx because God is unthought in Marx. If racial abstractions mark the hand of God at work in the slavery-communism relation (where communism marks the "cunning of reason" such that it enables Hegel's "relational capacity"), then the stakes are tied to the formulation of the dialectic itself, and the categories that define it: negativity, change, transformation, and most of all, revolution.

There are two key consequences of this argument. The first is that because race is repressed in the Marxist philosophy of history, racial slavery gets theorized by way of analogy to the slavery of antiquity, which provides a means to think slavery without the "racial" as a necessary component. The slavery of antiquity emerges, then, as an object of primitive fantasy, against which the content of racial abstractions can be abandoned more easily to its economic components (what Ferreira da Silva describes as "vanish[ing] into/as *raw material*"¹⁰⁷). This is inherited by Marx's formulation of the "secret expression of value." Returning to Best's work of Marx's theory of slavery, Marx performs the abandonment of race in the equation for which

what distinguishes the association of workers under a single owner in the case of slavery versus the association of workers convened by capital (personified in the capitalist) is the overt nature of coercion in the first case and its concealment—its mediation—in the second.¹⁰⁸

If the gesture of unity, universality, or commensurability is what enables mediation, or makes it specific to the wage-labor relation (as mediated rather than total violence), this happens simultaneously to the invisibilization of race in its mediating role (since it can only be seen as a kind of anti-universalist move, as Hegel does in his destabilization of identity in his discussion of "African slavery"). The Marxist notion of abstraction, which depends on commensurability (qua the universalization of the worker) further entrenches this as the condition on which the revolutionary subject depends for its own emergence. Further, claims about slavery's world historical (rather than economic) role become subsumed by the language of necessity without thinking explicitly about how racial slavery is key to the formulation of world history itself. As such, it may be the case that even insofar as the focus on the value-form intends to unveil the abstractions that make it possible, it conceals or obscures the (racial) contradictions that make abstraction possible at all.

Relatedly, the stakes of the second consequence lie in the communist hypothesis, the horizon that makes thinking revolution possible, and engenders the conditions in which it can be thought. By the communist hypothesis I follow Badiou and Marx/Engels to mean the horizon which organizes the political desires outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*: the abolition of the logic of class, a move towards collective organization in which inequality of wealth and the division of labor are eliminated, that the state and civil

¹⁰⁷Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 247.

¹⁰⁸Best, "Marx's Critical Theory of Slavery," 9.

society are no longer separate. These (primarily economic) factors consolidate the contemporary Marxist position, making its intellectual and political representations of revolution possible. But such representations must reckon with the race/history bind in order to disinherit the framing of race as a “remainder” of history, which will yield the reproduction of a political project that subsumes race within a broader dialectic of class struggle. Instead, a return to Hegel’s philosophy of history shows – where today class struggle is theorized as the antithesis of capitalism – that race is constructed as the antithesis of history. By this I mean that the very substance of history is constituted only through the racial abstractions that make it legible; at the same time race is made possible through history proper, an antagonistic relationship that has been repressed in studies of the Marxist philosophy of history. As such, where racial abstractions enable Hegel’s teleology, they are simultaneously what keeps Marx stuck in the inability to reconcile it (the race/history bind), thus reproducing race as history’s condition of possibility. This is a problem of dialectical stasis, in which the present conjuncture is sustained by a knot of contradictions that have yet to be loosened.

If the communist hypothesis is not to be abandoned then the race/history bind, as it structures or compromises negativity in the dialectic, requires the task to think teleology *without telos*. When slavery is a metaphor (a claim elaborated by Sorentino and Tapji Garba) it invites an “opening to tarry with unknowing, to *increase* frustration,” rather than to resolve it.¹⁰⁹ As such, this treatment of slavery throws thought itself “into a productive crisis that may, one day, open space for the only resolution that might effectively address the problem: ‘the end of the world’.”¹¹⁰ The same might be said of communism, that communism-as-metaphor frees the telos of struggle from its reliance on racial abstractions, insofar as it is transformed by this opening to reconfigure not only economic principles but juridical and ethical ones as well; perhaps communism-as-metaphor can prevent the eternal return of the same (in which slavery is the tragedy, communism is the farce), because if the kernel of slavery cannot be abolished, its racial logics risk being multiplied a thousand times over: slavery *ad infinitum*.

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¹¹⁰*ibid.*, 778.

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Minor Revolution: From Marxist Hermeneutics to Wayward Theology

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ABSTRACT

This essay develops a distinction between “major” and “minor” revolution through Amaryah Armstrong’s interventions in Black theology and Saidiya Hartman’s intervention in the Black radical tradition. Major revolution—exemplified by Marxist historical materialism and liberation theology—imagines emancipation as a promised cataclysmic event. Such models, however, inadequately address racial and sexual subalternity. This is either because of their allegorical/analogical construction, or due to the selectiveness and incompleteness of God’s redemptive gestures. Indeed, Armstrong’s wayward reading of Hagar reframes her as a limit figure who exposes the contradictions of redemption and allegorical universality. Hagar’s ambivalent naming of God underlines the violence of freedom-as-promise. An isomorphic ambivalence lies in Saidiya Hartman’s notion of “revolution in minor key,” which recasts revolution as noneventual, fugitive, and recurrent. This is a minor revolution that foregrounds survival in brutal conditions, where structural liberation remains unrealized but a freedom as otherwise material conditions is discernible.

KEYWORDS

Womanism; historical materialism; revolution; heresy; emancipation; allegory; liberation theology

1. Introduction

The overthrow of the bourgeois state foretold in historical materialism is cataclysmic: the moment when class antagonism is resolved through the abolition of labor itself. This revolution is total, final, and evental—the singular act that ends exploitation by remaking the very structure of human existence. A similar emancipatory cataclysm appears in black liberation theology, which places emphasis on God’s liberatory character and praxis. According to liberation theologians, God is partial toward “the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating them from human bondage.”¹ Here, scripture is approached through a hermeneutical framework that underscores the centrality of figures such as Moses, Joshua, and Jesus as their actions reflect a God that wills the emancipation of the dominated. Both Marxist and liberation theology imagine freedom as escape from

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¹Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2.

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bondage and entry into a new order. Taken together, they exemplify the evental paradigm of what we call “major revolution”: emancipation conceived as a singular, cataclysmic rupture.

If Marxist and liberationist traditions have imagined revolution as a cataclysmic event, Saidiya Hartman’s “revolution in minor key” insists otherwise: revolution is nonevental, fugitive, and excessive.² Minor revolution does not abolish alienation through a singular act but sustains life in the wake of captivity, where mere survival is already miraculous.³ The valence of “revolution” in Hartman’s afterlives of slavery schema culminates in the figure of the wayward revolutionary such as Esther Brown. On the other hand, womanist theologians have drawn on the figure of Hagar in the wilderness as a basis for faith. The former’s social poesis and the latter’s theophanic activity are constituted in the art of miraculous survival, in finding a way out of no way. In either case, an eventful and linear temporality gives way to a nonevental chronotope marked by the irreducible excess of blackness over forms of subjection.

We read Hartman’s minor revolution in light of Amaryah Armstrong’s excavation of the wayward theology immanent to Hartman’s secular work. A wayward theology is the rebellious knowledge that arises in the black feminist encounters with the failure of redemption,⁴ and with—we suggest—major revolution. We trace the theological critique of major revolution from Armstrong’s hagarology and critique of Pauline allegory to the notion of minor revolution in Hartman’s narration of Esther Brown.⁵ But first we turn to an account of major revolutions, secular and theological, and their pitfalls.

2. Impasses of major revolution

Major revolution, through its singular cataclysmic event, manages a synthesis of seemingly disparate referents and concepts. The good news of the cataclysm relates and separates eschatology and revolution, by extension theology and sociology, and even labor and blackness. But this grand synthesis, or universal emancipatory discourse, reproduces a problematic freedom. The allegories through which major revolution achieves its wide embrace of the secular and the theological is also the basis of its failure to mediate *within* sociology – between the sociology of class and the sociology of race. Unwittingly, due to the two-way street of allegory, the failure of major revolution in sociology thus betrays also the failure of the liberationist God of Christianity.

The materialist conception of history, as developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology*, is a keystone of major revolutionary thinking. Following from a premise of *social poesis*, that individuals exist as first and foremost engaged in their

²Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

³The major/minor distinction in contemporary theoretical discourse owes much to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a minor literature or a minor science. They write in their book on Kafka, “a minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.” See Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 16. A tempting analogy: a minor revolution does not come from a minor (say, subaltern) history; it is rather that which a subaltern constructs within a major history. It is also in this manner that we interpret Hartman’s suggestion that the minor revolution is a nonevental one (does not enter History, so to speak) in the way that major revolutions are located within history. The relevance of this analogous way to understand Hartman, however, is limited due to Deleuze and Guattari’s absence from her text – her chorus of citations. This is in part why we turn to the work of Amaryah Armstrong.

⁴Armstrong, “Losing Salvation.”

⁵Armstrong, “Of Flesh and Spirit.”

sustenance, Marx and Engels stipulated that societies are formed around class divisions that correspond to the function each class serves for the sustenance of the society as a whole.⁶ These class divisions may produce diverging class interests, which are resolved through a machination such as the state or religion that represents the interest of the dominant class as the collective interest. In turn, a subaltern class emerges, whose interest is neither served by nor represented in the collective interest. This class exists thus in an alienated condition, and the event of revolution occurs when the subaltern class finds the present state of things intolerable and overthrows the state in order to resolve the alienation. In the capitalist mode of production, Marx and Engels suggest, the destiny of all classes is tied up with the interests of the subaltern working class, or the proletariat (the dispossessed). The proletariat's revolutionary interest lies not merely in another class society, but in a classless society.

This subsuming of individuals under definite classes cannot be abolished until a class has taken shape, which has no longer any particular class interest to assert against the ruling class ... The proletarians, if they are to assert themselves as individuals, will have to abolish the very condition of their existence hitherto (which has, moreover, been that of all society up to the present), namely, labor. Thus, they find themselves directly opposed to the form in which, hitherto, the individuals, of which society consists, have given themselves collective expression, that is, the State. In order, therefore, to assert themselves as individuals, they must overthrow the State.⁷

On the one hand, sustenance, or the labor process, secretes the historical process, but, on the other hand, the revolutionary moment of history entails that the proletarian subaltern abolish labor, and by extension class society, as the condition of its own and everyone's existence. In the revolutionary moment, the life-process of class society turns against itself in the singular figure of the proletarian class. This kerygmatic announcement of the overthrow and abolition of class society echoes the foretold event of a Christian god's judgment at the end of the world. In either event, a singular or absolute force liquidates the gulf between classes and individuals, the general and the particulars, bodies and spirit.

Both liberation theologians and Marxist hermeneuticians elaborate this parallel between Christian eschatology and revolutionary sociology. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone drew on Moltmann's "theology of hope" to argue that eschatology must be present and disruptive, not deferred to the end of time.⁸ This presence demands that Christology "translate first century titles into symbols that are relevant today,"⁹ thence the urgent figure of Black Christ during the civil rights struggle and since. Cone moreover linked this urgency to Marx's definition of the human being as praxis, that is, a free being to the extent she is "participating in social structures for human liberation."¹⁰ This notion of human freedom as the active struggle for emancipation supports the liberationist attention to the Oppressed One. Although he was partial to Marx's anthropology, Cone also insisted that Marx's reduction of religion to ideology was inadequate. Marx was correct in identifying how oppressors use religion as an opiate to pacify the poor, but wrong to dismiss faith itself.¹¹ For Cone, Black faith

⁶Marx and Engels, "German Ideology," 154-60.

⁷Ibid., 198-200.

⁸Cone et al., *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 147-8.

⁹Ibid., 219.

¹⁰Ibid., 94-5.

rooted in the contemporary symbolization of the Exodus story is not mystification but liberative praxis, a theology that discloses God's presence in the struggle for freedom.

On this note, Black radical theorists and Marxist hermeneuticians have wrestled with the status of religion in Marxism.¹² A major treatment of this problematic appears in the work of Fredric Jameson, whose resolution to the problem Cone takes up with Marx—namely, the instrumentalization of religion, or culture broadly, by the economy—works in tandem with his theological buttressing of Marxist hermeneutics. Allegory is the name of this resolution and buttress. While Marx's reputation for negative hermeneutics in his critique of ideology is ubiquitous, Jameson supplemented the Marxist reading repertoire with a positive hermeneutics of Utopia. Cultural texts, Jameson argued, allegorize a Utopian collectivity despite, and precisely due to, their dominant class ideology. A Marxist hermeneutics of culture, in Jameson's landmark proposal, coordinates the positive and negative poles—of the critique of class ideology with the elaboration of Utopian collectivity. Jameson's basis for this argument lies in Emile Durkheim's theory of religion or metaphysical totality as a figuration of social totality posited by society.

Christian allegories of redemption thus give way to Marxist allegories of revolution due to Durkheim's sociological allegory between religion and society. The Utopian aspect of religion, insofar as it echoes the revolution foretold in historical materialism, would resolve the problem of instrumentalization in Marxism, along the lines that Cone suggests.

The allegorical resolution between Marxism and religion – and by extension, Black radical faith – motivates an allegorizing of racial subalternity with class subalternity which is not, however, a resolution. The self-abolition of labor is liberatory but when made analogous to racial subalternity it calls for the destruction of blackness. Despite their resonance and parallelism, unlike Cone's revolutionary eschatology – which makes black people the protagonist of divine history – the Marxist end of history might spell doom for the racial subaltern. Denise Ferreira da Silva writes, “the eschatology that in the historical materialist text brings about self-determination in the text of race relations produces social subjects that yearn for self-obliteration.”¹³ In other words, the historical materialist version of major revolution renders the racial subaltern suicidal.¹⁴ Ferreira da Silva shows that the historical materialist diagnosis of racism as a logic of exclusion in which the slave or the non-European is not (fully) included in the category

¹¹Cone et al., *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 133–4.

¹²The comprehensive work of Roland Boer is the chief example. On the side of Black radical thought, the theme of the superstructure looms large as noted by Cedric Robinson, but here we draw particularly from Fred Moten's deconstruction of Marx's deconstruction of the theological niceties of the commodities. Marx's commodity that speaks is not as much a parody of capitalism as a repression of the object's resistance, the slave commodities who spoke. See Moten, “Resistance of the Object.”

¹³Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea*, 165.

¹⁴Huey Newton's transvaluation of suicide could be seen as a culmination of this impasse. Considering sociological studies on the prevalence of suicide amongst black people, Newton came up with a distinction between reactionary and revolutionary suicide. The latter was the title to his autobiography. The idea was that an unjust society demands from the oppressed either a philosophical suicide (to tolerate oppression) or an actual suicide (which Newton called reactionary suicide) or a revolutionary suicide (a life of resistance). In the third option, the oppressed individual risks their life not for a death wish but for the love of dignified life, a life that can only be brought forth via active struggle and violence, and likely it will not come in the lifetime of the revolutionary. See “Revolutionary Suicide: The Way of Liberation” in *Revolutionary Suicide*. Insofar as the resistance of a revolutionary targets the same pressures of social death that occasion both revolutionary and reactionary suicides, David Marriott deconstructs Newton's distinction between the two in “On Revolutionary Suicide,” *Diacritics*.

of human or citizen is incomplete and flawed.¹⁵ Modern sociology of race relations makes the very existence of nonwhiteness a social problem, and- places the others of Europe on a trajectory to annihilation.¹⁶ In this view, race tensions existed because Asian and Black workers did not assimilate into the hegemonic identity as easily as the Slavic or Italian immigrant had by forming a Euro-American whiteness. As a result, the solution to “the negro problem” is entailed in the disappearance of the others of Europe, by death or by miscegenation. Even to the liberation-seeking racial subaltern, the driver of race prejudice is their difference, in the absence of which race relations would return to the ethnic harmony of whiteness. Class and race are thus disanalogous—the former is a logic of exclusion, and the latter a logic of elimination. A logic that historical materialism unwittingly recapitulates through allegory.

This limit of revolutionary sociology reappears, as if allegorically, in liberation theology’s omission of God’s selectivity in emancipating the oppressed. We are referring to the story of Hagar’s escape in the book of Genesis, where God brings not liberation but instead sends Hagar back into captivity. As the womanist tradition has argued, Hagar’s surrogacy for the Abrahamic patriarchy exceeds liberation theology. The theologian Delores Williams – a major influence on Amaryah Armstrong’s discussion in the next section – explains how “God’s response of survival and quality of life to African-American women and mothers of slave descent” serves as the source of hope in their “daily lives of oppression and toil.”¹⁷ Contrary to a acting as a great liberator, this God makes a way out of no way, and thus this tradition provides a way of considering God that honors the lived experiences of black women.¹⁸

The recapitulation in Marxist sociology and the omission (or inapplicability) of liberation theology, we hazard, implicates hermeneutics and allegory as the chief theoretical instrument of major revolution. Major revolution – whether theological or materialist – secures its universality through allegory based upon a black figure that nonetheless threatens that universality, its law, and the function of allegory. Indeed, allegory, the filament of major revolutionary thought across discourses, comes to serve the establishment of Christian universal community at the expense of Hagar – as Amaryah Armstrong shows in her critique of Pauline allegory, to which we will now turn.

3. Wayward hagarology

Armstrong’s hagarology engages two classical interpretations of Hagar. In Genesis, Hagar was the servant, slave, and surrogate of Abram and Sarai. She runs away to the

¹⁵This logic operates in the manner described above in the passage on *German Ideology*. For a group to be excluded is to participate in society without political representation of group interest.

¹⁶da Silva, “Sociologies of Race Relations.”

¹⁷Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6–7.

¹⁸It is worth noting that there is a strain in the womanist re-interpretation of Hagar’s story that emphasizes not the antagonism between Hagar and Sarai, but rather reparatively reads a missed sisterhood between them (not least, also suggesting a clerical sorority). This is present in Williams but more explicitly in Weems’ “A Mistress, A Maid,” *Just a Sister Away*, where she interpellates the audience of the text into a first-person plural comprising both Hagar and Sarai “For those of us who are educated and employed, there is always the potential to be a Sarai ... Yet most of us are just a paycheck away from Hagar.” The project of womanist sisterhood thus partakes in the opening problematic addressed in a more secular vein by Lauren Berlant’s 1988 article “The Female Complaint”: namely, “the fractures within the female subject.” The prognoses offered to this problem by Berlant’s feminist theory and womanist theology are different and difficult to characterize in relation to each other without discussing the tensions, slippages, and solidarities between feminists, womanists, and black feminists. That discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

wilderness while pregnant. There she has a theophany and God sends her back into captivity. God does not act as a liberator, but someone who provides the conditions of possibility of survival. This episode figures in the classical womanist interpretation. The Pauline interpretation, on the other hand, circles around the later episode where Hagar and Ishmael are ousted by Abraham after Sarah gives birth to Isaac. For Paul, the universal covenant of Christianity—that overcomes the particularistic, fleshly differences between man, woman, Jew, Gentile—is a spiritual community. This community is allegorized by the Abrahamic lineage of Sarah and Isaac, and Hagar signifies a non-spiritual community, non-universal community. Thus, for womanist theology Hagar represents the experiences of black women, and for Pauline typology, Hagar appears as flesh only to give way to the emergence of the spiritual covenant. We suggest that Armstrong posits Hagar as a “necessary figure for political theology” because she figures as a wayward prophet.

Armstrong critiques Paul’s allegory, on the one hand, and goes further beyond the womanist identification with Hagar on the other—she interprets Hagar as a limit figure of scripture. Or, in other words, as a figure that crosses and exposes the limit of Abrahamic patriarchy, allegory, and theology. This exposure furthermore “threatens the sovereignty of the law and contests the universal subject as the one whose legibility gives meaning to the law.”¹⁹ Armstrong presents this threat and exposure through a Spillersian distinction between flesh and body, where “body ... is [discursively] refined from the raw material of the flesh.”²⁰ While the body can signify the spirit, flesh is a social life in a bare form. This results in a “crime against the flesh,” inscribing it with an indelible stigma, at the heart of Paul’s universalist allegory:

in order to articulate how the universal community is a spiritual reality that supersedes the flesh, Paul requires the distinction between the slave and the free to be upheld. Hagar’s slaveness must be taken as something essential to her person— something which can be transmitted to her children—in order to distinguish the inheritance of the flesh from the inheritance of the promise. The universality intended to abolish the distinction that separated a Gentile slave mother like Hagar from the community established in Christ actually becomes the means by which her figuration as slave and her reproductive labor are reen-
trenched as both innately available for use and innately a threat to the child who properly inherits the promise.²¹

Hagar’s enslavement as the singular condition of universal community thus reproduces an antagonism between black women and theology. Indeed, the modern universal subject, coterminous with racial slavery, is prefigured in Paul’s universalism. The slave trade’s transformation of flesh into (the captive) body subjugates the name “blackness” for this devalued body which is really a form of anti-blackness.²² Attending thus to Hagar demonstrates the hermeneutical conditions of slaveholding Christianity. At the same time, Hagar as flesh is both the condition of possibility and impossibility of spiritual community—both basis and threat to Christianity.

¹⁹Armstrong, “Of Flesh and Spirit,” 127.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 130.

²¹Armstrong, “Of Flesh and Spirit,” 132.

²²“This stasis of meaning and value imposed upon the name “blackness” is what we might call anti-blackness or anti-flesh. For, this naming is in service to writing over the life that the body hides – it is a violence that seeks to evacuate the flesh of its social life.” *Ibid.*, 134.

Armstrong goes further to argue that the figure of Hagar, not least in the instability that arises from her various displacements, exposes the insecurity of the law.²³ Hagar's surrogacy both makes possible the promise between God and Abram and interrupts that whole machinery of inheritance. This machinery, or system of obligatory relations, Armstrong formulates thus:

negotiation of where or with whom responsibility for Hagar lies is the negotiation of to whom Hagar is indebted, to whom her reproduction is obligated, and who is responsible for (i/e)nsuring that Hagar will fulfill this obligation. Securing the slave's flesh is thus the manner of (i/e)nsuring the payment of the debt the expected progeny will fulfill.²⁴

Sarai and Abram transfer rights to Hagar as a property, and as fugitive, Hagar steals herself—along with the reproductive futurity of the patriarchal covenant—away. We know that God appears in order to indirectly fulfill his promise to Abram but also—though only secondarily—to ensure Hagar's survival. God arrives thus as the ultimate insurer/ensurer because all promises, and indeed the bonds and bondage that arise from it, are undone in Hagar's movement:

In her movement, not only has Hagar unlatched the surety of Abraham and Sarah's negotiation of responsibility for Hagar's mobility, she has also unlatched the surety, as in certainty, with which the slave's liberation is figured as a final achievement in black liberation theology.²⁵

The notion of "surety," as insuring and ensuring, indexes how state violence is hewn to promises, how conveniently threats and risks slip between financial and physical registers – how, as Armstrong notes, the operation of inheritance theologically structures economy and kinship.²⁶ As God ensures his covenant, in not only saving Hagar's life but also sending her back to the plantation, the surety of freedom-as-a-promise also comes undone, or is marked as a false flag of freedom. It is Hagar's waywardness, being the occasion for God's intervention to fulfill enslavist and patriarchal obligations, that exposes freedom as a type of bondage without erecting another speculative figure of freedom at the same time. As Armstrong writes: "Attention to the flesh requires an understanding of freedom as nothing other than *otherwise material conditions*."²⁷ Freedom-as-otherwise almost appears thus at the margins of the violence against the flesh committed in the name of a freedom-as-promise.

Hagar, in her theophany, moreover, becomes one of the few scriptural figures to name God. This name carries the ambivalence, or the structure of limit and its exposure, that Hagar does not stand for but appears intermittently in her movement.

that Hagar names God "El Roi," (God of seeing) suggests her naming is a cut in the optics of Abraham and Sarah, for whom the ocular is the means of securing Hagar's constrained mobility. Rather than running in a straight line from Abraham, in Hagar's naming sight

²³"Through the enactment of an encounter with various displacements, dispersions, and de-sedimentations, a difficulty is created in tracking the relations of domination. But this difficulty also highlights the instability of the slave as a figure. She moves within her objectivity. She speaks. She makes herself fugitive." Ibid., 136.

²⁴Ibid., 138.

²⁵Ibid., 138.

²⁶"inheritance is theologically founded as a structuring element of economy and kinship," Ibid., 128.

²⁷Emphasis added. Ibid., 137. To deform a famous Marxist phrase: freedom cannot be seen in the world or even imagined but only arrive in change or changing of the world.

becomes turned in on itself, undoing itself as the affirmation of security and becoming, instead, the indictment of such surveillance.²⁸

Following Baruch Spinoza, we might consider her a prophet in this theophany.²⁹ While Armstrong follows closely womanist hagarology and indeed womanist commitments, she anticipates in this 2017 text already her future call for a wayward theology that goes beyond the traces of redemption, or the surety of freedom as promise, in womanist theology. Hagar already has nothing to do with redemption, even though redemption (indeed, inheritance) can only be possible by ensuring Hagar's captivity. In 2023, Armstrong proposes to lose redemption in black theology, and she motivates this proposal based on her reading of the perennial crisis of meaning in black theology.

Armstrong argues, "from its emergence, black theology – in both its liberationist and its womanist forms – has understood a fundamental crisis or challenge to be the condition of possibility for its speech."³⁰ The crisis that both these traditions contend with arises from the various aspects of whiteness embedded in Christian theology, and thereby its inadequacy for a black radical politics. Whereas for James Cone this crisis was rooted in the aloofness of theological debates to the ongoing crisis faced by black people, for the womanist Jacquelyn Grant the crisis had to do with tensions between white and black women's structural positions vis-à-vis Christ.³¹ Armstrong is critical of the fact that the tendency of black theologians is to resolve this crisis, for the crisis would return to the extent that reconciliation or redemption recapitulates the antiblackness of Christianity.³²

Taking this recurring and ongoing crisis of meaning—alongside critiques of black theology as U.S.- and Christocentric—as "an occasion for stranger thought," Armstrong leans into nontheology to develop an alternative theological approach. Through an "immanent reading of political theology's appearance in ostensibly secular black feminist thought," the wayward theologian treats a "fundamental problem of black political desire in general—namely, the dominance of a political theological structure of redemption that attempts to route black acts, even those that aim at revolutionary projects of liberation, into a racial economy of redemption."³³ More specifically, Armstrong turns to Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe's critiques of "national romances of black belonging."³⁴ This redemptive romance, whether the return of the captive as tourist in Africa searching for his roots, or through a spectacle of the black maternal figure's redemptive suffering in the name of freedom, inevitably fails.³⁵ For such reconciliation, as if the rupture of the Middle Passage were in any sense reparable,³⁶ incarnates the ghost of slavery that haunts all redemptive kinship, as Hagar haunts Abrahamic patriarchy.³⁷ Christian

²⁸There is, moreover, a penumbral re-figuration of Hagar that Armstrong duly plays on here. As St. Augustine wrote, Hagar is the shadow of a shadow in the emergence of God's great city. She is doubly negated but also dwells in the shadows.

²⁹Spinoza, "Chapter 2" in *Theological-Political Treatise*.

³⁰Armstrong, "Losing Salvation," 327.

³¹Ibid. Also, Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*.

³²Armstrong, "Losing Salvation," 327.

³³Ibid., 324, 327. While Armstrong sets up the opposition between redemption and revolution, we would suggest that revolution itself is redemptionist and thereby propose that we "lose our revolution."

³⁴Ibid., 330.

³⁵Ibid., 329, 331.

³⁶Ibid., 329.

³⁷Ibid., 331.

redemptionism, in the form of a return to the homeland or to the family, thus reproduces the antiblack world. A wayward refusal to reconcile, however, appears as “not only the loss of a genealogical tie but the loss of loss itself via the destruction of anything like legitimate traces of kinship or homeland that one could rely onto provide a sense of belonging, continuity, or purpose,”³⁸ and such a pivot also “undermines theological senses of descent that preserve white belonging at the expense of black freedom” thereby exceeding the antiblack failures of Christianity.³⁹

To refuse the orthodoxy of redemption and then to appropriate political theology, Armstrong argues, would be “a means of occupying the heretical force attributed to blackness.”⁴⁰ The strangeness of this wayward theology hearkens to the ancient heresy of gnosis, which, “in this black sense, foregrounds the theological rebellion that is immanently generated from black feminist encounters with redemption’s failure.”⁴¹ The impossibility of kinship, or the haunting afterlife of slavery—these are notions generated in the black feminist encounter with the failure of emancipation and return. Wayward black theology inhabiting “its honest disinheritance—its alienation from theological and national belonging and the promise of a worldly home” performs its theological rebellion in its simultaneous refusal and appropriation of Christianity as a “a way of making God pay for the crimes of redemption.”⁴²

While Armstrong draws on Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* project, we take this problematic to a different place in Hartman’s oeuvre: her engagement with black women’s labor and revolutions in black intimate life. Following Armstrong’s movement from black theology, to secular critique, to heresy, we bring this wayward theology to bear on the sociological pieties and orthodoxies of revolution. Indeed, we suggest that the opposition between revolution and redemption to which Armstrong refers as a fundamental problem of black political desire⁴³ might need to be further clarified by another opposition: between major and minor revolution.

4. Hartman’s chronotology of minor revolution

Saidiya Hartman offers a crucial intervention in revolutionary thought by challenging the dominant paradigm of major revolution as a singular, cataclysmic rupture. Unlike Marxist historical materialism and liberation theology—which envision emancipation as a decisive overturn of existing structures—Hartman reconceives revolution as a non-vental, ongoing practice rooted in survival and refusal within persistent systems of racial and social capture. The excess of black women’s labors over the schema of the DuBoisian General Strike motivates this reconceptualization. Her analysis centers on recurrent spatiotemporal sites of oppression—the hold, the plantation, and the ghetto—which, through our interpretive lens, can be understood as *chronotopes* that, despite shifts in actors and historical particularities, reproduce structurally similar dynamics of

³⁸Ibid. 0.330.

³⁹Ibid., 331.

⁴⁰Ibid., 332.

⁴¹“Losing Salvation,” 333.

⁴²Ibid., 335–36.

⁴³“fundamental problem of black political desire in general – namely, the dominance of a political theological structure of redemption that attempts to route black acts, even those that aim at revolutionary projects of liberation, into a racial economy of redemption,” Ibid., 327.

captivity/evasion. Within these repeating frameworks, minor revolution emerges not as a ruptural event but as persistent excess and transgression that disrupts rather than abolishes the prevailing order. Hartman narrates Esther Brown and her chorus' "sonic revolt" at the Bedford Reformatory in 1920 –as a "revolution in minor key."

Hartman subverts the state archives from which she draws: while the state had justified the violent confinement of Esther Brown by rendering her a locus of criminal futurity, Hartman reads that same futurity as a revolutionary dream.⁴⁴ Wandering ungovernably through the streets of Harlem, Brown had refused servitude in the forms of work and marriage—she was wild and wayward, she wanted "better than what she had."⁴⁵ Hartman renders this refusal and the futurity that coalesces around it as an aesthetico-political expression of a lifeprocess—a "social poesis" beyond alienation: not producing value and whiteness, Esther Brown also "did not try to create a poem or song or painting. What she created was Esther Brown."⁴⁶ And so, she was arrested under a vagrancy law, a status offense: not because of what she did, but because of who she was and what she *could* do (the likelihood of future crime). As Hartman writes: "What the law designated as crime were the forms of life created by young black women in the city."⁴⁷ The wayward forms of life express the dreams of another world, visions of a future without subjection and being governed. In this respect, the ghetto was coterminous/continuous with the plantation, and even the slave ship: the future (as crime or as increase) had invaded the present to justify the subjection of black female flesh. But that same continuity imbues a freedom into the very hold of the ship. Revolutions in black intimate life are thus marked simultaneously by a subjection in the name of a future, and by a future dreamt in refusal.

The 1920 "noise strike" at the Bedford Hills reformatory for young women is exemplary of such revolutionary social poesis. Newspapers registered a "din of an infernal chorus" from girls abused and contained due to their outlawed forms of life cultivated in the ghetto.⁴⁸ These papers failed to hear that "the chorus spoke in one voice" of horrors endured and the future still dreamt.⁴⁹ "The call and the appeal transformed them from prisoners into rioters, from inmates to fugitives, even if only for thirteen hours. In the discordant assembly, they found a hearing in one another."⁵⁰ Hartman thus marks a minor revolution by a fugitive choros/chorus in excess of the topos of confinement, a futurist kairos in excess of the progressive chronos.⁵¹

Both major and minor revolutionary conceptions share the premise of social poesis, but Hartman defamiliarizes it by attending to the political excess of natal alienation. The materialist conception of history begins with the priority of the lifeprocess of sustenance, which ends up expressing itself in the form of religion or culture or state or ideas.

⁴⁴Hartman, "Note on Method," *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

⁴⁵Hartman, "Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," 466.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 469.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸Hartman, "Anarchy of Colored Girls," 481.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Hartman, "Anarchy of Colored Girls," 483. The archive – yet effacement – of this community of the fugitive in Bedford is in an interesting contrast to Hartman's wish and refusal to imagine two girls, in the archive of racial slavery, as friends. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 9.

⁵¹Indeed, the recuperation of Paul amongst Marxists has also dovetailed with a theme of Kairos – or the notion of the correct or opportune time and place. Minor revolutionary temporality, the future dreamt in refusal, in this sense, is closer to "akairos" as discussed by Roland Boer in "Revolution in the Event."

In this sense, the survivalist or womanist tradition of black theology is more akin to historical materialism than the liberationist one. What we would characterize as Hartman's chronotopological materialism takes as its core premises (1) the unity of survival and aesthetics, and (2) a spatiotemporal algebra of captivity. Both premises arise from the fact that the labors of black women exceed the black radical tradition, and its romances of the black workers' freedom. Hartman's sentence that resounds⁵²—"mere survival was an achievement in a context so brutal"—emphasizes the politics of a beautiful life in the face of social death. She further traces the reappearance of this brutality in chronotopes that reproduce natal alienation with a merely political difference: from the slaveship, to plantation, to ghetto, and then the prison.⁵³ Instead of producing or promising a revolutionary ruptural event, black women's "labors cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the black worker, but instead nourish the latent text of the fugitive. They enable those "who were never meant to survive" to sometimes do just that. This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation."⁵⁴ The nonevent of minor revolution, from the survival of Esther Brown to the recalcitrant domestic, nourishes fugitive life generously and perilously. Wayward lives thus evince a form of revolutionary social poesis that exceed and transgress the spatiotemporal limits imposed by captivity: "the slave exists out of the world and outside the house."⁵⁵ For the same reason, she is outside a politics of revolution, outside a radical romance. This spatial excess is also a temporal infelicity: the nonevent of emancipation and the failure any national romances of belonging.

Hartman's concept of minor revolution thus carries a double meaning, echoing Hagar's naming of God, that captures its dialectical complexity: revolution is at once a recurring cycle and a rupture. This is a sociological rebellion in a black feminist encounter with the failure of major revolution—its inadequate tropology of workers' freedom and the general strike.⁵⁶ The recurrent chronotopes of the hold, plantation, and ghetto enact ongoing cycles of violence, captivity, and surveillance, producing a feedback loop of racialized subjection and structural violence. Yet, within these cycles, minor revolution emerges as an excess: a series of embodied, fugitive eruptions that unsettle and transgress these spatial-temporal regimes. This double sense gestures toward revolution's temporality as never fully evental or complete but rather as a continual alternation between repetitive confinement and excessive fugitivity. Esther Brown's wayward life exemplifies this dynamic, enacting both cyclical captivity and incarnational refusal, performing the persistent excess that disrupts structural confinement.

Minor revolution is not final overthrow but an ongoing political and aesthetic practice that inhabits the interstices of recurring histories and probes otherwise futures. Thus, Hartman's intervention culminates in a synthesis of a chronotopological critique of major revolution with a (post)womanist ethic grounded in the interior poesis and

⁵²Hartman, "Belly of the World," 171; Hartman, "Anarchy of Colored Girls," 466.

⁵³"The ghetto became the third matrix of black death and dispossession, after the slave ship and the plantation, and anticipating the prison." Hartman, "Belly of the World," 168.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

“isness” of black resistance.⁵⁷ Minor revolution refuses the finality of deliverance narratives and the fixity of subjection, insisting instead on the enduring creativity and embodied existence through which black waywardness continually contests and re-signifies dominant structures. The ongoing fugitive acts exemplified by Esther Brown reveal how waywardness creates critical openings within systems designed to erase black presence and (overdetermine black) agency. Yet this poesis inhabits an ambivalent tension: the precarious push and pull between perpetual fugitivity—the ongoing refusal of capture—and the hopeful pursuit of broader structural and political transformation. This dialectic presents both an emancipatory challenge and an ethical call to sustain insurgent life affirmations without closure, nurturing a revolutionary futurity rooted in continual becoming and the politics of living otherwise.

5. Conclusion

Minor revolution, via wayward theology, checks Marxism but is not hostile to it—it is hostile only to the glorification of Paul in the contemporary leftism of Badiou and Žižek.⁵⁸ The gnosis in black also radicalizes how some far right ideologues have lumped Marxism and critical race theory. The grifter James Lindsay has resuscitated the ideas of the political theorist Eric Voeglin to misconstrue counter-hegemonic thinking. Voeglin had called gnosis or Gnosticism any utopian political approach that insisted on an otherwise. Lindsay has made a career applying these McCarthyist theories to contemporary left cultures. Moreover, minor revolution insists on survival as the rupture, as the zero degree of knowledge and politics—and in this sense the survivalist theology appears more Marxist than the liberationist one. Not that human as praxis for freedom is antithetical to minor revolutionary thought, but that it is located downstream from survival. Wayward theology pushes beyond reconciliatory terms between black theology and Marxism to insist on the labor of the negative against both redemption and revolution.

What does minor revolution look like today? By way of conclusion, we would return to god-talk, to give a non-sociological supplement to the minor revolutionary thinking of social transformation. The womanist theologian Eboni Marshall Turman notes the unpaid and invisibilized labors of black churchwomen as part of the patriarchal rituals that abate heaven within the black church. Committed still to hearing heaven, or revolution, as already underway Turman locates the evidence of utopia (or, *basileia*) in black women’s dance. In a process of *plerosis*, black “women’s sacred dance employs socially subjugated bodies ... as parabolic signifiers that use the potency of the present to signal the supremacy of the transcendent.”⁵⁹ We might compare this to Hartman’s description of Esther Brown’s movements: “An everyday choreography of the possible ... a manner of walking that threatened to undo the city, steal back the body, break all the windows ... unregulated movement encouraged the belief that something great could happen despite everything you knew.”⁶⁰ This demonstration of an otherwise

⁵⁷See Townes for elaboration on the incarnational affirmation inherent in the designation “is-ness.” Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 48.

⁵⁸In this hostility, we follow Armstrong, “Flesh and Spirit.”

⁵⁹Turman, “Moving Heaven and Earth,” 123.

⁶⁰Hartman, “Anarchy of Colored Girls” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

world through embodied figuration dovetails with Hartman's minor revolutionary emphasis on the beautiful life produced in the wayward's miraculous survival.

Indeed, minor revolution insists that survival itself is sacred, aesthetic, and disruptive. Yet this insistence raises a troubling possibility: if minor revolution is defined by fugitivity, refusal, and endurance, does it situate the subjugated in a perpetual posture of fugitivity? And how to come into an ethical relation to this fugitivity insofar as "the risk the fugitive poses to sovereignty is also a risk to the self," for the fugitive is (in) an unromanticizable danger?⁶¹ Does the fugitive excess that undoes sovereignty become a revolving event – or nonevent – in which black life is trapped in cycles of survival without structural transformation?

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⁶¹Armstrong, "Of Flesh and Spirit," 138.

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Unrealizing the Haitian Revolution: On Popular Insurgency and Destituent Power

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that a rigorous account of popular insurgency across the Haitian Revolution unsettles dominant scholarly presuppositions and coordinates, including the basic narrative elements that make the Haitian Revolution a distinct political sequence – its senses of beginning and end, continuity and discontinuity, success and failure. In contrast to the (largely Creole) official revolutionary leadership, who defended legal emancipation and strove for state power, the (largely African-born or Bossale) popular insurgency of formerly enslaved insurrectionaries, maroons, and workers sought to destroy the plantation order as such. This essay takes destituent power as a starting point for conceptualizing the complex unity of insurrectionary activity of immediate abolition and subtractive withdrawals to the outside at the heart of the Bossale popular insurgency. It also revises contemporary approaches to destituent power by theorizing the impossible-yet-real modality as an insurrectionary correlate to deactivating impotentiality and by recovering the necessary imbrication of the general insurrection and the general strike.

If these black insurgents were “conscripts of modernity,” they were also its deserters and mutineers. Turning the plantations into a “charred desert,” they launched a transcendental attack on the plantocratic order of modernity, on the power of the plantation to produce the modern world and to determine the conditions of possibility for action, thought, and experience. Contravening the metaphysical-political paradigm of realization, their trajectory expressed the unrealizable in the revolution’s successful realization, indicating something more and less – and entirely different – than a revolution: the most extensive enactment of industrial sabotage in modern history, the earliest victorious modern guerilla war, the most successful long-term struggle against the plantation order, and the singular invention of a post-capitalist destituent form of life. This multiplicity appears only once we relinquish our treasured investments in revolution, which is what fidelity to the mass self-emancipation of the enslaved demands, if it is not to betray its object.

KEYWORDS

The Haitian Revolution;
destituent power; political
modernity; revolution;
popular insurgency

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Looking back on his epoch-making *The Black Jacobins* (1938) in a 1971 series of lectures, CLR James reflects that were he to rewrite the book he would devote more time to the speech and action of the self-emancipating masses themselves. While the book already ascribed a fundamental role to the masses within the Haitian Revolution, it prioritized to a greater extent the decisive importance of revolutionary leadership, exemplified in the singular figure of Toussaint Louverture, for mobilizing and organizing them toward a revolutionary horizon. The imagined revision would counteract the tendency, common in theory as much as in practice, of assimilating popular insurgency to the perspective of its leaders. Recognized revolutionary leaders bestow upon largely anonymous popular insurgencies a form and a direction, a voice and a program, but at the cost of effacing their autonomous desires and trajectories.

James also reflects on the significance of two footnotes he added to the 1963 revised edition of *The Black Jacobins*, both of which feature quotations from Georges Lefebvre, the pioneering historian of the French Revolution from below. The first draws a stark contrast between the radical democratic orientation of the sans-culottes and the enlightened authoritarianism of the Jacobins, who “wished to act with the people and for them, but ... claimed the right of leadership and when ... at the head of affairs ... ceased to consult the people.”¹ The second underscores the anonymity and obscurity of the real popular leaders of the French Revolution, who did their work in the streets and workshops, away from official political arenas. “The people and their unknown leaders knew what they wanted. They followed the Girondins and afterwards Robespierre, only to the degree that their advice appeared acceptable.”² These footnotes “wouldn’t be footnotes if the book were to be rewritten today,” James explains, but to fully elaborate their consequences “I would have had to alter the whole book.”³

Making the book fully consistent with these insights would have required a complete revision because they implied the reversal and ultimately the breakdown of the dialectical relations between the masses and revolutionary leadership developed across *The Black Jacobins*. For James, the sans-culottes/Jacobins opposition becomes analytically salient for the Haitian Revolution in October 1801, when workers from plantations in the North, analogues of the sans-culottes, revolt against Toussaint and his ongoing coercive restoration of the plantation economy, mere months after Toussaint’s new constitution confirms the abolition of slavery and enshrines his power for life. This insurrectionary fracture between revolutionary black masses and revolutionary black leadership confirms the general truth that James learned from Lefebvre: leaders may appear to determine and direct the trajectory of popular insurgency but only as long as they listen to and express its desires. Therein lies the reversal. The masses follow those who lead only insofar as those who lead, more fundamentally, follow the masses. Toussaint spectacularly repressed the revolt through mass executions, including that of Moïse, his nephew and the military commander and agricultural inspector in the North, whom he held responsible. This is “the greatest mistake of his career,” but when read in conjunction with Lefebvre’s diagnosis of the Jacobins, it discloses something endemic – occurring “over and over again in the revolutionary movement” – to revolutionary

¹James, *The Black Jacobins*, 276; “Lectures,” 104.

²James, *The Black Jacobins*, 338; “Lectures,” 107.

³James, “Lectures,” 103, 105.

leadership oriented toward state power.⁴ From this perspective, “Toussaint” names the general problem of revolutionary leadership as it victoriously becomes constituted political power and, retaining its claim to “the right of leadership,” transforms the people into an object of government and, when necessary, of repression. For determinate stretches of the revolutionary process insurgent masses and revolutionary leaders move as one and speak in unison, but this fact does not erase their essential difference from each other.

While the 1801 revolt reveals the opposition between revolutionary leadership attaining power and insurgent masses refusing to become objects of government, the 1802 popular insurrectionary wave of arson, destruction, sabotage, and flight registers the complete breakdown and transformation of their relations into one of direct antagonism. In the pivotal period between June and October 1802, an intransigent popular insurgency confronts not only the French expedition – sent by Napoleon to reimpose slavery under the command of his son-in-law, General Charles Leclerc – but also those who had claimed to be their revolutionary leaders but had in May surrendered and joined the French. James recalls Pamphile de Lacroix’s description of the situation in the aftermath of the capitulation of Toussaint and his generals, Henri Christophe and Jean-Jacques Dessalines:

in the new insurrection of San Domingo, as in all insurrections which attack constituted authority, it was not the avowed chiefs who gave the signal for revolt but obscure creatures for the greater part personal enemies of the coloured generals.⁵

In his imagined rewriting, James would focus on these obscure insurrectionary creatures of 1802 – the Haitian counterpart of the obscure popular leaders of Paris – exasperatingly evoked in Leclerc’s August 1802 letter to Napoleon: “It is not enough to have taken away Toussaint, there are 2,000 leaders to be taken away.”⁶ Thousands of nameless leaders is how a counterinsurgency on the precipice of defeat feverishly imagines a dispersive insurgent field, where anyone can take initiative and nothing confers leadership except the intensification of insurrectionary activity itself. More than merely a historiographic shortcoming, their nameless obscurity attests to their refusal to claim “the right of leadership” as transcendent, stable, and hierarchical in favor of a guerilla clandestinity where leadership remains tactical, transient, and inseparable from mass obscurity.

James consigns Lefebvre’s insights to footnotes because fully working out their implications for the Haitian Revolution would have required nothing less than rewriting *The Black Jacobins* as *The Black Sans-Culottes*. This essay does not take up this historiographic task – which Carolyn Fick magisterially executed in *The Making of Haiti* – but it does pursue a theoretical line of inquiry inspired by James’s retrospective remarks. How can the trajectory of popular insurgency be determined if it cannot be limned from the speech and action of its revolutionary leaders? What are the defining characteristics and tendencies of popular insurgency, if it remains essentially autonomous from, and even antagonistic to, the revolutionary direction and order imposed on it? What demands and what strictures does an unconditional fidelity to mass self-emancipation impose in the realm of thought? And what is necessary for this fidelity not to

⁴James, *The Black Jacobins*, 276; “Lectures,” 104.

⁵James, *The Black Jacobins*, 338.

⁶*Ibid.*, 346.

inadvertently, and even unknowingly, betray itself and its object? I will show that rethinking the revolutionary sequence systematically from the insurgent perspective of largely anonymous insurrectionaries, maroons, and workers requires a thoroughgoing reassessment of the fundamental conceptual presuppositions, theoretical coordinates, and ideological investments that have guided scholarly approaches to the Haitian Revolution. An uncompromising commitment to popular insurgency, elaborated in a rigorously consistent manner, will unsettle even the basic narrative elements responsible for the shape and coherence of the Haitian Revolution as a distinct political sequence – its senses of beginning and end, its visions of continuity and discontinuity, its markers of success and failure.

Insurrection and revolution

The largest slave revolt in history begins on 22 August 1791, when some of Saint-Domingue's wealthiest plantations go up in flames. Widespread destruction of productive infrastructure follows, along with the killing of those who managed and owned it; within weeks, the general insurrection against the plantation order is tens of thousands self-emancipating insurgents strong. Two years later, in 1793, this self-directed insurrectionary activity compels the French, out of military necessity in the ongoing war against the British and Spanish, to proclaim legal emancipation in regions under their control. When the Haitian Revolution as a distinct political sequence ends in 1804, with the victorious declaration of independence and the ensuing constitutional enshrinement of slavery's abolition, it comes to express, in James's frequently adapted words, "the only successful slave revolt in history."⁷ Indeed, not just an insurrection or a revolt but a *revolution*, this was the measure of its success – and not just *a* revolution but the most radical one, extending universal rights to the formerly enslaved. Underlying these judgments is a conceptual commonplace of political modernity: revolution is superior to insurrection, naming its proper telos and trajectory of realization.

Although the 1791 general insurrection acts, in all standard accounts, as the unquestioned origin of the Haitian Revolution, none of the elements that will make it revolutionary are present at the beginning. Initially, abolition is neither a horizon nor a goal but an immanently intensifying insurrectionary activity of self-emancipation, which is "not preceded or even accompanied by an explicit intellectual discourse."⁸ This insurrectionary praxis of abolition without delay acquires a recognizably revolutionary character only when Toussaint bestows upon it a sufficiently universal horizon by centering the struggle "around the non-negotiable criteria of universal rights and the rule of law in a society free from slavery."⁹ Nothing is lost when the unfolding of the revolution appropriates the general insurrection as its origin as long as revolution only names insurrection's proper destiny and successful realization. But what if the general insurrection has immanent criteria of success, divergent from the fate of revolutionary teleological maturation, from what the revolutionary narrative retroactively grafts onto it by making it its origin? Could it be that revolution names not the continuation,

⁷James, *The Black Jacobins*, ix; see Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 1.

⁸Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 88. "The rebels themselves issued no general program or plan" (Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 193).

⁹Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 154.

intensification, and fulfillment of insurrection but its cooption, a way of harnessing its destituent energies for productive, ultimately constituent, ends? And could conceptually prioritizing the properly revolutionary aspects reduplicate, without acknowledging it, the perspective of revolutionary leadership while betraying the more expansive aims of popular insurgency?

The general insurrection carried out the immediate destruction of plantation slavery. Initially, there was no material difference between slavery and the plantation: destroying the plantations, the slaves simultaneously emancipated themselves. The 1793 declaration of legal emancipation by the French commissioners, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, fractures this unity to reveal the existence of two distinct aims, which up to that point remained superimposed and created the illusion of a unified one. Slavery was the form plantation labor took, but not the only one, it turned out. From 1793 on, the difference between abolishing slavery and abolishing the plantation order is incontrovertible: all revolutionary and post-revolutionary leadership will defend the abolition of slavery while attempting to restore the plantations. By contrast, the slaves-turned-insurgents-turned-workers persisted in their refusal of the plantations, whether based in slavery or coerced wage labor. As Fick shows in her archival reconstruction of worker resistance following the emancipation in the South, direct refusals of work and forms of work slowdown proliferated, as did squatting or direct takeover for free inhabitation and use.¹⁰ There was a marked expansion of commoning practices as well as of provision grounds for subsistence, those gardens and plots that here and elsewhere, as Sylvia Wynter argued, were “the focus of resistance to the market system and market values.”¹¹ These black workers enacted sabotage, tool breaking, and collective insubordination to the point of hindering production, as well as “anarchistic appropriation of plantation property” ranging from sugar and coffee to farm animals.¹² They practiced flight and disengagement grounded in social conspiracy, sheltered fugitives, and performed acts of mutinous complicity with those who became soldiers under the new regime.

For the black masses, the law that proclaimed their emancipation was the same law that coerced them back to the plantations. Along with declarations of abolition came the work codes, which from 1793–1794 to the monumental 1812 *Code Henri* and beyond coercively imposed plantation labor with threats of penal confinement, forced public works, and even corporal punishment. Throughout, leaders never stopped justifying the necessity of resuscitating the plantation economy: to protect general emancipation from external threat, to fund the state and its military, to ensure the continued existence of an independent Haiti.¹³ The repeated promulgation of the work codes confirmed what continual refusal of work and flight made clear more directly, that the black masses would not willingly work on the plantations. Slavery was legally abolished but, as Toussaint’s *Règlement de Culture* of October 1800 exemplified, all unauthorized movement was criminalized as vagrancy, and mobility became as restricted as ever, leaving the workers “more or less in a state of serfdom.”¹⁴ Legally free, the former slaves were

¹⁰See Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 168–77.

¹¹Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.

¹²Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 249.

¹³An excess always shadowed and undermined these claims of necessity, visible as much in Toussaint’s stated desire to restore Saint-Domingue to its past glory as in the six million dollar treasury surplus that existed at the time of Christophe’s death; see Fick, “Emancipation,” 32.

¹⁴Fick, “Emancipation,” 24.

rebaptized as *cultivateurs* but remained landless agricultural laborers under despotic control and were coerced back to plantations, frequently to the very same ones and sometimes under the very same masters.¹⁵ Toussaint's 1801 Constitution at once guaranteed freedom from slavery and racial subordination and strictly prohibited even the smallest disruption to the functioning of the plantation order, with the result that the black masses had "no tangible evidence of their freedom."¹⁶ Conjoining the legal codification of emancipation with the ruthless reimposition of the plantation economy was central to Toussaint's *caporalisme agraire*, but it was hardly an idiosyncratic policy. State-enforced, export-oriented plantation production remained the dominant project well into post-independence Haiti. Like slavery itself, its materialized symbols, the whip and the chains, were abolished, but in their stead clubs, vines, and rope came to be used with equal effectiveness against the *cultivateurs*.¹⁷

The self-emancipating masses could not be free as long as the plantations functioned, no matter what the law declared. They viscerally experienced the cunning truth that legal emancipation does not abolish but in fact presupposes the material reality of inequality and domination.¹⁸ The distinction between royal sovereign legitimacy and the transcendent legality of the law, decisive for Toussaint, appears less significant from this perspective than whether one is subjected to projects of violent accumulation and modernization or is left alone, free from imposition.¹⁹ More than a different vision of freedom, the trajectory of popular insurgency consistently exhibited a different, more radical, aim: *the destruction of the plantations*. More radical, however, did not mean more distant since the material destruction of the plantations necessarily entailed the *immediate* and *material* emancipation from slavery. By contrast, legal abolition was less a step on the way to this broader goal of plantation destruction, which contingently failed to be reached, than its neutralization: the successfully realized project of legal emancipation had as its necessary correlate plantations restored. Antagonistically limiting the insurgent aim of plantation destruction to the ideal sufficiency of legal emancipation, law was an apparatus of counterinsurgency even as it spoke the language of liberation – and even as it articulated the horizon of universality that bestowed upon the Haitian Revolution its revolutionary grandeur and legitimacy.

Dessalines declared independence on 1 January 1804, following the defeat of the Napoleonic forces, and the new constitution enshrined legal abolition the following year. This is the commonly accepted successful end of the Haitian Revolution. But in what sense is it an ending and a success? And for whom exactly? After all, "the mass of the population in the new nation had been returned in servitude to the same agricultural tasks they had known under slavery."²⁰ Celebrated as the father of the nation, Dessalines was also known for harsh discipline, cruel punishment, and brutal repression of the workers as inspector of agriculture under Toussaint, and this continued into his reign as the first ruler of Haiti.²¹ Under Christophe, who succeeded him in the North,

¹⁵Casimir, *The Haitians*, 102. Gonzalez documented that the practice of returning workers to the plantation where they were earlier enslaved continued long after the revolution's end (*Maroon Nation*, 107–9).

¹⁶Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 207–8; see Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 263–7.

¹⁷Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 122–3.

¹⁸This truth would be theoretically articulated only later by Karl Marx in "On the Jewish Question."

¹⁹See Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 154–67.

²⁰Fick, "Emancipation," 30.

²¹See Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 282; Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 84–128.

“discipline was as strict as it had been under slavery,” leading to sugar exports reaching nearly half of pre-revolutionary levels.²² For the insurrectionary masses who fought to destroy the plantocratic order, 1804 is not the essential point of discontinuity: the violent restoration of the plantation economy continued, even if plantation ownership had changed hands.²³ Unsurprisingly, insurrectionary activity also persisted: Dessalines’s reign ends by assassination in 1806 amidst growing upheaval, and Christophe’s suicide comes amidst a popular uprising.²⁴ All the while, *cultivateurs* also refused the plantation order by persistently fleeing into the island’s overgrown hills, just as slaves had done in the pre-revolutionary era.

For them, the essential point of discontinuity comes later. Only after the fall of Christophe’s Kingdom and the reunification of Haiti under the leadership of Jean-Pierre Boyer does the state effectively concede what continual peasant flight had already made a material reality, a “counter-plantation” way of life away from coercive supervision.²⁵ Boyer and his predecessor Alexandre Pétion, who was the president of the Republic in the South and West, were as committed as the black revolutionary leaders to the plantation economy; but they could not resort to authoritarian measures without endangering their political power as a *mulâtres* minority, resulting in a more laissez-faire economic policy and the gradual parceling out of land in exchange for political legitimacy.²⁶ If revolutionary narratives understood freedom from the plantations as a genuinely revolutionary objective, they would continue into the 1820s when large-scale agriculture was “in irreversible ruin,” but they mark 1804–1805 as the successful end and either ignore what follows or judge it a “counterrevolution of peasant property.”²⁷ Even this extension of the temporal frame is ultimately insufficient to do justice to those whose continual flight brought the plantations to ruin, because it remains within the epistemology of the state: legal acknowledgement of peasant use of the earth through official property rights was but a mechanism of inscribing it into the state’s extractive apparatus of taxation. These slaves-turned-insurgents-turned-*cultivateurs*-turned-peasants inhabited a perspective that was necessarily dispersive, tactical, and untranslatable into the transcendent universality and temporality of the law. They withdrew to become invisible and illegible, and to approach them through a prism of unity and legibility is to methodologically – and even metaphysically – reproduce the perspective of their enemies, of those who sought to enclose them within the state’s overseeing visibility so as to put them to work.

Constituent power or destituent power

On the eve of the general insurrection, two-thirds of the approximately half-million slaves in Saint-Domingue were African-born, or Bossale.²⁸ They made up the vast majority of the insurgent self-emancipating masses, in contrast to revolutionary black leadership and military hierarchy, who were predominantly Creole, or Caribbean-

²²Fick, “Emancipation,” 32; Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 86.

²³Casimir, *The Haitians*, 44.

²⁴See Trouillot, *Haiti*, 45–7; Fick, “Emancipation,” 32–3.

²⁵See Casimir, *The Haitians*, 137–42, 328, 351.

²⁶See Fick, “Emancipation,” 33–5; see Trouillot, *Haiti*, 47–8.

²⁷Fick, “Emancipation,” 35; Genovese, *From Rebellion*, 89. For a convergent critique, see Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 260–3. For the major exception to this mode of narration, see the singular Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*.

²⁸Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 25, 59.

born, and who formed, in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's words, the "embryo of the state-to-come."²⁹ As Gérard Barthélemy argued, the division between the Bossales, who made up the rural agricultural labor, and the Creoles, who made up the new urban elite, was decisive at the outset of the revolution and continued to be so deep into Haitian history.³⁰ A "reciprocal enmity," in Jean Casimir's words, characterized the relationship between the Bossale masses, who "responded to the repressive structure of the plantation system with a principled opposition," and the Creole elite, who remained invested in the productivity of the export-oriented plantation economy and took over the state apparatus, thereby appropriating for themselves the original colonial right of conquest over the territory.³¹

The Bossale trajectory, viewed in its entirety from the initial insurrection to the post-independence peasant form of life, exhibits a fundamental but overlooked enigma. It oscillates between two seemingly opposed types of activity, between two distinct tendencies that I will call *the insurrectionary tendency* and *the withdrawing tendency*. Both tendencies are characteristic of and essential to the Bossale trajectory, but this fact has remained untheorized and even unthematized, with scholarship analyzing them separately to illuminate different aspects of the revolution. Approaches exploring the refusal of the reimposition of plantation labor, exemplified by the work of Barthélemy and Nick Nesbitt analyzed below, have tended to highlight the withdrawing tendency by figuring Bossales as fleeing from the state and elaborating non-hierarchical forms of autonomy. By contrast, accounts investigating the military-political elements have tended to emphasize Bossales as experienced war veterans, enslaved after defeat in African wars, critical to the successes of the early years of the insurrection.³² Trouillot's mesmerizing reconstruction of Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci, "the Congo par excellence ... the most renowned of the African rebels," shows that this military-political element remained as significant at the end as it was in the beginning of the revolution: the Bossale insurgents were a continual problem for their enemies no less than for their official revolutionary Creole leadership, obstinately refusing to the end the discipline, order, and hierarchy that were the hallmark of European-style leadership adopted by Toussaint and his generals.³³ In the crucial months between June and October 1802, small rebel bands with Bossale leaders such as Sans Souci, Makaya, and Sylla – the most prominent of James's obscure leaders – refuse disarmament and form the final bulwark against counterinsurgency, which at that point includes the armies of Dessalines and Christophe. This relentless guerilla warfare, together with the widespread insurrectionary self-activity of the masses, succeeded "in spite of, in opposition to, rather than because of the black Jacobin leadership."³⁴ Refuting the claim that success required the organizational capacities of official revolutionary leadership and the productive capacities of functioning plantations, they instead confirmed a different, more profound truth, that the only genuinely inalienable capacity of those who claim "the right of leadership" is betrayal.

²⁹Trouillot, *Haiti*, 44.

³⁰See Barthélemy, *Créoles – Bossales*.

³¹Casimir, *The Haitians*, 14, 229–31.

³²See Thornton, "African Soldiers."

³³Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 67.

³⁴Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 231.

In light of Adom Getachew's argument for preserving "the specificity of the Haitian Revolution" by refusing to see it as merely the radical realization of French universalist ideals, I want to argue for preserving the specificity of the Bossale popular insurgency within the Haitian Revolution by theorizing the insurrectionary and withdrawing tendencies in their essential interrelation.³⁵ Analytically distinct, the two tendencies depend upon and recursively intensify one other and, at certain moments, fully coincide – but they have never been thought in a unified way. Delineating the specificity of popular insurgency's trajectory, in contradistinction to the projects of official revolutionary leadership, requires rigorously accounting for this complex unity of the immanently intensifying insurrectionary activity of immediate abolition and the subtractive withdrawals to the outside. A productive starting point for this theoretical undertaking – which will undergo substantial revision in the analysis that follows – is the contemporary concept of destituent power. This twenty-first-century concept first emerged to articulate the unique features of destituent insurrections as mass eventual ruptures neither determined by leaders or projects nor structured by instituting or representing logics.³⁶ It has since become a contested terrain for novel theories of mass uprising decoupled from modern revolutionary grammars and of politics in terms of withdrawal, exodus, deactivation, and inoperativity. Indexing an epochal shift, destituent power became salient, in Mario Tronti's judgment, with the eclipse of the collective modern subject who "was naturally constituent and a bearer of a positive project."³⁷ And it has subsequently provided a site for critically diagnosing the seemingly ineluctable relations revolutions have to new political foundations and for confronting the failures of revolutionary modernity without recourse to conservative revisionism or left-wing melancholia.

Across its varied articulations, destituent power's force, no less than its basic lexical and semantic properties, stems from its fundamental opposition to the dialectic between constituent power (of the people or the nation) and constituted power (of the state) essential to modern revolutions. Approaching the Bossale popular insurgency through the prism of destituent power brings into focus its antagonistic divergence from the Haitian Revolution as a political and narrative sequence marked by the celebrated dates (e.g., 1801, 1804) of constitutional and statist achievement when constituent power successfully converted itself into constituted power. Freed from revolutionary narrative enclosures, the insurrectionary and withdrawing tendencies exhibit an intrinsic disinvestment from the state and the law, from their universalities and their coercions, in favor of an uncompromising drive to destitution: the law is the vantage point of those who govern, but the Bossale popular insurgency did not seek to govern, to think or act like a state, revolutionary or otherwise: more precisely, it sought not to be governed but to be left alone.

The contours and implications of a destituent approach come into view by juxtaposition to a different attempt to rigorously theorize the specificity of popular insurgency in the Haitian Revolution. Nick Nesbitt's *Universal Emancipation* perceptively extolls post-emancipation peasant egalitarianism as the high point of freedom within the Haitian

³⁵Getachew, "Universalism," 823.

³⁶See Colectivo Situaciones, 19 & 20.

³⁷Tronti, "On Destituent Power."

revolutionary sequence, but this concluding judgment comes only after a prolonged defense of Toussaint's project of general emancipation and its culmination in the 1801 Constitution as essential moments in the political articulation of the Radical Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel's name for the strand of the Enlightenment grounded in Spinoza's materialist thought. Affirming these divergent perspectives – the perspective of revolutionary leadership and the perspective of the Bossale popular insurgency – in a conceptually consistent way, however, proves to be a difficult and, I argue, ultimately an impossible undertaking. Nesbitt attempts to accomplish this by means of what I would call a *narrative temporalization of the opposition*. An early summary formulation exemplifies this theoretical maneuver:

the simple, indivisible fidelity to universal emancipation shared by the entire subaltern population of Saint-Domingue nonetheless quickly revealed a primary contradiction between the developmental, wage- and surplus-based model of labor shared by all the modernizing elites ... and, in contrast, an unyielding strategy of resistance within the Bossale (African-born) community.³⁸

Unity comes first, then division. But exactly how quickly is the primary contradiction revealed? Symptomatically, Nesbitt cannot settle on a specific date, at one point proposing 1796 as the date when the indivisible fidelity gives way to divergent conceptions of freedom; at another, 1793; at yet another, locating it in Toussaint's repressions after his consolidation of power.³⁹ The impossibility of establishing the precise date stems not from some historical opacity or indeterminacy but from the fact that the primary contradiction is not in essence temporal. This impossibility is a symptom of a disavowal – a disavowal that attests to an intractable problem, at once empirical and theoretical, for Nesbitt's narrative temporalization – a disavowal of the basic fact that insurrectionary destitution came first.

In the beginning, the plantations burned. The initial general insurrection was a destituent praxis of ruination rather than a horizon of realization and foundation. The project of universal legal emancipation emerges out of this insurrectionary activity, becoming fully apparent only when the 1793 proclamation of emancipation irrevocably establishes the fundamental divergence between the abolition of slavery and the abolition of the plantation. Positioning universal legal emancipation as the original ground and unifying horizon theoretically undermines and effaces the more radical insurgent aim of materially destroying the plantation order as such. It also remains too idealistic in its assessment of the law: legal emancipation and the restoration of coerced plantation labor were structurally conjoined propositions for all revolutionary and post-revolutionary leadership. By contrast, those who burned down the plantations simultaneously emancipated themselves, because the destruction of the plantations necessarily entailed the material abolition of slavery without need of legal sanctification. Rather than legal, constituent, or ideal, the (ante-)originary common ground of mass self-emancipation is destituent, and its initial tactics – insurrectionary destruction and marooning withdrawal – confirm this.⁴⁰ That is, anarchic destitution came first, at

³⁸Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 7.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 172–3, 169, 168.

⁴⁰Even if, as Nesbitt argues, there are early attestations to the circulation of general emancipation as an ideal (*Universal Emancipation*, 62, 144–5), this does not override the fact that setting plantations aflame and retreating into insurgent marronage are essentially destituent actions, which defined the initial general insurrection and popular insurgent

the beginning and, in a sense, before the beginning, becoming the beginning and the proper origin of the revolution only once it was retroactively enclosed by the revolution's unfolding process of actualization.

Historically and theoretically misrecognizing universal legal emancipation as the originary unifying ground relegates destituent insurgency to a secondary role. Nesbitt thus characterizes the Bossale trajectory one-sidedly, as commencing with post-1793 resistance to plantation labor and as culminating in post-independence peasant egalitarianism, limiting it to what I have called the withdrawing tendency. To conceptualize this trajectory, Nesbitt mobilizes a radical reformulation of constituent power, grounded in Spinozist materialist universality, as autonomous from and critical of all constituted power. Withdrawing into the hills, the peasants refused "all forms of transcendental authority," preserving their autonomy, natural rights, and inalienable constituent power by rejecting representation in favor of an "absolute dedication to the expression of an uncompromised egalitarian freedom."⁴¹ This seems to align with Nesbitt's interpretation of the revolutionary sequence "between 1793 and 1804" as the fullest political articulation of the Radical Enlightenment.⁴² But this apparent alignment depends on the surreptitious deployment of two contradictory versions of constituent power to conceptually suture the difference between the trajectory of revolutionary leadership and that of the Bossale popular insurgency.

This contradiction becomes apparent if we return to Antonio Negri's earlier Spinoza-inspired reinterpretation of constituent power as an expansive, unlimited procedure or an absolute process without finality. Importantly, Negri proposes this radical reconceptualization of constituent power in explicit contrast to its juridical conceptualizations as an extraordinary event that generates law, a force that rises up to form a constitution, and a legitimating ground for an already constituted political order.⁴³ Understood as infinite self-activity for which "every determination is free and remains free," constituent power stands opposed to the institution of sovereignty, which functions "as a fixing of constituent power, and therefore as its termination."⁴⁴ Negri clearly demonstrates that these two theorizations of constituent power – the radical one that severs it from all legal and constitutional entrapments and the traditional one that relates it to constituted power – are incompatible. Rigorously affirming constituent power as inalienable and autonomous necessarily implies seeing every conversion of constituent power into the constituted power of a legal order as a betrayal. In turn, extolling the Bossale vision of freedom through the prism of radical constituent power in a theoretically consistent manner requires approaching all revolutionary dates indicating such conversions – and, in fact, Toussaint's entire revolutionary drive toward state power – antagonistically. One can make use of one version of the concept or the other but to narratively shift from one to the other so as to suture the two perspectives cannot be done without contradiction: for inalienable constituent power, all aspirational movement toward and translation

activity thereafter (see Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 193; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 103–9; for a critique of Nesbitt's position and its sources, see Popkin, *You Are All Free*, 17–18 ft.26).

⁴¹Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 172.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 21.

⁴³Negri, *Insurgencies*, 1–35.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 21.

into constituted power – even when enacted by revolutionary leaders – are categorical acts of hostility.

The constituent approach distorts the Bossale trajectory, even limited to its withdrawing tendency, in another way. The flight into the hills was continual from colonial-era marronage, across its insurgent transformations of the revolutionary years, to its culmination in the post-independence counter-plantation form of life. Exhibiting a steadfast refusal of coercive plantation labor, those who disappeared into the uncultivated hills rendered the plantations inoperative: under the new, post-independence order, plantation owners never ceased to complain about shortages of labor. Conceptualizing these subtractive movements through the prism of radical constituent power erases their topological specificity by silently subsuming them into an infinite, open-ended process that characterizes the topology of constituent power. These ongoing movements to the outside, into and within the surround, however, were a “means of disengagement” or what Black and Italian radical thought will name the strategy of exodus – and the destituent exteriorities they opened disrupted the immanently self-expanding processual logic of constituent power no less than the statist logic of constituted power.⁴⁵

These contradictions disappear once we recognize the essentially destituent character of the withdrawing tendency, which complements the direct material destitution exerted by the insurrectionary tendency with a more oblique and indirect expression of destituent power. It arrests, forestalls, wards off, and renders inoperative, but these are less operations of cessation or negation than *immanent effects of a destituent form of life*. The post-independence Haitian peasantry offers us a rare example of precisely such a form of life. Barthélemy’s unique theoretical reinterpretation of this “strange and profoundly innovative system,” invented without any explicit program or doctrine, as “an egalitarian system *without a State*” provides an indispensable resource for making visible its destituent character.⁴⁶ Barthélemy shows that what the modern world will see only as miserable underdevelopment was a singular social form articulated through an intricate web of local mechanisms of autoregulation – such as extensive agriculture, the *lakou* and communal organization of land use, and forms of collective labor – that actively thwarted accumulation and development.⁴⁷ In refusing “the entire system” of wage labor and surplus production, this peasant form of life forestalled the emergence of inequality and the reconstitution of hierarchical relations of domination based on it in favor of an equality of poverty, a poverty of common abundance, of subsistence without lack.⁴⁸

The key theoretical inspiration for Barthélemy’s reevaluation of the Haitian peasantry is also one of the very few precursors explicitly avowed by contemporary destituent thought. Pierre Clastres was the first to enact a perspectival reversal to demonstrate that societies the West saw as primitive, as incapable of proper development, and as “rejects of universal history” due to their statelessness were actually structured so as to ward off the formation of the state or to *a priori* destitute it by preventing it from coming into being.⁴⁹ Through social mechanisms like intermural war, these tribes preserved internal equality, forestalled the production of surplus and hierarchy, and

⁴⁵Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 310.

⁴⁶Barthélemy, *L’Univers rural*, 28.

⁴⁷See *Ibid.*, 23–44; Barthélemy, *Créoles – Bossales*, 27–33; Casimir, *The Haitians*, 351; Dubois, *Haiti*, 107–13.

⁴⁸Barthélemy, *L’Univers rural*, 38.

⁴⁹Clastres, *Society Against the State*, 189.

thereby contravened the two foundational civilizational axioms of the West: “true societies unfold in the protective shadow of the State” and the “categorical imperative: man must work.”⁵⁰ For Giorgio Agamben, the most subtle theorist of destituent power, the significance of Clastres’s approach lies in providing one of the “vernacular figures of anomic communities.”⁵¹ Clastres describes a form of life that expresses its anomic character through its very form rather than as an absence negatively determined by the operations of the law, the state, and the exception. That is, Clastres shows how a form of life can be destituent, how it can deactivate the state and historical time indirectly, as an immanent effect of its very form. In turn, Barthélemy’s analysis helps us see how the Haitian peasants invented a destituent form of life, which deactivated the whole plantation order and the coercive apparatus that enforced it. If, as Agamben suggests, “the destitution of power and of its works” can be carried out “only in a form-of-life,” that is, only in a life that is inseparable from its form, then the Haitian peasantry succeeded in the work of destitution or, rather, in unworking and rendering inoperative the very works of power that subjected and dominated them.⁵² This form of life drew a line of incommensurability in relation to the Creole-led Haitian state, which never succeeded in regulating it – a fact historically attested to by judgments like Casimir’s: “without being willing to admit it, [Haitian leaders] allowed themselves to be absorbed by the autonomy of the countryside.”⁵³ The peasantry’s stateless form of life was “wholly outside of the political [*de toute dimension ‘politique’*],” and this destituent exteriority surrounded and deactivated the political in all of its self-declared inexorability.⁵⁴ Withdrawing from hierarchical authority and its terms of order, the peasants affirmed, to adopt Cedric Robinson’s theoretical vocabulary, incompleteness over inequality and formed an unintelligible outside to Western vision of the political as the “basic grammar” that structures social life according to the division between the rulers and the ruled.⁵⁵

Appearing poor in and to the world, the Haitian peasants enacted an egalitarian subtraction and resisted the position fated for them within the temporal order of universal history, an underdeveloped site slated for development. Arresting the temporality of projects and progress was the necessary condition for avoiding becoming raw materials in those projects and that progress. What the modern world judged a structural incapacity was, in reality, an antagonistic refusal that actively incapacitated the nexus of coercion, accumulation, and progressive development structuring that modern world.⁵⁶ Their preference for the inoperative time of poverty manifests the temporal correlate to the

⁵⁰Ibid., 193.

⁵¹Agamben, “What is Destituent Power?,” 73.

⁵²Ibid., 72.

⁵³Casimir, *The Haitians*, 23.

⁵⁴Barthélemy, *L’Univers rural*, 29. Symptomatically, when Nesbitt, who also draws heavily on Barthélemy, quotes this formulation, he inserts “constituted” into it – rendering the phrase as “outside of all [constituted] politics” (*Universal Emancipation*, 170) – thereby preserving constituent politics for the peasants and enacting what Cedric Robinson called “the compulsion to subordinate apolitical phenomena to political coherence” (*The Terms of Order*, 29).

⁵⁵Robinson, *The Terms of Order*, 4, 196–9. This peasant form of life was fundamentally egalitarian because it forestalled the reimposition of capitalist accumulation, the hierarchical relations of political domination it presupposes and reproduces, and the anti-blackness with which it is structurally imbricated. Interpreted in light of Robinson’s and Barthélemy’s insights, this successful destitution of plantation modernity’s apparatus of immeasurable and permanent domination deserves being called egalitarian, even if this equality – as every other really existing one – was not absolute or absolutely pure. For a contrasting view, see Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 44–6.

⁵⁶See Barthélemy, *L’Univers rural*, 17–20.

topological divergence between the Bossale trajectory and constituent power understood “as an all-powerful and always more expansive tendency,” since the latter, like revolutionary modernity more generally, expresses a fundamental orientation toward and investment in the future.⁵⁷

Resembling archaic or pre-capitalist societies, the Haitian peasantry’s form of life was, in a very real sense, post-capitalist, “born at once from a monstrous excess of the history of [capitalism] and from a reaction against it.”⁵⁸ It arose out of the ruins of a purely modern space, a colony genocidally cleared and completely structured by the violent imbrications of anti-blackness, plantation slavery, and capitalist production for the world market. Grounded in “the collective, total, and visceral refusal of the former system,” this destituent form of life sought to impede the return of domination and bondage – not only in the form of slavery but also in the form of slavery’s afterlife, the cunning and brutal realities of which they were the first to experience.⁵⁹ In blocking imperatives of labor, property, and accumulation constitutive of plantation capitalism, their form of life shares in the general vector of communism; in warding off the transcendent structures of authority and hierarchal grammars of the political, it shares in the anarchic vector of ungovernability. Their successful war against the plantation order demonstrated the necessity of a unitary struggle against state and capital, before the official codification of European radical traditions would partition it and find grounds to exclude this form of life and the black insurgency out of which it arose from its official genealogies.

In withdrawing, the Haitian peasantry formed an outside that was, in Barthélemy’s words, “beside the state but not against it.”⁶⁰ Yet if the destituent exteriority of the *moun andeyo* – the people outside or the excluded people – avoided direct antagonism, it retained its insurrectionary potential: keeping the state at a distance, these peasants refused to disarm, while practicing “armed squatting” and “clandestinity and irregular forms of class struggle.”⁶¹ Resituated within the full trajectory of popular insurgency, their destituent warding off of the state and the plantation economy remains structurally related to insurrection as “a stoppage, an immobile movement,” and a rupture of the spatio-temporal order of the world.⁶² Two sides of a single destituent gesture, simultaneously “desertion and attack,” or two poles of a recursive movement of intensification, which made maroons the preparatory grounds of insurgency and insurrectionary activity occasion repeated flight into the hills.⁶³ Thus, if the withdrawing tendency in isolation appears as *beside but not against*, when conceptualized in its essential interrelation with the insurrectionary tendency, it manifests the position of *outside and against*.⁶⁴

Popular insurgency exerted a destituent power first on the colonial order of plantation slavery, then on the revolution’s path of actualization, and finally on the revolution’s legitimate statist heir. Rather than being an expression of constituent power, this insurgent trajectory reveals the illusion at the heart of constituent power’s claim to radical autonomy: even if constituent power cannot be converted into constituted power

⁵⁷Negri, *Insurgencies*, 14.

⁵⁸Barthélemy, *L’Univers rural*, 19.

⁵⁹Ibid; see Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

⁶⁰Barthélemy, *L’Univers rural*, 28.

⁶¹Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 43, 87. See Trouillot, *Haiti*, 81; Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 172–5.

⁶²Tari, *There Is No Unhappy Revolution*, 103.

⁶³The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 88.

⁶⁴See Tari, *There Is No Unhappy Revolution*, 179–80.

without betrayal, it remains – lexically, conceptually, historically – defined, structured, and legitimated by the movement toward it, however disavowed. When the unfolding revolutionary process narratively and conceptually subsumes the essentially destituent energies of popular insurgency, those continuing to pursue destitution are condemned as counterrevolutionary: too undisciplined, disorderly, and anarchic or too backward, traditional, and unmodern. With the old order destroyed, those remaining intransigent in their destituent ways will face coercion and elimination to prevent them from corrupting the proper narrative trajectory of the revolution. After mass insurrectionary resistance against counterinsurgency is effective enough to make Dessalines and Christophe turn back against the French in fall 1802, these black generals, now aligned with the armies under *gens de couleur* leadership of Pétion, conduct a repression campaign against those who, like Sans Souci, “refused to acknowledge the revolutionary hierarchy and supreme authority of Dessalines.”⁶⁵ The 1804 end of the Haitian Revolution marks not only the defeat of the French but also the successful completion of Dessalines’s extermination of the Bossale insurgent maroons, whose activities were judged to lie “outside of the national interest.”⁶⁶ What is thus eliminated as counterrevolutionary is the refusal to give up on destitution even when its object becomes the revolution itself, its ineluctable drive to convert constituent into a new constituted power, its commitment to the nation, national unity, and national interest as means of legitimating the revolutionary state. Popular insurgency challenged “the unceasing, unwinnable, desolate dialectic between constituent power and constituted power,” and the revolution’s official leaders could not tolerate such a direct affront to its essential core.⁶⁷

Popular insurgency repeatedly disrupted the order of time that enclosed it, from colonial modernity’s projective future of fungibility and accumulation to the revolution’s unfolding trajectory of actualization, to the developmental futures of the post-revolutionary state. In this, the insurgents seemingly offer an ideal instance of Walter Benjamin’s image of humanity attempting to pull the emergency brake. This image, offered as a counter to Marx’s description of revolutions as locomotives of world history, has become a contemporary theoretical commonplace, without sufficient explanation ever given for what allows it to contradict the fundamental semantics of the modern concept of revolution, which constitutively includes, as Reinhart Koselleck diagnosed, an investment in the future, an acceleration toward it, and a legitimation by it.⁶⁸ The Bossale popular insurgency provides us this absent explanation. Revolutions can act as emergency brakes on the runaway train of modernity only through the ante- and an-originary destituent excess that they strive to enclose and neutralize, only, that is, if popular insurgency pulls the emergency brake on the revolution itself and interrupts the very trajectory that bestows upon it its cherished revolutionary status.

General insurrection and general strike

To conceptually ground his theory of destituent power, Agamben returns to Benjamin’s use of *Entsetzung* as the activity that deposes, renders destitute, and suspends the cycle of

⁶⁵Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 40–3.

⁶⁶Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 233, see 231–6.

⁶⁷Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 266.

⁶⁸Koselleck, “Historical Criteria.”

law-making and law-preserving violence. The celebrated instantiation of this activity, presented in “Critique of Violence” (1921) and drawn from Georges Sorel, is the proletarian general strike, which in contrast to the political strike does not make demands but is a pure means and does not “so much compel [*veranlaßt*] as fulfill [*vollzieht*].” The general strike is essentially anarchistic because the withdrawal of labor is undertaken with “the sole task of destroying state power,” with the resolve “to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state.”⁶⁹ The connection between withdrawal and fulfillment is central for Agamben’s theory of destituent power as a rendering inoperative without destruction, as a deactivation that opens to “a new possible use.”⁷⁰ As such, destituent power demands the invention of “completely other strategies” than those of revolt, insurrection, and revolution, all of which, for Agamben, remain imbricated with constituent power.⁷¹ The mass insurrectionary activity of 1802, as I will show, gives the lie to this conceptual distribution and demonstrates that the theoretical encounter between black popular insurgency and destituent power induces a transformation in the form, modality, and genealogy of the concept.

The insurrectionary tendency, when decoupled from its revolutionary appropriations, reveals a core no less destituent than any mode of inoperativity, including the general strike. Revolution may be caught in the desolate dialectic of constituent and constituted power, but a general insurrection is more proximate to a general strike than Agamben would make us believe: it is a direct and immediate withdrawal of labor that makes no demands, a pure means. The 1791 general insurrection was an anarchic destituent praxis, which arrested work through a widespread destruction of the plantation order’s means of production, without making demands, at least not until leadership attempted otherwise.⁷² In the 1802 insurrectionary wave directed against the French expedition, there was no official leadership to impose a revolutionary horizon, there was only mass popular resistance, “organized in clandestinity, often in marronage, and fully sustained by guerilla warfare.”⁷³ Self-authorized direct action of the “largely unknown and obscure” took the form of widespread sabotage, arson, and flight into the hills, recursively intensifying until all remaining plantation infrastructure was destroyed.⁷⁴

The formerly enslaved officer Dieudonné, now an agent of French counterinsurgency, reported in March 1802 to have arrested militants who were traversing the mountains enjoining the rural population to “abandon every type of work.”⁷⁵ For such militants, “making the rounds” and “spreading the word” about the general strike was only a moment in the intensification of mass insurrectionary activity.⁷⁶ The historical record attests that limited strikes, resembling political strikes in Sorelian/Benjaminian terms, also occurred in 1802. In May, workers at the French military bakery and hospital in Port-au-Prince withdrew their labor to demand unpaid wages. These examples, recovered from the archives by Johnhenry Gonzalez, confront us with the reality that the withdrawal of labor without insurrectionary activity was possible, but only in the form of a

⁶⁹Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 246.

⁷⁰Agamben, “What is Destituent Power?,” 69.

⁷¹Ibid., 70; Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 266.

⁷²See Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 106–9, 124–9.

⁷³Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 227.

⁷⁴Ibid., 248.

⁷⁵Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 76.

⁷⁶Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 224.

limited strike action; the abandonment of all work as such, by contrast, maintained an irreducible insurrectionary imperative. What are we to make of this peculiar distribution of facts?

Plantations were a material means of production and accumulation wholly dependent on domination, whether in the form of slavery or nominally emancipated labor. Only the total ruination of these infernal laboratories of capital could forestall the eventual reimposition of plantation labor and thus maintain general strike's defining commitment to resume only a wholly transformed, uncoerced work.⁷⁷ For the 1802 insurrectionary militants of the general strike, the call to abandon all work was inseparable from the call to burn down the plantations because only as a general insurrection could the general strike successfully maintain its axiomatic trajectory. Abandoning all work without insurrectionary destruction, by contrast, would leave plantations to idle. Idle plantations, however, could only presage the failure of the general strike: they suggest that one day work could resume there, which would mean that counterinsurgency was successful or that the general strike ended through negotiation and compromise, retroactively showing it not to have been a general strike at all.⁷⁸ There was no way to merely deactivate the plantations and open them to new possible use. The only way to fulfill the plantations was to see them in flames.

As theorized by Sorel within the turn-of-the-century French syndicalist milieu and subsequently picked up by Benjamin and Agamben, the general strike arrests work with the aim of destroying the state, but if it is successful it also leads to the resumption of production, only now under the control of the self-emancipated working class.⁷⁹ For early syndicalism, the working class, understood as technically and morally most advanced, would continue as producers, but the process of industrial production would be managed more rationally and its profits distributed more justly, leading to increased economic productivity and real social progress.⁸⁰ By theorizing destituent power through the general strike in opposition to the general insurrection, Agamben reproduces this productivist grammar of early syndicalism, even as he explicitly critiques the primacy of labor and production within leftist thought.⁸¹ The general insurrection of 1802 sought to make all such resumption impossible because those working on the plantations could have no illusions about economic productivity and the material infrastructure that made it possible: the coercive power of the state must be defeated not for a more just production and a more fair distribution but for the destruction of the plantation order and the interminable refusal of work. Their antagonism imposes a proleptic corrective to destituent power by targeting, to adopt Frank B. Wilderson III's formulation, not "the legitimacy of productive practices" but "the legitimacy of productivity itself."⁸² And their ruination of the plantation order devastated not only its economic productivity

⁷⁷Indeed, even plantations in ruins remained the occasion for recurring melancholic laments for those dreaming of resurrecting the glorious path of accumulation, see Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 1–5.

⁷⁸My discussion of the general strike is inspired by Joseph Albernaz's striking reconsideration of its genealogy (see "Abolition").

⁷⁹See Jennings, *Syndicalism in France*, 1–55 and Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*.

⁸⁰As Moishe Postone has convincingly argued, however, modern science and technology are essentially structured by capitalist relations of production. That is, they are not neutral tools that could simply continue untransformed into a post-capitalist world (*Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 352–5).

⁸¹Agamben, "What is Destituent Power?," 69.

⁸²Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 231.

but also, and more profoundly, its ontological productivity, its very capacity to produce the modern world.

After 1817, once the Caribbean-born communist abolitionist and former slave Robert Wedderburn first conceptualizes the general strike, one could say that the insurrection is always a strike but always also exceeds the strike.⁸³ To this, the 1802 insurrectionary militants of the general strike offer the proviso that the insurrectionary excess is a necessary one, essential to general strike's persistence, intensification, and success. Theoretically reducing insurrection to the seizure of state power, as Agamben does, limits destituent power to what deactivates without destroying and only preserves the very infrastructure that will be used to reimpose productivity. These black insurrectionaries disclose a truth subsequently forgotten in formulations of the general strike: isolating it from the general insurrection condemns it to failure. It makes the general strike an ideal, indefinitely deferred horizon and political strikes a material reality, however limited and insufficient. Conceptually deriving destituent power from this partition likewise displaces it into an ideal future: for Agamben, the invention of destituent strategies is "the task of the coming politics," a position that displays total amnesia about the repertoire of gestures and strategies that black popular insurgency across, and in excess of, the Haitian Revolution developed in its ultimately successful ruination of the plantation order.⁸⁴

The theoretical transformation that the 1802 insurrectionary militants of the general strike impose on destituent power are visible on the modal level as well. Since Aristotle's foundational division between *dunamis* and *energeia*, this co-articulated dyad – expressed variously as potential-potentiality-possibility and act-actuality-reality – has formed, in Agamben's diagnosis, two sides of "the ontological-political machine of the West."⁸⁵ Underlying the theory and practice of politics in the West, "the metaphysical paradigm of a realization" establishes this disjunctive unity and imposes the imperative "to translate into reality something possible" understood to be "not real or not yet real."⁸⁶ Beginning with Aristotle's assertion that "actuality is prior to potentiality," the paradigm always accords primacy to the second term: potential is realized in act, possibility in actuality.⁸⁷ The thesis that the possible is fully realized and exhausted in the actual culminates in Hegel's articulation of *Wirklichkeit* as an endless process of realization or actualization that sublates – abolishes and fulfills – in itself all possibility.⁸⁸ Against this dominant line of thought, Agamben recovers the experience of potentiality *qua* potentiality, of what in it remains irreducible to the process of realization. Severed from its teleological fate, pure potential is a potential *not to* or an impotential, which deactivates and renders inoperative the work, activity, or being-in-act that is *energeia*. Agamben centers his theory of destituent power on this experience of potential "in its non-relation to the act," and this is why he has insisted that it must be understood, properly speaking, as destituent potential or potentiality [*potenza*] and not destituent power [*potere*].⁸⁹ Freed from their enclosures in revolutionary trajectories of realization, the general insurrections of 1802 and 1791 demonstrate that the paradigm of realization can be, and indeed *must* be, contravened

⁸³See Albernaz, "Abolition," 542–8.

⁸⁴Agamben, "What is Destituent Power?," 70.

⁸⁵Agamben, "Destituent Potentiality," 15.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 10, translation modified.

⁸⁷Aristotle, "Metaphysics," 1049b5.

⁸⁸See Agamben, "Destituent Potentiality," 10–2.

⁸⁹Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 276; Agamben, "Destituent Potentiality," 9.

from the opposite direction as well: not through a pure potential decoupled from the imperative of realization but through a real that was never realized because it was never possible.

These general insurrections were impossible because they were ontologically foreclosed by “the totality of possibility” of the modern world.⁹⁰ Yet, despite being impossible within the racial ontology of the modern world – in which blackness “overdetermines the embodiment of impossibility” – they were real.⁹¹ Before being retroactively transformed into the origin of the revolution’s trajectory of realization, the 1791 general insurrection was an immanently intensifying activity that was unthinkable – unthinkable “even among the slaves” themselves – because its claims were “too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds.”⁹² In this, it directly contradicted the central premise of the paradigm of realization, “that political action consists in realizing, in facts or deeds, a doctrine, a philosophy, an ideal, a plan.”⁹³ And in simultaneously destroying the plantations and materially abolishing their status as slaves, the insurrectionaries instantiated the specific grammatical quality Agamben ascribes to destituent activity, that the subject not remain external to the action but itself be deposed in the activity undertaken.⁹⁴ Before being retroactively appropriated as a sublated moment in the successful realization of the revolution, the 1802 insurrectionary wave was “a generalization of the incendiary Spirit of ‘91,” and in resurrecting this ante-originary interruptive refusal it subverted the structuring parameters of the paradigm of realization.⁹⁵ The trajectory of popular insurgency directly undermined another key element of realization, the presence of a discrete and unitary subject, which explains the tendency, arising immediately and persisting in historiographic guises to the present, of attributing its activity to transcendent actors, ranging from outside agitators to revolutionary leaders.⁹⁶ Such maneuvers reinscribe this dispersive field within the grammar of realization and thus make its mass obscurity legible, but only at the cost of concealing its destituent character. By contrast to revolutionary leaders, who conformed to the paradigm by formulating projective horizons of realization, such as universal legal emancipation or the attainment of state power, these general insurrections were not realizing the possible or the ideal but were instead impossible-yet-real destituent ruinations.

Antagonistically refusing the paradigm of realization and the revolutionary trajectory it underwrites, these general insurrections manifested the impossible-yet-real as a destituent modality, thereby demonstrating how Agamben’s approach falls short of a full modal theory of destituent power. The disclosure of the impossible-yet-real as an essential, but essentially foreclosed, modality of destituent power was left to this black insurgency because within the grammar of the modern world, “when we say impossibility, we say black; when we say possibility we say anti-black.”⁹⁷ The insurrectionary exertion of material ruination and immediate abolition is no less destituent than – and forms the

⁹⁰See Albernaz and Chepurin, “The Sovereignty of the World.”

⁹¹Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 44.

⁹²Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 88.

⁹³Agamben, “Destituent Potentiality,” 10.

⁹⁴See the discussion of the middle voice and deponent verbs proper to destituent power in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 274–7 and Agamben, “What is Destituent Power?,” 67–72.

⁹⁵Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism.”

⁹⁶See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 91–3, 102–4.

⁹⁷Sorrentino, “Slave/Animal/Labor,” 45.

necessary correlate to – the destituent form of life that culminates the movements of withdrawal; isolating destituent impotentiality from the impossible-yet-real destituent power of general insurrection only inhibits and neutralizes the delegitimizing drive of destitution.⁹⁸ The 1802 insurrectionary militants of the general strike confirm this essential complementarity in concrete terms: set the plantations on fire, abandon all work, flee into the mountains, then generalize and intensify. Attaining a point of indiscernibility between the general insurrection and the general strike, they succeeded, and the form of their victory was total devastation: “They burned San Domingo flat so that at the end of the war it was a charred desert.”⁹⁹

In his 1971 lectures, James quotes this description from *The Black Jacobins* before praising the singular inventiveness of W.E.B. Du Bois’s historiographic recovery and speculative reinterpretation of mass slave self-emancipation in the South as a general strike. James repeats Du Bois’s words, “This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. ... They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations.”¹⁰⁰ By understanding slaves as black workers, Du Bois is able to backdate, as James underscores, the first mass use of this new method of proletarian struggle from its commonly understood appearance in 1905 in Russia to 1862 amidst the US Civil War.¹⁰¹ James’s admiring analysis of Du Bois’s speculative reinterpretation of the mass action of 1862 as a general strike takes place through a sort of conceptual parataxis with his own reflections on the popular insurrectionary wave of 1802. The general strike and the general insurrection both characterize popular insurgency when it is analytically decoupled from the projective horizons espoused by official revolutionary leadership, but the unthematized proximity in James’s lectures suggests something more specific and more significant: if 1862 indicates an original instance of the general strike, 1802 indicates its even earlier successful enactment, overlooked because its insurgent activity predated the historical division of the general strike and the general insurrection into distinct strategies.

James’s retrospective reflections emphasize without naming the fundamentally destituent core of the 1802 insurrectionary wave, which in the words of Lacroix reproduced by James resembled “all insurrections which attack constituted authority” in being instigated not by official leadership but by “obscure creatures.” James underscores the claim’s generality by interjecting his own emphasis in the middle of the quote – “all, ALL, A-L-L” insurrections against constituted power arise obscurely from below – and by constructing a transhistorical series with contemporary destituent events: “They were not only in San Domingo obscure. They were obscure in Watts, they were obscure in Detroit ... in Newark ... in San Francisco ... in Cleveland ... in Harlem.”¹⁰² James credits Du Bois for teaching him not only that popular mass activity and intuitive knowledge come first, while official leaders, at best, follow by ratifying and codifying them, but also that the insurrectionary activity of popular insurgency, when it appears divorced from and antagonistic to official revolutionary leadership, forms the “genuine

⁹⁸This is why, *pace* Agamben, destituent power is preferable as a locution to destituent potential: it is more than simply a potential or an impotential.

⁹⁹James, “Lectures,” 90; *The Black Jacobins*, 361.

¹⁰⁰James, “Lectures,” 92.

¹⁰¹See *Ibid.*, 93, 97.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 106.

historic part of every revolution.”¹⁰³ Insurrections against constituted authority, when they occur within revolutionary sequences, are insurrections also against authority constituted by the revolution and thus directly challenge the revolutionary conversion of constituent into constituted power. Put otherwise, the assertion that the destituent element forms the genuine core of the revolution and that in 1802, as James puts it, “the revolution broke out again” inevitably conflict with the basic narrative and conceptual framework that make the Haitian Revolution a revolution.¹⁰⁴ A revolution certainly depends on the destituent energies of popular insurgency, but to become a revolution, a successful revolution, it must harness those energies to constituent ends. That is, it must discipline them into the proper trajectory of its realization, culminating in such dates as 1801 and 1804, that is, in the constitution of state power targeted by destituent insurrections. Therein lies the antinomy of the revolution: to affirm the destituent elements as genuinely revolutionary without affirming the constituent elements is to abandon what makes the revolution a distinct political sequence, that is, a revolution and not merely an insurrection; but to implicitly ascribe revolutionary status to both the destituent elements *and* the constituent elements is inevitably to betray the former. Subordinating the destituent aspects to the revolutionary narrative drive, this double ascription makes them significant as sublated dialectical moments within the revolutionary path of realization and, when they resist correction and coercion, ends up agreeing, however quietly and tacitly, with their repression. This antinomy can be resolved only by analytically distinguishing revolution’s inextricable relation to the dialectic of constituent and constituted power from insurrection’s essentially destituent character.¹⁰⁵ Just as Du Bois’s general strike was “doing something much more difficult and abrasive,” something that could not be straightforwardly appropriated “to nationalist ends,” so the 1802 wave of popular insurrectionary activity pointed elsewhere than the national unity of 1804, both manifesting what James Ford described as “an anarchist tendency in the dark proletariat” in its “struggle with and within degradation and damnation.”¹⁰⁶

One may be tempted to extend the temporal frame to the 1820s, to the point when, in Fick’s judgment, “the internal logic of the revolution from below ... triumphed.”¹⁰⁷ If the revolution triumphs from below, where does its success end up? Perhaps nowhere. Might the Bossale popular insurgency, from the general insurrection to the post-independence destituent form of life, index instead what “will not have been *from* but rather will have *remained* below”?¹⁰⁸ Not, then, a revolution *from* below but a massive undertow, a vertiginous katabasis that pulls *into* the below everything, including the very name revolution and our treasured investments in it? Tarrying in this abyss – without trying to save it through revolutionary trajectories of realization – allows a stranger, more unfamiliar multiplicity to appear. In the abyss, we can limn this popular insurgency as the most

¹⁰³Ibid., 105.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵This position differs from contemporary theoretical attempts to use destituent power to rethink revolution freed from “the old constituent fantasies” (Invisible Committee, *Now*, 76) or from the desire “to constitute a new sovereign power” (Flohr, “Stasis,” 195). The difficulty with such attempts with respect to the Haitian Revolution is that its very status as a revolution – its fundamental narrative sequence, its essential punctuations of continuity and discontinuity – cannot be decoupled from the dialectic of constituent and constituted power.

¹⁰⁶Ford, *Thinking Through Crisis*, 157, 147, 130.

¹⁰⁷Fick, “Emancipation,” 35.

¹⁰⁸Moten, *Stolen Life*, 194.

extensive and destructive enactment of industrial sabotage in modern history; or see it crystallize as the most successful long-term “popular war against plantation system,” in which the victory against French was but a moment in the broader struggle to destroy the plantation order.¹⁰⁹ Predating Spanish resistance to Napoleon, its 1802 insurrectionary campaign can be recognized as the earliest successful modern guerilla war against a modern army; it can also be acknowledged as the earliest successful enactment *avant la lettre* of the general strike.¹¹⁰ And its aftermath becomes a singular post-capitalist form of life, which through a destituent withdrawal from the state effectively imposed the most radically egalitarian land distribution in the Americas. All of this appears once we are willing to relinquish the analytical primacy of revolution, which is what fidelity to the mass self-emancipation of the enslaved demands, if it is not to betray its object.

Conscripts, deserters, mutineers

Two acts of nomination have come to epitomize the Haitian Revolution: Toussaint changing his last name from Bréda to Louverture and the declaration of independence adopting the original Taíno name, Haiti. The first expressed a “self-consciousness of enlightenment,” the second a “symbolic erasure of colonialism and colonial slavery.”¹¹¹ A destituent approach demands an alternative act of nomination, one that would no longer signal an opening, an origin, or a foundation. Rather than a subject, a project, or a trajectory of realization, it would have to indicate “a dark velocity from nowhere,” a conflagration that consumes the plantocratic order of the world no less than personal identity itself.¹¹² On 17 August 1802, amidst the escalating wave of destruction and flight, the French arrest and question a female insurgent in the South. The resulting archival traces – suitably negligible, only a name and the fact of arrest – provide us this act of nomination.¹¹³ “Brule les Cayes” takes the insurrectionary wave of arson as her name. It is a name that withdraws as soon as it is uttered into clandestine anonymity, a name likely in the imperative. Les Cayes, the capital of the Southern Province, must burn. Burn it down. The whole plantation world must become a charred desert. There is nothing more to know. Everything else remains, as it must, in obscurity.

In what sense was Brule les Cayes modern or a conscript of modernity? I pose this question in light of David Scott’s meditation on Toussaint as an exemplary conscript of modernity, who was forcefully subjected to its conditions and thus “could not choose *not* to be modern.”¹¹⁴ Through a rigorous re-reading of the six paragraphs on tragedy that James added to the opening of the final chapter of the revised edition of *The Black Jacobins*, Scott argues that Toussaint’s condition reflects the broader tragedy of colonial enlightenment and that this tragic register is more salient to the contemporary problem-space than the heroic narration and romantic modes of emplotment arising

¹⁰⁹Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 74, see also 35–6.

¹¹⁰That is, it is the first successful modern guerilla war even according to the contestable parameters established by Carl Schmitt in *Theory of the Partisan*. Taking this fact seriously radically upends Schmitt’s Eurocentric genealogy and its guiding investments no less than the basic strategies and conceptual morphology of the partisan/guerilla figure that Schmitt outlines, an argument I hope to elaborate in a future publication.

¹¹¹Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 195; Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 242.

¹¹²Albernaz, “Abolition,” 557.

¹¹³See Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 77.

¹¹⁴Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 129.

from James's original visions of revolutionary decolonization. In what sense, then, was Brule les Cayes likewise a conscript of modernity? She certainly could not emulate the path of self-fashioned and ultimately tragic intellectuality of Toussaint, nor could she instantiate the brutal leadership of Dessalines, who though infamous for ordering the massacre of the whites was praised by Leclerc as the "butcher of the blacks."¹¹⁵ Disappearing from the archives as soon as it appears, her name points to a different vector, a vector of anonymous arson and insurgent conspiracy. Her defiant act of self-nomination gestures toward what lies below the proper threshold of character imbued with sufficient ethos to sustain a narrative, be it redemptive or tragic. Her fleeting materialization refuses proper individuation, bespeaking a vertiginous and impersonal non-position, which renders insignificant the character differences between Toussaint and Dessalines, so significant for Scott in following James: one may tragically hesitate, the other may fulfill the revolution, but both are committed to the plantations and coercive state power, to revolutionary-political leadership and its hierarchical order.¹¹⁶ Working "against the grain of monumentalization" bestowed upon masculine revolutionary heroes, her name unnames in the very act of naming, alluding to the anonymity of an insurgent field characterized by "the black (ante)heroic, something more and less than heroism."¹¹⁷ Momentarily captured by modernity's carceral visuality, her name is simultaneously, and in perfect coincidence, a declaration of insurrection and a withdrawal into obscurity, one that evinces "a politics of the imperative, engaged in its interminably downward movement."¹¹⁸ A name as a provocation, a threat, and an incitement to arson does not ground a narrative – it enflames a groundless insurrection against narrativity as such. Burn it down not for the immortal inscription on the pages of world history but for the glorious ruination of the plantations and a destituent obscurity in common.

Brule les Cayes is but one figure among those obscure insurrectionaries of 1802 that make up the chorus that James invokes in concluding his remarks on tragedy. No imagination, however radical, could "have envisaged the entry of the chorus, of the ex-slaves themselves, as the arbiters of their own fate."¹¹⁹ Scott quotes James's remarks on tragedy in full and interprets them meticulously, but he leaves the invocation of this chorus unconsidered. What divergent truth does this chorus embody that could account for the omission? While the added paragraphs on tragedy, in their entirety, "interrupt revolutionary Romanticism" by forming "a recursive moment in which the narrative drive folds back on itself," the entry of this chorus of ex-slaves, I would suggest, undermines the generic form of tragedy itself.¹²⁰ The chorus is certainly central to tragedy, but *this* chorus was not only a collective voice of judgment but also, and more fundamentally, a collective force of action. The chorus is a catachrestic name for a dispersive insurgent field of self-authorized activity of the obscure masses. Their intransigent insurrections and withdrawals tore open a destituent abyss, which undermined the narrative and character presuppositions of the tragic mode of emplotment no less than the romantic one. This destituent abyss will subsequently be

¹¹⁵Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 282; see also Casimir, *The Haitians*, 161.

¹¹⁶Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 171.

¹¹⁷Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 139–40.

¹¹⁸Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism."

¹¹⁹James, *The Black Jacobins*, 292.

¹²⁰Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 165–6.

reduced to a narrative caesura when, credited with saving the revolution, it becomes but a step along the way to the revolution's successful completion in 1804, that is, when revolutionary narrativity recuperates it as a moment of negativity within its own dialectical trajectory. In itself, however, the emergence of these ex-slaves as the arbiters of their own fate remains as divergent from Toussaint's tragic enlightenment as from Dessalines's successful creation of an independent Haiti. These concerns are foreign to Scott, to his theorization of the tragedy of colonial enlightenment as well as to his argument for shifting the contemporary problem-space's dominant conception of power from a negative one, grounded in the dialectics of oppression and overcoming, to a positive one, grounded in a Foucauldian theory of power as productively forming the very conditions of thought and action.¹²¹ The textual basis for the latter argument Scott locates in James's appendix to the second edition, which positions plantation slavery – along with the genocidal clearing of indigenous forms of life – as what violently and inexorably establishes the foundational modernity of the Caribbean, its distinctly modern civilizational conditions, its distinctly modern forms of subjection and rationality, and its distinctly modern modes of discipline and government.¹²² How does the chorus of ex-slaves fit into this conceptual framework and its emphasis on the productivity and inescapability of plantation modernity? Or rather, how does an uncompromising commitment to the truth and significance of this popular insurgency, in its full radicality, unmoor and transform its basic coordinates?

Seized by “the interpellative event of modernity in general” that is the middle passage in its “brutal *ekstasis*,” they were factually and irreducibly modern.¹²³ Caught in violent web of plantation modernity, they did not, however, internalize its rules of government and reason, its modes of subjection and action; instead, they burned down and fled the very grounds and conditions of its civilization. If they were conscripts, they became mutineers and deserters. Their mutinies and desertions recursively intensified into a *transcendental attack* on the plantocratic order of modernity, on the very power of the plantation to produce the modern world, to determine the field of possibility and actuality, to structure time and space. Their mass insurrectionary mutiny was impossible – foreclosed from the totality of possibility – yet it was real, and their withdrawing desertion cleaved open an exteriority that refused all actualization in the terms of the modern world. Their deserting mutinies and mutinous desertions rebelled against the transcendental order of plantation modernity, against the universality and inexorability of the transcendental conditions it imposed. The ruination of the plantations was but the empirical manifestation of this transcendental attack, which was unthinkable precisely because it contravened the power of the plantation to determine the conditions of possibility – and thus of actuality – for action, thought, and experience. This transcendental attack was unthinkable also because it directly confronted “the violence that underwrites the modern world's capacity to think, act, and exist spatially and temporally,” that is, because it strove to incapacitate the very productive capacity – both economic and ontological – of the modern world.¹²⁴ There was an attempt to prevent the plantation futures

¹²¹See *Ibid.*, 106–7.

¹²²See *Ibid.*, 124–9.

¹²³Moten, *Stolen Life*, 207–9.

¹²⁴Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 2.

that are our global ongoing condition from coming into being.¹²⁵ Plantocracy may have won, but they also, for a time, succeeded: the destituent form of life that they invented out of the “tabula rasa” of the charred desert was not fully eliminated until the twentieth century.¹²⁶

For these black insurgents, there was no way forward and no way back. No way forward because the future destined for them was to be, once more, the raw materials in plantation modernity’s projects of accumulation. No way back because the middle passage and plantation slavery subjected them to total deracination.¹²⁷ Their response to this irreducibly modern predicament, perhaps the only ethically rigorous one available, was to rend open an abyss in the order of the world, in its ontological and epistemological matrix, in its spatio-temporal emplotment, by antagonistically manifesting what Fred Moten called “the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space.”¹²⁸ A destituent approach discerns the full radicality of this response because it avoids condemning their disinvestment from revolutionary modernity’s proper narrative and political order as pre-modern, restorationist, or backward-looking.¹²⁹ By suspending the normative temporal disjuncture instituted by revolutionary modernity, between progressive historical temporality and everything that fails to conform to it, a destituent approach abandons the demand to separate out legitimate tendencies, practices, and tactics of mass insurgency, those that align with modernity’s forms of universality (and coercion), from illegitimate ones, those that draw on non-modern traditions and remain culturally particular.¹³⁰ It thus frees the Bossale popular insurgency from judgments based on origin or ideal horizon, which would relegate it to the insignificance, when not the illegitimacy, of cultural specificity.¹³¹ Such judgments only reproduce earlier ones espoused by revolutionary leaders, exemplified in the drive, Dessalines’s above all, to eliminate maroon leaders like Sans Souci, Sylla, Makaya, and Lamour Dérance, whose use of sorcery, fetishism, and voodoo was deemed illegitimate.¹³² It did not matter – or mattered all too much – that they were effective enemies of the plantation order, the implicit judgment behind their elimination, and subsequent historiographic marginalization, was a “modern, racist, and Eurocentric” one, namely, that they “should have civilized themselves before protesting against slavery.”¹³³ A destituent approach, by contrast, takes effectiveness rather than origin as criteria because, on the terrain constituted by the middle passage, everything becomes deracinated, generic, and available for use in the ongoing general antagonism against plantation modernity and its incessant imposition of regulation, fungibility, and accumulation.¹³⁴

The trajectory of popular insurgency harbored a claim that was “too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds,” but not the one that was fulfilled in 1804, since these

¹²⁵See McKittrick, “Plantation Futures.”

¹²⁶For plantocracy, Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 119–20; for tabula rasa and invention, see Barthélemy, *Créoles – Bossales*, 28–9 and Sexton and Barber, “On Black Negativity.”

¹²⁷See Patterson, *Slavery*, 7–8 and Sexton and Barber, “On Black Negativity.”

¹²⁸Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 739.

¹²⁹The classic instance of this judgment is Genovese, *From Rebellion*; for a contemporary version, see Grüner, *The Haitian Revolution*.

¹³⁰It thus converges with Scott’s argument for the necessity of suspending the forced choice between the revolutionary modern and what he calls “the African cultural logic of the subaltern insurgents,” but does so, importantly, without inhabiting a left-wing melancholic perspective (*Conscripts of Modernity*, 104).

¹³¹E.g., see Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation*, 43–4 and Grüner, *The Haitian Revolution*, 63–8.

¹³²See Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 231–3.

¹³³Casimir, *The Haitians*, 18–19 and 60–1.

¹³⁴On fungibility, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

obscure insurrectionaries aimed to destroy the material and transcendental productivity of the plantation, which the post-independence state continued to brutally impose. What was fulfilled in 1804 was the narrative trajectory of the Haitian Revolution, resulting in the formation of a “black state” in contradiction of the “ontological order of the West and the global order of colonialism,” which never stopped vengefully reasserting itself through punitive economic, political, and military measures.¹³⁵ Even if post-independence Haiti provides, as Getachew argues, “an alternative political form for collective autonomy,” which made blackness into a political category and, through its asylum provision, “afforded Haiti a way of expanding its anti-slavery and anti-colonial project beyond its territorial confines,” it remains the case that both its legislation of blackness and its international political visions were correlated with the coercive restoration of the plantations, to which the response of the black masses was refusal in the form of a continual armed withdrawal into the hills.¹³⁶ The trajectory of popular insurgency could not be enclosed within the frame of national unity except by force, as evidenced by the fact that, before declaring independence, Dessalines found it necessary to liquidate all those that had, in his words, “become obstacles to freedom.”¹³⁷ Even after 1804, the Bossale masses, in Casimir’s judgment, “retained their status as foreigners,” but they affirmed this condition of political exclusion, preferring, to adopt Moten’s formulation, “social insurgency” over “political order.”¹³⁸ If eventually popular insurgency gives way to a proper nation, for a long time after independence, it first acts as a maroon nation in perpetual flight from the state, a “nation-in-dispersion” that rendered “the state inoperable” and thus contributed to “the theory and practice of stateless social life.”¹³⁹

Refusing to be subjected to the overseeing, ordering, and coercive universality of the state, which endured across the revolutionary disjuncture, this chorus of ex-slaves exhibited a drive not of legal universality or of constituent universality, or even of insurgent universality, but only, perhaps, of destituent universality – of the unnamed, uncorrected, and unimproved.¹⁴⁰ Approaching the Bossale trajectory, in Getachew’s words, as “the unrealized possibilities of the first and only successful revolution against colonial slavery,” even when intended as generous appreciation, remains insufficient and misleading.¹⁴¹ To speak of unrealized possibilities is to reinscribe these insurgents-turned-peasants into the paradigm of realization, that is, into the conceptual and narrative grammar of leadership, revolution, and the state, thereby displacing them onto a foreign theoretical terrain and erasing the specificity of their trajectory. An unrealized possibility is a possibility that could have been but contingently failed to be realized, but the Bossale popular insurgency could not be realized, not in 1804, not before or after that either, because it actively contravened the

¹³⁵Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 89.

¹³⁶Getachew, “Universalism,” 833-6. Contrasting with Getachew’s line of thought, Casimir (*The Haitians*, 17-20) argues that the use of blackness “as a marker of social status” obfuscated the conflict between Creoles and Bossales, “between property owners and workers.” He also shows that Haiti’s vision of itself “as a kind of lighthouse for the black race” was fundamentally “Africanophobic,” denigrating the Bossale masses while exalting European civilization. Moreover, Gonzalez (*Maroon Nation*, 103-4) documents that the Haitian state actually captured non-Haitians to use as labor on the plantations, clearly demonstrating that the effects of the plantation imperative were not limited to the territorial confines of Haiti.

¹³⁷Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 233.

¹³⁸Casimir, *The Haitians*, 44; Moten, *Stolen Life*, 201.

¹³⁹Moten, *Stolen Life*, 195, 203.

¹⁴⁰See Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*. On the figure of the chorus, see also Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls.”

¹⁴¹Getachew, “Universalism,” 838.

basic presuppositions of the paradigm of realization. Expressing itself through the impossible-yet-real modality of insurrection and the deactivating impotentiality of withdrawal, it refused to play by the metaphysical rules of the disjunctive unity of possibility and actuality; and in proliferating anonymous destitution, without cohering into a unified subject or formulating projects to realize, it refused to play the political game based on those metaphysical rules. If this popular insurgency forms a part of “the lost treasures of the revolutionary tradition,” as Getachew suggests borrowing Arendt’s formulation, it does so only in the sense that the revolution was always destined to lose it, that it was always already lost, not as the unrealized but as *the forever unrealizable* – as *the unrealizable in the revolution’s successful realization*.¹⁴²

In the decades since Trouillot’s provocation, the Haitian Revolution has become increasingly thinkable, but the popular insurgency that traversed it has not shared in this fate, except through narrative and conceptual subsumption within the broader revolutionary sequence, and this has only deepened its unintelligibility. A destituent attunement begins to rectify this problem by shifting our attention from heroic characters to insurrectionary obscurities and from revolution as apex of political modernity to what remains intransigently below, preceding and exceeding, and breaking apart, the revolutionary narrative frame. Destituent through and through, the trajectory of popular insurgency was incommensurable to all paths of realization, to all revolutionary and modern epochal distributions. Turning the plantations into a charred desert and then thwarting their subsequent restoration through a destituent form of life pointed elsewhere than the universal modernizing horizon sanctioned by revolutionary leaders. Modernity and revolution violently but vainly strove to interiorize the activity of this insurgent field within their spatio-temporal coordinates, but the chorus of anonymous insurrectionaries engulfed the empirical and transcendental fields of plantation modernity in a conflagration and rent open an atopic exteriority that threatened the order of the world with a cosmic delegitimation. All of this was too radical to be fully thinkable then and has remained so largely to this day.

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¹⁴²*ibid.*

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Bread & Roses: The Soul After Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

This article begins an Anarchist-Communist Theology of Liberation, with a special emphasis on Marxist legal theory intended to show law's role in extending and disguising the violence of primitive accumulation.

KEYWORDS

Anarchism; communism; critical race theory; Marxist legal theory; liberation theology

A “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,”¹ and roses are red,² red like blood,³ red like Mars,⁴ red like the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Communist Internationals.⁵ Roses are red like the future: *From each according to ability, to each according to need.*⁶ This is an old lesson, a lesson of infinite abundance, as Karl Marx's futurological forays into Matthew 25 made startlingly clear:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.*⁷

Capitalism entered the garden “... dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt”⁸ and abundance was everywhere silenced, everywhere forgotten.

Seven seas of blood were shed; entire peoples were crucified, drowned along with their languages, their philosophies, and their eschatologies. The blood shed at the dawn of the Capitalocene, mass murder beyond all possibility of comprehension and the crown of thorns “round earth's imagined corners,”⁹ was and remains beyond comprehension, beyond memory; all of it was turned into money, into pure fungibility, thirty pieces of silver, the face of Caesar, the stuff of all the kingdoms of the world; and none of it

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¹Stein, “Sacred Emily (1913).”

²Burns, “A Red, Red Rose.”

³Bogdanov, “Immortality Day.”; Charles Drew, <https://www.acs.org/education/whatischemistry/african-americans-in-sciences/charles-richard-drew.html>

⁴Bogdanov, Red Star.

⁵James, *World Revolution* 1917–1936.

⁶Red was the color of the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Communist Internationals.

⁷Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program.”

⁸Marx, *Capital*.

⁹Donne, “Holy Sonnet VII.”

ever stopped, all of it endlessly repeats as law, as equality, as due process of law, as equal protection of the law.

Trauma is beyond comprehension; trauma relegates memory to repetition. Our present is a never-ending crucifixion, a torment that cannot be borne, a sentence that goes on forever, and a bitter cup that is never taken away.¹⁰ If we knew another way or if we remembered how we came to this day or if we had faith that it would pass away, it would be a wonder:

I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down,
I don't know how my father stood his ground,
I don't know how my people survived slavery,
I do remember, that's why I believe¹¹

In the gospel of *Sweet Honey on the Rock*, survival itself, survival is remembered and made a rock upon which belief in the sweet honey of salvation can find a home.

The trauma of the original accumulation is kept beyond comprehension, beyond memory through law. We are in flight, if *Sweet Honey on the Rock* are to be believed, from our own flight, afraid of our own fear, panicked by the horror that we cannot allow ourselves to remember, the unremembered horror that replicates itself in everything the world it made presents us:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.¹²

"You know they were laughing," said my former research assistant when we spoke of Freddie Gray, the failed runaway, whose spine was broken, per Baltimore police, by the bumpiness of riding across Baltimore roads in the back of the police wagon, not by slavecatcher knees pressed hard against the back of his fugitive neck.

Genocide, colonialism, and slavery, the first capitals, the degree zero of capitalism, meant taking everything, and as this taking of everything was accomplished through mass murder on a world-ending scale, it was the end of the world. Genocide is the end of the world. Colonialism is the end of the world. Slavery is the end of the world, white-over-black, forever.

The end of the world created those who were to *have* and those who were to *have not*, and it gathered them together, constellated their features, as *race*. Race is never natural, never innocent, and never simple. Race is always and everywhere *white-over-black*, and *white-over-black*, a taking that is officially remembered only in the mode of repetition, only as a fetish, is the first and last and only note in capitalism's endless hymn of self-praise: "It is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior

¹⁰Matthew 26:39 KJV.

¹¹Sweet Honey in the Rock. "I Remember, I Believe."

¹²Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven (1890)."

through and through. And racism is only the emotional, affective, and sometimes intellectual explanation of this inferiorization.”¹³ The inferiorized explain, over and over and over again, that they are not, in fact, inferior, rarely realizing one cannot argue with a fetishist, one cannot argue as a fetish object. As Fanon observed:

For a time it looked as though racism had disappeared. This soul-soothing, unreal impression was simply the consequence of the evolution of forms of exploitation. Psychologists spoke of a prejudice having become unconscious. The truth is that the evolution of the system made the daily affirmation of a superiority superfluous.¹⁴

Racism changes, like anything that flows, like blood, like fire, like Thomas Jefferson’s beloved black roses.¹⁵ The black roses were a gift from his friend, Washington socialite, Margaret Bayard Smith, who noted that the “outhouses for the slaves” were “all much better than I had seen on any other plantation,” whilst admitting that the “cabins” constituted “a most unpleasant contrast with the palace that rises so near them” at Monticello.¹⁶

Everything held in common was taken, the multifoliate rose was cut to pieces, commodities to be bought and sold, commodities that with each purchase and sale repeat the violence of the original taking. A legal system is labyrinth, a labyrinth with a minotaur, a labyrinthine way of keeping the original accumulation beyond official memory, that is to say, beyond comprehension, whilst preserving and hiding its violence. Through jurisprudence, the world, smashed into smithereens, remains, like a dream, behind the wall of sleep. In the dream, the dream that replaces the real, there is only repetition. Some own, some do not. Those who do not own were disowned, dispossessed, left bereft and marked, white-over-black, by race. Law says that each is equally bound by rules, rules imposed by the angels of our better nature to govern and regulate the devilish possessiveness that moves us about in the world. Law links people to property as if it were natural to call things *his* and *mine* or *hers* and *thine*. What happened before the mark is forgotten; the mark is remembered, not the marking.

The marked were made into commodities. The commodity’s essence and aim is equality. Eight hours of one thing equals one ton of another thing equals a dozen of yet another thing. Everything is everything is everything, and nothing is alive or enchanted or unique; nothing human survived the original accumulation. When the commodity speaks, it sounds like money:

Since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and confuses all things, it is the general *confounding and confusing* of all things – the world upside-down – the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities. He who can buy bravery is brave, though he be a coward. As money is not exchanged for any one specific quality, for any one specific thing, or for any particular human essential power, but for the entire objective world of man and nature, from the standpoint of its possessor it therefore serves to exchange every quality for every other, even contradictory, quality and object: it is the fraternisation of impossibilities. It makes contradictions embrace.¹⁷

¹³Fanon, “Racism and Culture.”

¹⁴Ibid., 37.

¹⁵<https://www.monticello.org/exhibits-events/livestreams-videos-and-podcasts/strawberry-rose-rsepod/>

¹⁶<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/the-practice-of-slavery-at-monticello/>

¹⁷Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* 141.

There is no progress, no life, until we cross “the narrow horizon of bourgeois right.”¹⁸

Slavery is death. Law is the body of this death. Capital is its point of origin and destination. Capital turns life, our activities and choices of hours and days and weeks and years, into a thing, into a fungible thing, into an object of property, a commodity, *and it turns this turning* into a religion: Commodities speak. Commodities speak in prayer for legal relief. But far from being “the way and the truth and the life,”¹⁹ the prayer for legal relief is everywhere and always a return to “the fraternization of impossibilities.”²⁰

Capitalism is slavery. The worker is not free to not work. Work is the worker’s essence and the worker’s end. *Arbeit macht frei*, work sets you free, or so the owners of the workers’ power to work say. Capitalism’s workers are free to work for this owner or that owner or another owner, but they are not free to not work.

Death is the end of life and the beginning of capitalism. Capitalism begets law. Law chains people to capital. It says this is mine, mine alone, not yours. What once was free is now something that belongs to me or to you or to someone else, not simply to use, but to prevent others from using.

Roses are red like blood, sharp like spears,²¹ fragile like flesh, bathed in sunlight and dew and breeze and earth, and sometimes roses are a commune and a crown of thorns, and sometimes roses are a dozen or they are dried or they are held in photographs or they appear in poems or dreams or as tears, or they are memories and promises of crucifixion and resurrection.²² October is also a rose: “And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”²³

Empire is born of slavery, and slavery is a crucifixion. Empire exists within the *narrow horizon of bourgeois right*, where historical time finds itself crossed out by spectacle and repetition. Within the spectacle, there is no *before*, there is no *after*, there is only trauma and repetition, world without end. After the bloodshed, there are *haves* and *have nots*, marked by race, and a way out is posited, marked as law. We proceed from primitive markings (race) to some post-identitarian after, but *after*, always coming, never comes, because there is no before-or-after within the spectacle, within the narrow horizon of bourgeois right.

In ancient Rome, roses were for the dead. We continue to present roses as offerings to the dead. As an unwanted offering is not an offering, piety demands that we the living determine what the dead want before we approach the altar with our offering. What do the dead want? To want is to lack, and what the dead are lacking is life, as Dred Scott, declared to be an object of property by the Supreme Court of the United States, well knew.²⁴

¹⁸Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program.”

¹⁹John 14:6 KJV.

²⁰Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, supra note 17.

²¹John 19:33-34 (But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water) (KJV).

²²Anonymous, *Of a Rose, a Lovely Rose*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g612Bft2NQU> (last visited February 27, 2025).

²³Matthew 26:27-28 KJV.

²⁴Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

Slavery is death, death only, and that continually, white-over-black to white-over-black to white-over-black, and what is true of slavery and genocide is also true of colonialism. Everyone ever born into chattel slavery was dead long before their first heartbeat:

[T]he rights of private property have been guarded with ... care. Thus, the rights of property are united with the rights of person and placed on the same ground by the fifth amendment to the Constitution, which provides that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, and property, without due process of law. And an act of Congress which deprives a citizen of the United States of his liberty or property, merely because he came himself or brought his property into a particular Territory of the United States, and who had committed no offence against the laws, could hardly be dignified with the name of due process of law.²⁵

The black was presumptively a slave, and the slave was absolutely not a person, the slave was property, a commodity, and equal to *that* could not be equal. As law itself begins by placing genocide, colonialism, and slavery, the birth of capital, beyond its reach, recognition of black personhood “could hardly be dignified with the name of due process of law.”²⁶ As we learned from the Court:

Upon these considerations, it is the opinion of the court that the act of Congress which prohibited a citizen from holding and owning property of this kind in the territory of the United States north of the line therein mentioned, is not warranted by the Constitution, and is therefore void; and that neither Dred Scott himself, nor any of his family, were made free by being carried into this territory; even if they had been carried there by the owner, with the intention of becoming a permanent resident.²⁷

“Flowers preach to us if we will hear.”²⁸ “Consider the lilies,” they are beautiful because “they toil not, neither do they spin.” “In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea.”²⁹

A lily can be a rose:

I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.
As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.
As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.
I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.³⁰

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Rossetti, “Consider the Lilies of the Field (1866).”

²⁹The lyrics of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* were set to an older song, *John Brown’s Body*, and soldiers went to war with both songs in the air, sometimes singing:

He captured Harper’s Ferry with his nineteen men so true
He frightened old Virginia till she trembled through and through
They hung him for a traitor, they themselves the traitor crew
But his soul goes marching on

And sometimes singing:

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is Wisdom to the mighty, He is Succor to the brave,
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,
Our God is marching on.

Battle Hymn of the Republic.

³⁰Song of Solomon 2:1-4 KJV.

May Day is a festival of abundance, as is Christmas: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” We would be wiser than Solomon to join the festival of abundance from midwinter to midsummer. The “delicate fabric of bird song,” the “smell of wet wild earth,” the “red small leaves of the maple,” “the raindrop try with [one’s] lip,” “the grass” touching fingertips, and other wonders *must be much loved* if we are to be sure we shall see them again.³¹ We must seize the time³²: “Oh I must pass nothing by / Without loving it much”: “For how can I be sure / I shall see again / The world on the first of May / Shining after the rain?”³³ To seize the time is to “pass nothing by without loving it much” and by loving it much ensure that we shall see our beloved again, world without end.³⁴

“Where have all the flowers gone?”³⁵ “They’ve gone to graveyards everyone.”³⁶ When we turn our backs on the Empire and its Market³⁷ we are ourselves joined to the divine. The space and time of the spectacle are *only* the space and time of the spectacle, a trauma-born pseudo-reality. “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour” is to move from the spectacular to the historical, from the traumatological to the real.³⁸ *This* time and space, the “world on the first of May,” is real. When the stone rolls away, the empire and its market are revealed as mere representation, mere spectacle.³⁹

Dred Scott was enslaved, and therefore dead, long before his heart stopped beating.⁴⁰ Slavery is death, death only, and that continually, white-over-black to white-over-black to white-over-black. In fact, Scott, like everyone ever born into chattel slavery, was dead before his heart first began to beat.

The power to expand the territory of the United States by the admission of new states is plainly given. But the power of Congress over the person or property of a citizen [is] regulated and plainly defined by the Constitution itself. And when the Territory becomes a part of the United States, the Federal Government enters upon it with its powers over the citizen strictly defined, and limited by the Constitution. It has no power of any kind beyond it; and it cannot, when it enters a Territory of the United States, put off its character, and assume discretionary or despotic powers which the Constitution has denied to it.⁴¹

³¹Teasdale, “May Day,” in *Flame and Shadow* 30 (2014) (1920).

³²Seale, *Seize the Time*.

³³Teasdale, *supra* note 33.

³⁴Guy Debord wrote: “The spectacle, considered as the reigning society’s method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a *false consciousness of time*.” Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* §158 (Donald Nicholson-Smith trans., 1995) (1967).

³⁵Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Matthew 4:1-4(KJV); Luke 4:5-8 KJV; Mark 1:12-13 KJV.

³⁸Blake, “Auguries of Innocence.”

³⁹Debord observed:

THE CONCEPT OF the spectacle brings together and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena. Diversities and contrasts among such phenomena are the appearances of the spectacle — the appearances of a social organization of appearances that needs to be grasped in its general truth. Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle’s essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life — and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself.

Debord (1995), *supra* note 36 at §10.

⁴⁰Dred Scott v. Sandford, 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

⁴¹*Id.*

If poetry, as Audre Lorde taught, “is not a luxury,” then neither are roses.⁴² Without bread, we are the dead. But “without art and love and beauty” we are also the dead.⁴³ We are the dead in this place of empire only if we give up the ghost in exchange for repetition, in exchange for white-over-black to white-over-black to white-over-black. Slavery is white-over-black, segregation is white-over-black, and neosegregation is white-over-black. Slavery by any other name is death, death only, and that continually. “You, of course, are a rose,”⁴⁴ and roses are red, red and wild. Love is a wild rose.⁴⁵ We are roses and wild and red: “O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June.”⁴⁶

Roses aren’t meant for captivity.⁴⁷ The wild rose, like the kingdom of heaven, is a seed, a good seed, a wild seed, not “the tares.”⁴⁸ The tares are the bad seed, the seed sown by the devil, the seed that bedevils, the empire that Satan cultivates:

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan ...⁴⁹

We the roses, the wild roses, flourish and protect⁵⁰:

Ruderal ecologies weave through homeless encampments on the edge of town, and along the river. National borders create ruderal zones, their fences and militarization engendering unique ecologies. You see them in between city buildings, in vacant lots, in the gaps in the cement, the squares of soil set aside for street trees that are full of dog leavings, along the sides of highways, at the back of strip malls, coming up through the dust, in traffic triangles, at the edges of mono-crop agriculture, heaving through the pavement of abandoned factories, in landscapes miniscule and vast ... They rise up in rubble, ruins, in wastelands. They disperse themselves with all the means of transportation the 21-st century can offer, rapidly reproducing, spreading seeds, building soil and detoxifying it, playing host to insects and a myriad other organisms rejected by capitalist modernity.⁵¹

⁴²Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” (“Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real ... our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors. For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive”). Lorde tells us to cherish the boisterous black angel (“... learn to cherish / that boisterous Black Angel that drives you / up one day and down another / protecting the place where your power lies / running like hot blood / from the same source / as your pain”). Audre Lorde, *for Each of You*, in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* 59 (1997).

⁴³Oppenheim, *Bread and Roses*.

⁴⁴Frost, “The Rose Family.”

⁴⁵Brontë, “Love and Friendship.”

⁴⁶Burns, “A Red, Red Rose.”

⁴⁷Acts 16:25-26 KJV (“And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed”).

⁴⁸A weed is a wild plant that grows where it is not wanted. Matthew 13:31-32 (“Another parable He put forth to them, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches’”). Matthew 21:42 (“Jesus saith unto them, ‘Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?’”); Psalms 118:22 (“The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner”).

⁴⁹Matthew 4:8-10 KJV.

⁵⁰<https://dojustice.crcna.org/article/mustard-weed>

⁵¹Haughwout and Kellhammer, “Ruderal Witchcraft Manifesto.”

“Ruderal ecologies” are wild roses, which is to say that they are relationships, which is to say the disciples “had all things in common.”⁵²

The legal norm is authorized by a higher legal norm, and that higher legal norm is authorized by a legal norm that is yet higher, and so it goes, on and on and on, until “the memory of man runneth not to the contrary,” per Blackstone, or until the “grund-norm,” per Kelsen.⁵³ There is, then, a point of origin in legal systems, civil or common law, for the mystical authority of law. The point of origin is the point beyond which legal interpretation cannot go, “the navel of the dream,” so to speak.⁵⁴ The point of origin is primitive accumulation, the millions of murders that together produced race and capital.

Slavery and its repetitions are death, only death, and that continually. We are still inside slavery’s repetitions. Let us leave all the “whited sepulcher” of law’s empire behind.⁵⁵ In Dante’s *Paradiso*, paradise appears as a flower of saints and angels, a rose. Let us say instead that paradise is a rose with petals made of all who are in their beings and doings the good news of resurrection, the good news of freedom from the repetitions; petals of Jesus and Mary, petals of all who have faith in the resurrection of the dispossessed, in the “the least of these,” including Dred and Harriet Scott and the many thousands gone, and including Baltimore runaway Freddie Gray whose back was broken and all the others whose lives were certainly discounted as “the least of these.”⁵⁶

“And when He had given thanks,” He broke it and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me.”⁵⁷ It sounds like music:

No more the drudge and idler.
Ten that toil where one reposes
But the sharing of life’s glories
Bread and roses, bread and roses,
Bread and roses, bread and roses.⁵⁸

We the roses are only weeds to the empire, not to each other; to each other we are precious: “You come from a long line of poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said the very first time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains feel off.”⁵⁹

⁵²Acts 2:44-45 KJV (And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need”); Acts 4:32 KJV (“And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common).

⁵³Kelsen, *The Pure Theory of Law*.

⁵⁴Freud observed:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the *dream’s navel*, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.

Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁵⁵Matthew 23:27-31 KJV (“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets”).

⁵⁶Matthew 25:40 KJV.

⁵⁷1 Corinthians 11:24 KJV.

⁵⁸Oppenheim, *Bread and Roses*.

⁵⁹Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook”.

The blood of the crucified rains down on all of Creation like petals. Weeds? No, they are “God with us ... Emmanuel,” God with us in the form of “the least of these.”⁶⁰ This is good news, this is the good news. The good news is that we have nothing to fear. The empire and its rules are nothing to fear: “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”⁶¹ This savior, this Christ crucified, turns out to be the hungry, the thirsty, the refugee, the one in rags, the sick, the imprisoned, and always the least of these:

I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.⁶²

Wild roses are edible. In the words of T. Bone Slim, one of the Wobblies:

Will the roses grow wild over me.
When I'm gone to the land that is to be?
When my soul and body part in the stillness of my heart –
Will the roses grow wild over me? ⁶³

Rose hips, the fruit of the plant, are filled with seeds. Who knows “what will next prove a rose?”⁶⁴ Even a stone could turn out to be a seed! “... if these [disciples] should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.”⁶⁵ “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” but the seeds of the flower are not dead repetitions of the same flower. The seeds are surprises.⁶⁶ Wild roses are alive again and again and again each time we gather to conspire for the “least of these” against the empires that are built of their and our crucifixions.⁶⁷

Margaretta Thorn observed:

Our duty is to our fellow-beings, and when we let an opportunity pass, we know not what we lose. Therefore we should do with all our might what our hands find to do; and remember the words of him who went about doing good, that inasmuch as ye have done a good deed for the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me; and even a cup of water is not forgotten.⁶⁸

⁶⁰Matthew 25:40 KJV.

⁶¹Luke 2:11 KJV.

⁶²Matthew 25:35-40 KJV.

⁶³Slim, “The Popular Wobbly.”

⁶⁴Frost, “The Rose Family.”

⁶⁵Luke 19:41-45 KJV (“And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation. And he went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought”).

⁶⁶See generally, Haughwout, *The Politics of the Graft*, 255–63.

⁶⁷Slim, “The Popular Wobbly.”

⁶⁸Thorn, Appendix to *Harriet Wilson, Our Nig*.

Even a cup of water is not forgotten:

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
*nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands*⁶⁹

Neither is food, nor the fact that a lily can be a rose and can sit amongst thorns:

I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys.
As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.⁷⁰
The beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.⁷¹

Louise Michel, the *Red Virgin* of the Paris Commune, explains:

Many things float in children's dreams. Some are red like blood and some black like a night of mourning. Such were the banners of the rebels who dwelt deep in my thoughts. The weddings of those who loved each other were the red weddings of martyrs, and they signed their covenants in blood.⁷²

What does it take to fulfill these covenants? An awareness that the future is already won:

It will be a marvellous thing – the true personality of man – when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child.⁷³

But because love is strong as death and stronger than the repetitions, we the roses will gather, riotous and wild, as we rise over and above empires and their norms, laws, precedents, and authorities.

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⁶⁹Cummings, "Somewhere I Have Never Travelled."

⁷⁰Song of Solomon 2:2 KJV.

⁷¹Song of Solomon 2:16 KJV.

⁷²<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/louise-michel-the-red-virgin>

⁷³Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism."

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Blackness at Revolution's Narrow Gates

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My first encounter with “constituent power” as a critical category was in the early 1990s. The Italian movement of the “self-organized, self-managed social centers” was spreading through occupations and squatting of mostly urban spaces whose contested reappropriation in the face of state power was also thought of as a reclamation of “living labor.” It was, in other words, activity producing – amid the collapse of the extant world of work and employment – sociality, cooperation, musical and visual experimentations. Antonio Negri’s theorizations of general intellect and multitudinous becoming were brought back,¹ even before the theorist himself, from an exile that was both real and metaphorical, following years of repression under emergency legislation, academic state-imposed *damnatio memoriae*, and the diatribes among comrades from the previous decade. It was an analytical and strategic turn that, in line with what Alex Dubilet and Anisha Sankar show in this issue of *Political Theology*, forcefully reopened the question of whether being a Communist had to be dialectically authorized by a particular form of either capitalism or its unmaking. A “wayward” – in Adam Banks and Ahura Sultan’s sense – theological influence on the Italian side of what Dubilet (12) identifies as a terrain inhabited by “Black and Italian radicals” was Fra’ Dolcino, who posited the “community of equals” as the image of God. His *ecclesia* was not only in rebellion against worldly authority, but also explicit in denying to the law – which for Anthony Paul Farley is the ground and fruit of the postabolition global plantation – loyalty oaths, appeal, and recourse.² In Thomas Müntzer’s “theology of revolution,” as Ernst Bloch called it, it is also the return of the dead that dynamizes and eventualizes the possibility of change ushering in equality. With Müntzer, writes Bloch,

[t]he dead return again, in new activities as well as in new contexts of meaning, and history that is grasped, placed under perpetually potent revolutionary concepts, driven to legend and thereby illuminated, becomes, in the richness of their bearing witness related to revolution and apocalypse, an inescapable function. History is in no way, as in Spengler, a decaying sequence of images, nor is it in anyway, as in secularized Augustinianism, a stable epic of progress and providential economy of salvation, but rather a hard, dangerous journey, a suffering, a rambling, a confusion, a search for a hidden home, full of tragic failures, of

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¹See Negri, *Insurgencies*.

²Laudani, *Disobedience*, 30–1.

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scalding, bursting fissures and eruptions, forsaken promises, intermittently charged with the conscience of light.³

Not only do death and defeat give meaning to the “Peasants’ War” within the philosophy of history but they also generate from within it (im)possibilities that, Bloch continues, “perhaps even transcend history altogether.”

Can slavery as Black *social*, “[i]ncidental death [which] occurs when life has no normative value, when no humans are involved,”⁴ partake of the “Communist horizon”? Would it? What can that (im)possibility do to the thought and praxis of revolution? For Jared Sexton it is blackness – not colonized subalternity, alienated labor, or patriarchal gendering – that aligns “abolition” with “degeneration, decline, or dissolution,” instead of “resurgence, recovery, or recuperation”:

Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even, or a politics whose demand is “too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds.”⁵

One wonders, therefore, to what extent complete silence on either slavery or blackness enthrone claims that “sovereignty of the people” is the “Communist horizon” to be navigated toward by interpolating “labor” and the “common” as touchstones of exploitation and its unveiling.⁶ Similarly, a drastic separation of the prisoner from the slave has accompanied the inscription of “prison abolition” into a “small-c”⁷ communist program where blackness is subjected to and managed by signifiers (the migrant, the refugee, the poor and police-abused) more conducive to civic empathy and political coalitions.⁸

Two interconnected threads run through the group of essays here presented, which can be summarized in the form of hypotheses. First, the place of slavery in critical theory is secured by a systematic unthinking of blackness within *racial* slavery. Second, the “denial of antiblackness”⁹ signals anxieties translating “revolution” into a “call to order”¹⁰ demanding *proper* political agency. Revolution’s quintessentially modern correlate, “freedom,” is consequently caught in the unsatisfactory conceptual alternative Tia Trafford dissects, as either an essential human norm in the name of which political domination is also exercised or a historical social practice through which capitalist command is also reproduced. In the indeterminacy of the boundaries between freedom and its opposites, left politics has oscillated between the teleology of class organization and desires for civil society as lifeworld “at a distance” from the state.

Liberalism – the dominant modern configuration of political interlocution – emerged from a similar dilemma, in that case how to project into universal human norms and

³Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer*, 20. I am quoting from the translated pages in Bloch, “Excerpts from *Thomas Müntzer*,” 11.

⁴Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 31.

⁵Sexton, “The Vel of Slavery,” 593. Sexton’s quote is from Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

⁶See Dean, *The Communist Horizon*.

⁷Ruth Wilson Gilmore, quoted in Kelley, “Making History,” 383.

⁸On Gilmore’s treatment of racial imprisonment *sans* racial enslavement see Teed, “Whither Abolition” and Wood, *Blackhood Against the Police Power*, 166–72.

⁹Costa Vargas, *The Denial of Antiblackness*.

¹⁰Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*.

values legal notions like contract and private property, which even in their philosophical (let alone historical) genealogy carry the traces “dripping blood” (Farley) of slavery and colonialism. The shift of emphasis from positive rules to social conventions, through which capitalism was eventually internalized and naturalized as mere societal autopoi-esis, secured the success of its “juridical project”¹¹ as, again in Farley’s terms, spectacle and belief reiterated through forgetting. Appearances play a major analytical role across most articles, primarily appearances of freedom, which the abolition of legalized racial slavery is as central in sustaining as the left’s belief that abolition ultimately reveals capitalism’s “true” abstraction in capital’s “impersonal” compulsion. The material basis of domination – the commensurability of labor power *compelling* the satisfaction of workers’ needs but without *coercing* their individual will – secures, in left imagination, the existence of a space of critique within fetishized social relations. A potential reversibility of capital’s domination appears then out of thinking compulsion as “mute”¹² and servitude as “voluntary”¹³ or figuring employment as an affective rather than productive relation,¹⁴ within which laboring subjectivity is titillated beyond the crude stimulus of necessity, adding perhaps to that very crudeness new layers of necessity that is internalized or consented to.

Trafford refers to Marx’s famous speculative question of what commodities would say about their value if they could speak. The question’s deliberate absurdity is partially belied by the fact that at least one voice can speak on behalf of one commodity: workers as “proprietors” of labor power, the massive portion of human life capital extracts and turns into value. Therein lies, in Marxian imagination, the irreducible difference between slavery and freedom, meaning the disfigured capacity that, never completely normalized under capitalist relations, allegedly remains as the ever-present promise of their future undoing. “Speech” makes it all about workers being linguistically able to separate themselves from the commodified part of their own selves. Workers can speak *that way* (not merely voicing “economistic” wage demands, for example) because slaves, as fully commodified beings, cannot. It is the specter of falling into that position, anti-thetic to workers’ humanity yet unavoidable if, Marx warns, capital’s barbarism will take its course beyond the historically necessary function of capitalism itself, that urges workers to speak. Not only speak, in fact, but signify their labor “otherwise,” weaving into it cultural and moral content and regulative ideas meant to fortify the barricades keeping the slave, more than the capitalist, at bay.¹⁵ A non-idealist deployment of freedom as the ongoing virtuality of social practices, not the lost dimension of a humanity split by capital from its supposed essence – for the “split” happens at every point of one’s compliance with capital’s call – rests in the end on the power of enunciation. Workers are free because they can speak, as exploited and alienated humans, against exploitation and alienation on behalf of their muted selves turned into stuff. The gordian knot Trafford begins with – is freedom a norm steeped in idealized human essence or is it the empirically fleeting outcome of social practices? – is then cut. Both

¹¹Costa, *Il progetto giuridico*.

¹²Mau, *Mute Compulsion*.

¹³Lordon, *Willing Slaves*.

¹⁴Read, *The Double Shift*.

¹⁵See Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor*. For a practical example, one can consult recent pleas in *Jacobin* magazine to take the “dignity of labor,” religious faith, tradition, and patriotism seriously as positive workers’ values.

positions are at fault for their ultimate reliance on competing ontological claims – a metaphysical ontology of the human in the former case, a social ontology in the latter – whose shared quandary lies in their investment in humanity itself.¹⁶

If eschewed racial slavery delimits the stage for the play of semblance and practice, Wilderson's "drama of value,"¹⁷ through which workers' liberation unfolds, then blackness can only enter it as an encumbrance. Blackness is in fact the reminder that slavery as structural incapacitation, not labor as a disfigured human capacity, is the abstraction allowing the incorporation of freedom as the legitimizing representation of capitalist subjugation.¹⁸ Having missed that target, Sankar argues, explains Marx's capitulation to historicism – simplifying the causality from slavery to capitalism into a mere temporal sequence – despite his own method. Trafford wonders why, if freedom is useful for capital because it is its fetish entrenched in social practices, freedom needs to be stated as a universal norm at all. The abstract slave materializes concrete freedoms not only as the foil of the worker's self-activity but also, and especially, because it has "constituent power" in the making of the human. Sylvia Wynter has explored Europe's attachments to freedom, as the freedom to dominate as much as being kept from domination, in their deep Christian roots and secular blossoms within the assemblage of humanism, colonization, genocide, and enslavement.¹⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva probed the genealogy of the "modern subject" in a philosophical and epistemological trajectory building Western reason into a productive articulation of human interiority and natural or racial exteriority, sheltering whiteness from being ruled by either of them by asserting its violent power over both.²⁰ Such are the capacities allowing, *inter alia*, human workers to enter the labor market with the fully formed idea that they have, as Kant put it, "dignity" and not just a "price."²¹

In the "cataclysm," as Banks and Sultan write, of the desire it conveys, the post-Enlightenment idea of revolution is also rife with antiblack anxieties. Casting post-1791 Haiti as a revolutionary turning point in universal history has served, Dubilet's article shows, to provincialize, even decolonize, Eurocentric genealogies of radical emancipation, but at the cost of a complicity between left imagination and the Haitian revolution's own suppression of Black insurgency. The "constituent power" Toussaint Louverture and his fellow Jacobins claimed ended up *re-constituting* the plantations, whose direct, frontal attack by the rebellious slaves had opened the breach for the revolutionary process itself to leap into. Black destituent power, Dubilet concludes, is not only a historical precondition but the interruptive possibility – or impossibility, to the extent radical politics requires its continuous suppression – cutting the relay between constituent power and constituted sovereignty. Destituent power does not stand for a mere celebration of the subaltern's "distance" from established authorities, a precious suggestion, considering how the cry "leave us alone" is globally echoing popular, ordinary, "from below" alignments with fascist fantasies. It is instead a practice of sabotage and stealing away, of being "against" as much as "outside." It is not interested in the humanist project

¹⁶The most powerful Black indictment of ontology along the metaphysical-social bifurcation remains Judy, *Sentient Flesh*.

¹⁷Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

¹⁸Sorrentino, "The Abstract Slave."

¹⁹Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality."

²⁰da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea*.

²¹Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 42.

of “radical enlightenment,” be it to universalize the Euro-American revolutionary lineage or to expand its founders’ gallery by centering until now neglected Indigenous or colonized actors.²² The destituent power of Black insurrection is, finally, a dilemma for the program of “general strike” for it is the slave, not the worker, that wages it. Contrary to the withdrawal of labor, the destruction of the plantation by insurgent slaves does not require a “third term” – surplus-value, land, cultural sovereignty, gender equality, or freedom itself, in the sense of freedom *from* something – structuring and signifying the conflict between rulers and ruled.²³

The threat Black insurrection brings into the world, Dubilet insists, does not even in fact presuppose consequential acts operationalizing it. Its haunting presence is a reminder of the “fear” with which “the world always expects something of the Negro.”²⁴ Black insurrection is therefore a scandal not only for political elaborations of possibility, but also for the ethics of Deleuzian virtuality as something that, differently from mere possibility, actively shapes reality.²⁵ The virtual’s anchoring in living affects and desire, not to mention its fidelity to the world, cannot contemplate the antagonistic salience of social death, whose thinly veiled blackness Deleuzians – with whom theorists of “constituent power” are notoriously conversant – castigate as paralyzing attachments to “unpayable ontological debts.”²⁶ The avowed Nietzscheanism of this critical lineage meets here the Hegelian philosophy of history, which Sankar returns to, in its excision of “Africa” from the very definition of historical time, which for the Human is a vital unfolding of the Spirit but for the Black starts and ends with slavery, the absolute negativity against which humanity’s dialectical progression can be proclaimed. “The perplexity,” Lyndon Barrett wrote, “is that, in order for the progressive dialectical scheme to work, the self-evidence of racial blackness must remain a civil, historical, and subjective nullity.”²⁷

The seeming paradox of slavery as absolute negativity giving history movement, purpose, and intelligibility is the Hegelian legacy to a critical theory that for Sankar reduces the communist revolution into a “farce” confronted to the “tragedy” of Black rebellion. The communist program intervenes in capitalism to prevent it from universalizing slavery or generalizing the expropriation of workers’ entire living being, not only their labor power. Slavery is an object of critique because it indicates an empirically ascertainable tendency within capitalism. The ultimate communist nightmare is the overflowing of slavery beyond its racial designations. Contrary to proletarianization, slavery as such is not meant by Marxists to generate subjects of critique from its object, capital. Nor can the slave be a doomed hero like Müntzer, a perfect communist but out of time, therefore destined to fail – as Engels had it and Sankar summarizes – in the absence of material conditions favorable to Communism. In the practice of Black insubordination and defection, Glissant ponders,

²²Rescuing Europe’s Enlightenment by stretching its roots into indigeneity and piracy has notably been the signature trait of David Graeber’s posthumous work, see Graeber, *Pirate Enlightenment*.

²³Wilderson, “The Black Liberation Army.”

²⁴Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” 107.

²⁵Deleuze, *Bergsonism*.

²⁶Braidotti, “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism,” 39. See also Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls.”

²⁷Barrett, “Captivity, Desire, Trade,” 81.

[w]e have suffered from the lack of the tragic in our history: for instance, by not making the maroon our tutelary hero. But we could not possibly seek reassurance in the notion of a unifying force that is the objective of the austerities of tragedy. Our folktales are perhaps also antitragic: their disruption of history and the rejection of any form of transcendental legitimacy.²⁸

Recurrent across these essays is the possibility that slavery can be foundational – as the Althusserian “object of thought,” not merely a term of analogy or a historical concept – of a theory of communism. Would the underlying practice be categorizable as “Black revolution”? Anxieties about Black antagonism inform, as discussed above, the political properties and proprieties of revolution. The Benjaminian image, invoked by Dubilet, of “pulling the emergency brake,” or letting inoperativity stall an undesirable motion, is quite appropriate to allegorize the conflicting velocities of insurgency and revolution. But, if Toussaint’s revolution itself was a framework for containing a preceding and exceeding Black insurrection, then who pulls the brakes on whom?

“Excess” offers Banks and Sultan a perspective for rethinking Black revolution as “wayward” and refractory to Marxism and liberation theology. Esther Brown, whose history Saidiya Hartman has critically fabulated from the fragmentary evidence scattered in police reports and crime columns, was a young Black woman whom the world deemed a mortal threat because she refused work, subverted family values, practiced unsanctioned sex, consumed unaffordable goods, and “enjoyed too much freedom.”²⁹ Esther’s “minor revolution” longed for sensuous, not merely sentient, life against a world negating Black life altogether. “Minor” stands here not for small-scale, immature, or culturally specific but for eccentrically metacritical, since the inadequacies of “major” revolutions when confronted to slavery can only amount to doubling down on the world’s antiblackness. In Banks and Sultan’s powerful parallel, Esther Brown’s waywardness is affinitive to the biblical Hagar’s, whom God re-enslaved to the plantation and the community expelled once her surrogacy was completed. Both inaugurate the very universality – free labor, the law of the father – that annihilates them. Unthinking Hagar’s enslavement brings her promised “liberation” as “mother of the nation” into relief, while Esther’s survival in the face of gratuitous violence stands at odds with “organized labor.” In both cases, freedom is a leap out of this world rather than a promise of redemption. Its collective materialization in the performative, like the riotous chorus at the Bedford Hill Reformatory, discussed by Hartman and recalled by Banks and Sultan, is, against formal aesthetic representation,³⁰ something closer to the transmission of energy, for “[b]lack flesh knows something ... about movement and vibration against the strictures of cramped time and space.”³¹

As an image of future abundance, the historical necessity of revolution has aimed to snatch from the jaws of natural or artificial necessity the sensuous enjoyment of “a shared political subjectivization.”³² Shared by prevailing radical notions of political subjectivization is also, however, horror at the figure of the slave, at least insofar it is not superseded by a properly human mode of agency, one that aims to take over the plantation, not burn it. As recclamation of an all-too-human plenitude, revolution appears to the abundance of Black’s

²⁸Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 87.

²⁹Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 235.

³⁰See Bradley, *Anteaesthetics*.

³¹Crawley, “Stayed/Freedom/Hallelujah,” 33.

³²Ross, *Communal Luxury*, 17.

“gratuitous freedom”³³ – “freedom from the world, freedom from Humanity” – akin to André Gide’s “narrow gate,” a castigation of wayward desire in the name of redemption.³⁴ The authors of this group of articles help readers think of ways of, if not smashing through the gate, at least circumventing it.

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³³Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 23.

³⁴Gide, *La porte étroite*. It is indicative that in Gide’s case as well that early image started a journey of reconciliation between desire and morality where, in his travel diaries from the Congo, Africa is the Hegelian primitive realm enslaved to nature and spirits whose anti-slavery progress Gide made coincidental with a humane, anti-imperialist colonialism, see Wynchank, “Perception of the Relationship.”

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