

FANTASY AS CRITIQUE AND COGNITION:
MARX'S BLACK METAMORPHOSES OF LIVING LABOUR (2006, 3,200 words)

1. Introductory

1.1. The following is an excerpt from a larger essay within which I explore two axioms: a/ that the insight of Karl Marx is indispensable to any looking forward that attempts to avoid catastrophe for humanity; b/ that this insight is best understood as being constituted by a fusion of three domains and horizons (cognition, liberty, and pleasure), with a set of regulative principles and a focus applying them to the determining factor of capitalist and any post-capitalist life: work, or better. I shall in this excerpt talk only about one aspect of this focus. It will be seen that the mortification of living labour, effected by trading creativity for alienation, leads with accelerating speed to personal and collective death. This is why both Marx and his predecessor Fourier feel it as a monstrous world of upside-down relationships and end up in a radical refusal; but it is also why they largely must talk about it intertwining precise analysis of their contemporary life and labour with fantastic imagery: Fourier within the horizon of utopian projections, Marx within the horizon of horror fantasy.

1.2. Before getting into my analysis proper, I wish to discuss some of its methodological presuppositions relating to *cognition or understanding (sapientia)*, a quite central domain in Marx. It is for him on the one hand science but on the other hand integral human practice. I've argued in three earlier essays ("Transubstantiation," "Utopian," and "What") how *Wissenschaft* or knowledge was in German subsumed by Kant to mean a systematic body of cognition with a proper correlation of principles and consequences. Now, on pain of having no transmittable knowledge, scientific or other, we cannot do without systems in the sense of articulated wholes or provisional totalities organized according to an overarching method; yet only dynamically equilibrated systems, with a deniable and thus changeable rather than closed history can today be defended. Therefore, we may still wish (I would) to retain the methods and name of science for strictly articulated and formalized cognition, as opposed to what Aristotle called "opinion" (*doxa*). But this can be rescued from its present dominant use as a death-dealing variant of absolutist belief, enslaved to capitalist profit, only if it gets into continual feedback with values and interests from human practice. Science is nothing without humanity: as Gramsci remarked, whether the universe would exist in the absence of humanity is for us (today) an empty question.

It is possible to find in Marx an oscillation between, on the one hand, the constantly changing inductions from *praxis*, which then necessarily and prominently employ metaphoric clusters as an indispensable cognitive tool, and on the other hand the formalized science of his times which proceeds through fixed ("iron") laws. But usually, and especially in all of his depth analyses such as those in the *Grundrisse* which I shall be using here (further as G with page number), his dialectic does not use the pain of the antithesis -- the blood, sweat, and tears of what he called "the wrong side of history" -- as a rhetorical ploy on the order of a double negation necessarily ending in the victory of the good synthesis, that is, for Hegel's *theodicea* (justification of Providence). It is not an illustration of pre-existing speculative schemes but an open-ended process, and Marx stresses the unforeseen ruses of history. If history is necessarily a dialectic of free vs. unfree self-creation through struggles of societal classes and fractions, which is since the rise of capital centered on the existential tug-of-war of living labour versus commodification and fetishism, then it has no end (but untold catastrophes and triumphs: Rosa Luxemburg's "socialism or barbarism").

2. Fourier

2.1. The Absolute Swerve:

However, Marx's argument is today still largely overlaid by his 19th-Century urge toward Newtonian scientificity. Nonetheless, for him cognition is in no way bound by those "positive" parameters, but inextricably fused with the visionary or poetic elements (which are not irrational but supply what conceptual reason has yet no instruments for). He thereby recognizes that both philosophy and science begin by transforming practice into mythical personifications and then micro-metaphors, and end in one vast macro-metaphor (as, for example, Wiener's definition of mathematics goes). They cannot reflect upon themselves unless they recognize how deeply consubstantial they are to poetry: Eros turns into Newton's attraction, geometry into gravitational fields, the wayfarers' horizon into Einstein's relativities. Still, in order to understand Marx properly, the strengths of his greatest precursor and complement, Charles Fourier, have to be factored in.

Fourier's major strength is to have responded to the system of bourgeois "industry" (which for him means artisanal work and commerce) by an "absolute swerve" (*écart absolu*) based on the pleasure principle, both personally sensual and socially combinatory, as a totalizing horizon; and his major weakness is that he did not understand revolutions, industrial or political. But he caught supremely well their consequences.

Fourier judged "civilization" (class society, in particular bourgeois commercialism) to be, in a popular image, a "world upside down."^{1/} In it, the lawyer has to wish for "good lawsuits," the physician for a "good fever," the officer for "good wars, that killed half of his colleagues," the priest for the "good dead, that is, funerals at one thousand francs apiece," the monopolist for a "good famine, which doubled or tripled the price of bread," the wine merchant for "good frosts," and the builders for "a good conflagration to consume a hundred houses and further their trade" (*Théorie I*: xxxvi); family means adultery, riches mean bankruptcy, work is constraint, property ruins the proprietor, abundance leads to unemployment, and the machine to hunger. There is no reforming this ridiculous and pernicious set-up except by a new set-up, the harmonious association based on passionate attractions among people. The absolute deviation or swerve is the necessity to turn once more upside down the deadly social world in order to make it livable.

2.2. Passionate Attraction:

People are by ineradicable nature bundles of passions for Fourier, and these can only be steered and organized. The central problem of bourgeois individualism was how to shape a community which would, as Rousseau put it, protect the person and goods of each without making him obey anybody but herself. Fourier's politics are a radical quest for sensual happiness for one and all. He starts from enlightened egotism and aims for a society where the individual can only find his benefit through operations profitable to the whole collectivity; he calls this new regime of free association the Phalanstery. As in the Orphics and 18th-Century sensual materialism, passionate attraction or appetite is a universal principle, and Fourier extends it from Newton's matter to the other three worlds of plant, animal, and social life. People and their passions are not equal but varied yet complementary. Therefore, their appetites, primarily sexual and gustatory, are in Phalanstery developed and harmonized by composing them into series where classes of people (by sex and age) are, by an intricate and even maniacal system of idiosyncratic analogies, composed into a "calculus of Destinies."

This extends to the future and the universe: from the 18 different creations on Earth, ours is the first and worst, having to go through five horrible stages from Savagery down to Civilization, before ascending through Guarantism (the economico-sexual welfare state of the federated *phalanstères*) to Harmony. At that point there will be no more sexual or economic repression, hunger, war, States, nations, illnesses or struggle for existence. Most important for Marx, there will also be no split between intellectual and manual labour, or labour and "leisure" (see *Critique of the Gotha Programme*,

and Debout). The blessed life of Harmony, innocent of private property and salaried work, of nuclear family and the split between city and country, will right the proceedings of class Power: courts and priests will be Courts of love and priesthoods of sex, wars will turn into competitions of (e.g.) pastry-making, armies will clean, plant, and reconstruct, work will become attractive as play and art, and swerving abnormality the norm of society.

Fourier's shattering interplay of maniacal poetry and ironical dialectic, rooted in the deep longings and genuine folk imagination of ancient working classes just being crushed by commerce and industry, was the first to take into account the necessities of huge demographic agglomerations. It will reappear in garden cities and kibbutzim, in Marx (see G 712) and the hippies. What it lacked was a reckoning with industrial labour and capital, and with the deep-seated, internalized and normalized, violence its reign and its leaping technoscience bring.

3. Marx: Value Creation and Fantastic Metamorphoses

3.0. Two presuppositions are quite central to Marx's analysis of the "material mode of production" constituting capital and capitalism. The first one is *living labour* (*lebendige Arbeit*), "the *living source* of value" (G 296-97)^{2/}; Preve perspicaciously notes that this "absolute starting point... functions for him as a true Being" (144). The second one, which is not dealt with here, is its measuring in production as time.

3.1. Alienation of Value-Creation:

Creative power is appropriated by capital:

The worker... sells labour only in so far... as its equivalent is already measured, given; capital buys it as living labour, as the general productive force of wealth.... [I]n exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, [the worker] surrenders its *creative power*, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage.... The creative power of his labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an *alien power* confronting him. He divests himself of [externalizes, alienates -- *entäussert sich*] labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such. (G 307)

The productivity of labour becomes the productive force of capital.... Capital itself is essentially this *displacement, this transposition [of the productive force* of labour], and... *this transubstantiation*; the necessary process of positing its own powers as *alien* to the worker. (G 308)

The worker is impoverished by the process of production, during which he must enter into and be transformed by an "absolute separation between property and labour, between living labour capacity and the conditions of its realization, between objectified and living labour, between value and value-creating activity." His "value-creating possibility" is transformed into capital, as master over living labour capacity, as value endowed with its own might and will, confronting him in his... poverty. He has produced not only the alien wealth and his own poverty, but also the relation of this wealth as independent, self-sufficient wealth, relative to himself as the poverty which this wealth consumes, and from which wealth thereby draws new vital spirits into itself, and realizes itself anew.... The product of labour appears as... a mode of existence confronting living labour as independent...; the product of labour, objectified labour, has been endowed by living labour with a soul of its own, and establishes itself opposite living labour as an *alien power*. . . . As a

consequence of the production process, the possibilities resting in living labour's own womb exist outside it... as realities alien to it.... (G 452-54)

3.2. Fantastic Metamorphoses and Anamorphoses:

The product of a subject (labour) is unnaturally born out of it as not simply an objectified reality (like a baby or an artefact) but as a malevolent usurper, taking from the subject its "vital spirits," vitality or indeed soul. This is not too bad an approximation to a Gothic tale, in two variants, with a male and female protagonist: the first, in which the unclean capitalist Power seeds the womb of labour (here a *succuba*) with a demon birth; the second, in which the unsuspecting hero is beset by a power he unwittingly let loose out of his soul-substance or vitality, and which turns upon him to suck the rest of such "vital spirits" -- from the Sorcerer's Apprentice tale (already used in *The Communist Manifesto*) to the popular image (though not the original novel) of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster.

Or, "[t]he accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain is thus absorbed into capital ..." (G 694). As in horror-fantasy, brain-forces are absorbed into the villain, the "animated monster" of capital (G 470). In older language, he practices soul-extraction, soul-transferral or soul-eating. For when value becomes capital, living labour confronts it "as a mere means to realize objectified, dead labour, to penetrate it with an animating soul while losing its own soul to it" (G 461). The underlying image of vampirism and vampiric reincarnation, the evil incarnation process, is reproduced in Marx's very syntax:

Capital posits the permanence of value (to a certain degree) by incarnating itself in fleeting commodities and taking on their form, but at the same time changing them just as constantly; alternates between its eternal form in money and its passing form in commodities; permanence is posited as the only thing it can be, a passing passage-process-life. But capital obtains this ability only by constantly sucking in living labour as its soul, vampire-like. (G 646)

3.3. Labour as Living Fire:

The most incisive formulation may be:

Labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time. In the simple production process... the transitoriness of the forms of things is used to posit their usefulness. When cotton becomes yarn, yarn becomes fabric, fabric becomes printed etc. or dyed etc. fabric, and this becomes, say, a garment, then (1) the substance of cotton has preserved itself in all these forms...; (2) in each of these subsequent processes, the material has obtained a more useful form, a form making it more appropriate to consumption; until it has obtained at the end the form in which it... satisfies a human need, and its transformation is the same as its use. (G 361)

Perhaps it is by now not startling that "the advance of population... too belongs with production" (G 486). Such a formulation is confirmed by Engels's famous preface to *The Origin of the Family*: "...the production and reproduction of immediate life... is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence...; on the other, the production of human beings themselves" (455).

As opposed to production of exchange-values for profit, the production of use-values for consumption is a beneficent metamorphosis of life into more life, human quality into another human quality: "living labour makes instrument and material in the production process into the body of its soul and thereby resurrects them from the dead . . ." (G.364). The classless society or realm of freedom necessitated by the qualitative logic of human vitality, which sublates the quantitative logic of political economy, is one which has turned the vampiric dispossession of labour and its vitality into a

Heraclitean but even more a Promethean "form-giving fire," into a means of renewed life. Humanized production or creativity replaces death with life: the essential Marxian argument is as "simple" as this.

3.4. Marx as a Copernican Revolution in Metamorphic Imagery:

Thus the *Grundrisse*, and then *Capital*, are the high point and crown of a whole millennia-old (if not millenary) plebeian tradition of metamorphic imagery, in which the immortal labouring people constitute the world's body -- a tradition best set forth in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. This tradition runs on the affirmative side from early metamorphic myths -- such as the central one here, Prometheus as both fire-bringer and shape-giver (*pyrphoros* and *plasticator*) -- and from folktales, through what Bakhtin calls "prandial libertinism" such as the Cockayne stories and Rabelais -- positing a magically unimpeded direct appropriation of nature without war, scarcity or work -- to Fourier's future of passionate attractions. On the negative side, Carnival is accompanied by Lent: all that falls short of such full contentment is treated as a demonically unnatural state of affairs, a misappropriation of the people's living forces or vital spirits by vampiric villains. To mention only Marx's most likely sources, such a filiation runs again from the horrific elements in myths and folktales, culminating in those of the Grimm brothers, through classical antiquity (Homer's Circe and Lucretius rather than Ovid's codification of metamorphoses), to the Romantic elaborations on these motifs.^{4/} The subversive plebeian genres (or the twin genre) of horror fantasy cum utopian alternative, radically alienated from the seemingly solid and unchangeable status quo and therefore committed to seemingly fantastic processual and metamorphic imagery, supplied Marx in the *Grundrisse* with the popular, spontaneously materialist imaginative tradition formulating the lot of exploited people as a struggle between living renewal of their forces and a zombie-like death-in-life.

Marx changed and fulfilled this tradition by fusing it with the materialist and dialectical intellectual traditions which stem from similar roots but developed somewhat independently from Heraclitus and Epicure to Hegel and Feuerbach, briefly fusing with the plebeian tradition also at such earlier high points as Lucretius, Rabelais, and Cyrano. Marx's main innovation was to alter the people's body into labour's living body, which makes out of the cosmic presupposition of ever-living fire a concrete, everyday matter of living labour's formative fire. This radically transcended the Greek vision of activity split between the *praxis* of free and wealthy citizens and the *poiesis* of the "mechanics," slaves, and women: it substituted for it the deeper binary relationship of living labour and vampiric capital. It added to the plebeian defence of the consuming and hedonist body the crucially new cognition of the producing body, which both incorporated and criticized (that is, dialectically sublated) bourgeois political economy. It will last as long as that economy and the need to imagine a radical alternative to it does.

4. Prospect

If, as all creation, love as well as child-bearing and child-rearing belong to production in the non-bourgeois and anti-capitalist sense, then Marx takes this sense for his yardstick with which to measure the wrong character of capitalist production; but it is right to say that he, and the whole Marxist tradition, does not focus on production as creation. Though many women and children worked in Marx's time on turning labour into reproduction of capital, this was eventually found less profitable than using them for the hidden costs of reproducing the labour force, and industrial labourers became as a rule male. There was much reason in his focussing on the problem as it concerned these male labourers, on labour as abstractly genderless, but that does not excuse the neglect after him.

A crucial and vital updating of Marx's insights for the 21st Century must use, beyond the insights from the new ways in which the Fordist and Post-Fordist epochs have inflected our inmost experiences, also those of materialist feminism. Beside adding new foci, such as the intertwining of

the producing and the gendered body, they add new methods. There should be no deep obstacles for such an alliance (though many contingent ones, arising mainly out of opposed interests of male and female elites competing at the capitalist poker table). One would simply have to add holy birth -- all creation that consecrates life -- to the demonic birth.

Notes

1/ *Nouveau* 14; see more on Fourier in my *Metamorphoses*, where 11 titles of secondary literature up to 1975 may be found.

2/ A long list of secondary literature to Marx and the *Grundrisse* is given in Suvin "Transubstantiation" and Suvin-Angenot, to which today at least Antonio Negri's *Marx beyond Marx* (Brooklyn NY and London: Autonomedia & Pluto P, 1991) should be added.

3/ "For Marx, assumption of bourgeois perspective and voice, through what might be termed a heuristically useful travesty, was thus a frequent counter-ideological procedure" -- Terdiman 23; he goes on to note a grotesque example of the Moscow editors, who took the wonderful pastiche in the projected volume 4 of *Capital (Theories of Surplus Value)*, where the criminal produces penal codes and moral feelings, for Marx's own position.

4/ It would be an interesting work of literary detection, which is approached in Suvin and Angenot, to find precisely from where Marx took his fantastic imagery; this would include Goethe's *Faust* (see also G 704) and Shakespeare. As far as vampires go, there are both French Enlightenment and German Romantic sources: Voltaire somewhere speaks about stock-market speculators, tax gatherers, and businessmen in Paris and London who suck the people's blood in full daylight and do not live in graves but in beautiful palaces (cf. Caillois), and this was a commonplace of the Parisian melodrama and vaudeville in Marx's youth (for ex. in the vaudeville *Les trois vampires* of 1820, these are identified with a judiciary official, a cashier, and a customs official, see Milner 177). Marx no doubt knew Heine's famous critique in *Die romantische Schule* of German vampires, who include a field-marshal and a dead fatty who leaves his grave to earn ducats.

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