Marx's Rhetoric

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Abstract: Marx was a radical critic of capitalism and an advocate of its revolutionary overthrow and substitution by communism. An intellectual, polemicist, and propagandist, his political theory was expressed in a variety of rhetorical strategies aimed at illuminating the dynamics of class conflict beneath property relations and at exposing the inadequate and often partial opinions of his adversaries. Marx's thought was later taken as the foundation of an all-encompassing outlook known as "Marxism" that, paradoxically, diminished ideas and arguments as factors in political agitation. Yet a closer look at Marx's rhetoric demonstrates his argumentative versatility across different genres and a distinctive attention to figurative language in illuminating power relations in capitalism.
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1 *Introduction*

Karl Marx's (1818 - 1883) political theory comprises a theoretical critique of capitalism and the advocacy of a revolutionary politics centred upon classes and the overthrow of "bourgeois" property relations. We know much of this theory from the arguments and analyses he – alongside his occasional co-writer, Friedrich Engels – set out in the form of essays, books, and notes (some of which were never published in his lifetime), a manifesto and numerous prefaces, lectures, and correspondences. However, his ideas and theories are rarely examined in terms of their rhetoric. Marxism, the 20th-century ideology and theoretical doctrine elaborated in his name, tended to minimise the importance of speech and argument

in general, dismissing these as a distracting "superstructural" veneer behind which established class interests lurk, to be discarded for an "objective" but, too often, deterministic analysis (see Aune 1994).

Yet, more than a philosopher, revolutionary, or political economist (activities none of which he pursued professionally), Marx was a polemical writer who assembled arguments in various forms and for different audiences. His "revolutionary" politics therefore greatly hinged on the efficacy of his words and their capacity to dislodge effectively the views of his opponents. Notably, Marx eschewed moralising appeals to conscience or principle and, instead, preferred to argue from a critical grasp of real experience. His rhetorical strategies thus altered according to circumstances and, given his striking and varied choices across his lifetime, displayed an inventiveness of style that belie any effort to dismiss speech as a mere surface. Indeed, to read Marx is to encounter various argumentative genres, not all of which necessarily align or seamlessly support each other.

In what follows, I survey the key rhetorical strategies in Marx's work that inform our understanding of him today as a political theorist. I begin by looking at the rhetoric of criticism he developed as a philosophy student but which he came to use against "idealist" philosophy, eventually advocating an alternative brand of "materialist" social criticism that situated critique around class-based property relations. I then explore some of the strategies Marx employed, both with Engels and alone, to analyse the complex dynamics of class politics, which he often depicted in highly figurative terms as a dramatic interplay of overt self-images and emergent economic interests. Finally, I reflect on the rhetoric of critical political economy that later in his life became the intellectual focus of Marx's enquiries. Here, again, he revealed a figurative grasp of language understood not as transparently descriptive of reality but as an integral part of the functioning of capitalism itself.

Throughout his career as a political agitator, Marx understood the importance of using language and argument in various modes: to transform his readers' grasp of ideas as tools for social criticism, to demonstrate how classes figure themselves as urgent forces of social and political change, or to reveal how a complex economic system makes us complicit with its deadly inner logic. Far from being objective "scientific" discoveries, I want to suggest, Marx's powerful insights into capitalism were inseparable from his ascription of qualities, motives, and character to particular agents and situations. That is to say, the force of his arguments is viewed better as a rhetorical, rather than an exclusively intellectual, achievement.

2 *The Rhetoric of Criticism*

Marx was relentlessly critical of other people's ideas. His inclination was, often, to follow closely the logic of an argument and pounce upon its inconsistencies, errors, and contradictions, exposing flaws in its reasoning and dismissing its author as a sentimental dreamer. If Marx's rhetoric can be found anywhere, it is in what he himself described as the "reckless critique of all that exists" that motivated much of his writing (1977, 36). The strategy of exposing flaws in the reasoning of others meant that Marx's own arguments typically emerged polemically, whether in critical logical analysis, sarcasm, or *ad hominem* attacks (see Carver 2010). While many have lauded his style of critique as itself premised upon a distinctive philosophical approach – a systematic "dialectical" method of dissecting reality and laying bare its inner workings – it might be more accurate to view it as a series of declamatory encounters aimed at dispelling the attraction of self-serving or unexamined rhetoric rather than revealing the ultimate truth on any matter. His objective in this rhetoric was often to encourage readers simply to reason from elsewhere, preferably from actual social relations of production and not from hallowed principles or vague ideals.

How did Marx acquire this particular style? His earliest forays into critical debate were as a student of philosophy and as a radical journalist under repressive conditions in Prussian Germany in the 1840s (see Sperber 2013). His audiences were, initially, a small band of other intellectuals but, later, expanded to include a wider constituency of educated middle-class Germans. By the mid 1840s, following disagreements with his former philosophical colleagues and his association with radical socialist movements in France, Marx renounced highbrow philosophical critique for a new kind of social criticism committed to the practical overthrow of private property. Far from being a philosophical "discovery," this transition involved a notable shift in argumentative *topoi*. Let us briefly follow the development of this outlook.

The young Marx was an educated, middle-class German, schooled in the Classics and familiar with the leading currents of modern philosophical thought, and therefore no stranger to the technicalities of logical argument or even poetic ornamentation. He even boasted (in a letter from university to his father) that he had translated part of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* from the Greek (1971, 8). Marx's early years as a student in Berlin brought him into contact with a community of dissenting atheist intellectuals – the so-called "Young Hegelians," left-wing followers of G. W. F. Hegel – that nurtured his skills in critical argument. Open public debate was forbidden and free expression was consequently difficult under semi-autocratic government, so matters of political controversy were displaced onto largely abstract philosophical and theological dispute. The Young Hegelians constituted a kind of unofficial political party, driven by ideals expressed in the form of abstract principles (see McLellan 1969). The young Marx was an avowed rationalist and atheist and identified closely with the critique of religion and all forms of reasoning that proceeded from apparently theological premises. Critical thought, in the Kantian tradition, demanded the interrogation of concepts and the eradication of any "dogmatic" residue of thought. That imperative was directed at the

ideas of Hegel, the dominant post-Kantian thinker of the time who had made real social and political institutions the embodiment of an unfolding principle of reason (the Idea). For the Young Hegelians, Hegel's ideas, when shorn of their theological baggage, justified their criticism of Germany's parochial customs and beliefs and legitimated extensive democratic reform of political institutions.

In following the Young Hegelians, Marx was greatly indebted to the humanist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach's critique of religion and of Hegel's "speculative" philosophy in particular (which he regarded as a form of "rational theology") involved inverting the notion of man as the expression of God and asserting, instead, that God was the expression of man. God, he argued, was an externalised – or "alienated" – ideal conjured by mankind to express its desire for spiritual fulfilment: a product, not the origin, of that desire. Philosophy could only think its concepts properly once their "sensuous" origin in human experience was re-established, free of the error of theology (Feuerbach 1986, 51). Feuerbach's critical method, presented by way of aphorism and inference, consisted in "transforming" the validity of theological principles rather than refuting them outright. Concepts were thus conceived not as autonomous conceptual unities but as responses to a deeper human experience.

Feuerbach's critical method enabled a powerful and critical shift in stance towards Hegel's philosophy. It attacked the conceptual hierarchy by which Hegel had presented his system, evading entanglement in its dense complexity by disputing its guiding logic. The method served as the key device in Marx's criticism of what he called "the entire mystery" of Hegel's thought, which he set out in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* of 1843: concepts had been invested with positive, independent qualities that covered over the real absence of unity in human experience generally, yet these concepts were attributed a primacy over human affairs (Marx 1994, 3). Thus, in Marx's view, Hegel's political philosophy

involved a "mystification" that imagined the state as the logical expression of an independent Idea and not as a product of contingent human design. Hegel's "objectification" of the state "forgets that particular individuality is a human individual and that activities and functions of the state are human activities" (4). But if his inverted logic was reversed, the priority of human needs over public authority – in the form of democracy – could be asserted: "Hegel proceeds from the state and makes man into the subjectified state; democracy starts with man and makes the state objectified man" (9). These chiasmatic formulations of general principles dominated Marx's early rejection of Hegelian political philosophy, permitting him to shift the intellectual agenda from what he saw as "allegorical," theological reasoning to his own secular focus on property and democracy. The latter entailed real practical demands of society obscured by the attribution of independent spiritual meaning to the state, law, and bureaucracy.

Unable – because of his atheistic opinions and radical associations – to get a job as an academic, Marx took up journalism and in 1842 became the editor of the liberal newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*. There he began to publish articles on practical matters, including poverty and local politics, and faced at first hand the challenges of writing under direct censorship. He also began to tire of the philosophical preoccupations of the Young Hegelians, which he regarded increasingly as self-indulgent and vague. His former associates, he found, preferred to argue wholly in the realm of concepts and failed to speak to pressing issues of social and political reform (see Marx 1977, 23). As an editor charged with the task of public communication, Marx felt that his role was now to ensure "the education of the public" on the political situation, not to scare them with the "ogre" of atheist philosophy.

By the time he moved to Paris in 1843, following suppression by the authorities of his newspaper, Marx had already declared that "the criticism of religion" – the cornerstone of the Young Hegelian outlook – was redundant. It was now time, he claimed (echoing Feuerbach's

own epigrammatic announcements of logical transformations) to transform "the criticism of heaven . . . into the criticism of earth" (1977, 64). The focus of a genuinely critical attitude – one attuned to actual experience and not its conceptual gloss – should be politics, law, and society generally, not abstract and ahistorical principles of freedom or humanity. Having rejected theology in order to emphasize humanity as the source of meaning it was imperative to deepen this humanism by understanding man as a social creature shaped by concrete relations of property. Marx also began to identify the subject in whose name he believed a critical attitude should be aligned: the proletariat. In this he was influenced by his recent meeting with Engels, as well as by his growing connections with French socialist organisations, and he proceeded to denounce the views of his Berlin friends in a number of densely theoretical and occasionally *ad hominem* critical essays. In their first co-authored book of 1845, *The Holy Family*, for instance, Engels and Marx together lampooned philosophical idealists for their self-referential, "critical criticism" and sneering, aloof attitude towards concrete social struggles (see Marx 1977, 131-155). Hyperbolic personal attacks were a common, if sometimes unedifying, weapon in Marx's rhetorical armory.

This shift in Marx's arguments may, from afar, seem like the smooth unfolding of a philosophical deduction (as Marx seemed to present it) from speculative philosophy to humanism and then to practical social and political concerns, each phase logically supplanting the other. But it entailed an alteration of rhetorical stance that was political as much as intellectual, signalling a movement away from reformist aspirations for a democratic revolution in Germany and towards an allegiance to working-class struggles against private property. By the time he and Engels had formulated what they later referred to as their joint "outlook," they had in fact even stopped bothering to justify it philosophically. Thus the manuscript of the jointly authored text of 1845, often called the *German Ideology*, was never published in their lifetimes, although, paradoxically, for many today it remains the initial

locus of a distinctively "Marxist" social theory called "historical materialism" (see Carver and Blank 2014a and 2014b; Wilkie 1976).

We can certainly find in the *German Ideology* what appears to be a neat summation of a critical social theory that, again, emphasises reasoning from social relations of material production, not from the logic of ideas or philosophical premises alone. "Because these Young Hegelians take ideas, thoughts, concepts, in general the products of consciousness which they have rendered independent, to be the actual shackles of man . . . it is evident that the Young Hegelians also have only these illusions to struggle against" (Marx 1994, 122). Combatting illusory "phrases" with "other phrases," continued Marx and Engels, they made no substantial contact with actual reality (123). By contrast, Marx and Engels claimed to reason not from ideas and concepts but from "real presuppositions": "real individuals, together with their actions and their material conditions of life" (123). All human consciousness, all forms of imagination and thought "corresponded" to wider social relations of production that made possible human subsistence and reproduction. Hence it is from *there* that critical thinking must begin. "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness," they declared in another sweeping chiasmic inversion (125). Thus the task of critical inquiry, they surmised, was to situate ideas within the framework of a distinct "form of life," historical relations of production with their own class divisions of labor. Indeed, ideas could never be wholly separated from the class organisation of society: "In every epoch the ideas of the ruling are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the dominant *material* power is at the same time its dominant *intellectual* power" (145). Here Marx and Engels suggested a general theory of "ideology," implying that false or misleading ideas are generated by classes, and these ideas prevent a full grasp of their wider conditions of existence. By implication, the true test of any body of critical ideas was not how it could abstract from material reality but, rather, how it evaded complicity with dominant social

forces and incited the practical reorganisation of reality by those subjugated by it. As Marx's famous eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, written around the same time, asserted: "Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to change it" (1994, 118).

The very general theses concerning ideas, history, or class asserted (though not especially evidenced) in the *German Ideology* may look plausible as social theory. But they might also be viewed as a kind of summary of argumentative *topoi* to help Marx and Engels finally distinguish their style of criticism from that of the Young Hegelians. In that respect, they are rhetorical gestures aimed at drawing relatively crude divisions between one set of arguments and another. They set out a rhetorical agenda concerning what it means to undertake effective, politically engaged argument. Genuine critical reasoning, they suggest, moves from the exigencies of social relations of production, not from the intrinsic promise of ideas and principles. Instead of deploying empty phrases, serious critics should direct themselves to concrete social struggles and the relations that condition them. Rather than offering a genuine theory of how *all* social systems work (are dominant ideas *always* those of the dominant class? Are individuals *only* what relations of production make them?), Marx and Engels were fashioning a style of critical reasoning that clarified *their own* argumentative priorities as socialists.

It is hard to draw stronger claims about the views presented in the *German Ideology* since it is an incomplete and extremely uneven manuscript, the precise contributions and intentions of its authors are not clear, and Marx and Engels chose not to publish it anyway. While that text supplies some clue as to Marx's view of a "materialist" social criticism, it was first published in the 1930s and so was not available to those early Marxists who looked to Marx's work for a statement of his theoretical "method." Indeed, it is largely to the later "Preface" to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859 that Marxists have looked for a summary view of his outlook. Written nearly fifteen years later, the discursive,

polemical style of the *German Ideology* is there replaced by a tidy but brief "guide" to Marx's studies:

> In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process generally. It is not the consciousness of men that specifies their being, but on the contrary their social being that specifies their consciousness. (Marx 1996, 159-160)

This summary – with its simple division of economic "structure" from the "legal and political superstructure" and apparent primacy given to the one over the other – has regularly served as the central source for those seeking Marx's view of society and history. Notable here is the claim that structure and superstructure comprise substantially distinct realms of human activity such that economic processes can be differentiated from forms of social consciousness and should, therefore, be accorded a greater weight in composing "social being." Marx then goes on to describe – again in somewhat sweeping generalisation – the process by which any society changes (1996, 160).

> At a certain level of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the already existing relations of production, or in what is merely a legal expression for this, with the property relations within which they had previously functioned. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution commences.

Revolutionary transformation was thus presented as the outcome of a "contradiction" between abstract "forces" and "relations" of production, or social classes and the established organisation of productive activity. Again, Marx simplified socio-economic systems into two distinct formations. The "Preface" gives the impression that he subscribed to a rather reductive, mechanical view of society and social change in which various levels can be identified and a law-like determination can be discerned (although this is merely asserted and not demonstrated with any proof). A critical outlook, from the perspective of the "Preface," resembles a scientific statement concerning the interaction of nature-like objects, not of rich human "forms of life" where motivation and imagination may come into play, where the critic is a passive observer of the inexorable unfolding of events who locates "real" causal factors through the superstructural façade, and not a participant whose interventions may themselves shape the result.

The "Preface" lends a simplified, "scientific" gloss to Marx's critical theory. It is no surprise, then, that it has served as the key point of reference in debates over the coherence of Marxism as a systematic theory of history and society (see Cohen 2000). But it has done a tremendous disservice to any nuanced understanding of Marx's rhetoric of criticism. If read as the culmination of a singular quest to find a global explanation for all of human history – rather than, say, merely a synopsis of his views for the reader of his book – then it neglects to account for what Marx spent much of his time doing as a critic, namely, arguing to get socialist politics and property relations in general onto the political agenda. If we regard the latter as his critical objective, and not the theoretical mastery of history, then the variations in his rhetorical strategies come to make more sense.

3 *The Rhetoric of Class Politics*

Having established a rhetorical stance from which they could distinguish their own critical outlook, Marx and Engels went on to promote and analyse concrete class politics. Indeed, most of the work they published in their lifetime was social and political commentary rather than philosophy. That called for a rhetoric oriented less to theoretical propositions and more to capturing the dynamics of the unfolding moment. Defining situations, giving character to various agents, narrating their movements, regressions, and transformations all entailed a style of communicating that drew upon various tropes to energise them. Far from dismissing ideas as merely superstructural phenomena behind which structural forces work, Marx's political writings present politics as a perpetual play of appearances, where self-perceptions and underlying interests interweave and clash. Two of the most notable examples of Marx's rhetoric of class politics are the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848, co-written with Engels, and his own *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* of 1852.

Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto* (see Marx 1996, 1-30) to promote their new communist politics among the radical revolutionary movements that had exploded into life in Paris (and subsequently across Europe) in 1847-1848. Many of the revolutionary groups were "bourgeois" rather than socialist, and the *Manifesto* undertook the task of clarifying the distinctive aims of their own "Communist League": not merely the extension of liberal rights but, ultimately, the overthrow of all property relations. Marx and Engels adopted the manifesto genre made popular during the French revolution of 1789 but gave it a longer, narrative form. It consisted of texts originally written mostly by Engels, recycling phrases from his earlier journalism, as well as previous statements made by Marx. It was a masterpiece of combative revolutionary rhetoric, combining a bold, sweeping narrative to dramatize the situation ("A spectre stalks the land of Europe"), identification of the key protagonists of the moment (the "bourgeoisie" and "proletarians"), distinguishing communists' demands from those of other socialists, and exhorting its readers to join with the

proletariat's struggle against private property. Directly addressing the immediate situation with an urgent, provocative style (unlike the dense and involved writing of Marx's "philosophical" works), this audacious text later became one of Marx and Engels' most popular and widely read publications (see Carver and Farr 2015).

The *Manifesto* places classes and class struggle at the centre of social and political events and invites its readers to view the entirety of history from the standpoint of their irresolvable conflict: "Society as a whole is tending to split into two great hostile encampments, into two great classes directly and mutually opposed" (Marx 1996, 2). The modern bourgeoisie is presented as a class of insatiable, merciless exploiters, ready to tear up all traditional values and customs – "it has stripped the sanctity from all professions that were hitherto honourable" (4) – and transform all institutions and ideas into tools of their conquest: "The power of the modern state is merely a device for administering the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (3). Proletarians are likewise presented as a historically transformative class, gifted by their very degradation with the potential to change the course of history and abolish class division altogether: "The circumstances necessary for the old society to exist are already abolished in the circumstances of the proletariat" (11). Stripped "of all national characteristics," workers stand outside bourgeois moral distinctions and "have nothing of their own to secure" (11). Their conflict therefore equates to a global struggle for the emancipation of *all* classes from private property. This hyperbolic dramatization of conflict – reducing history to the interplay of opposed classes whose clashes will bring an end to all social division – radically simplified the situation and elevated the proletariat to an agency of urgent societal redemption. In so doing, Marx and Engels offered an intransigent yet uniquely inspirational political message to their followers and allies, encouraging them to view proletarians as a unified force of wholesale transformation and not just a disparate ragbag of laborers and the poor. Although communism was never given detailed clarification

as a goal distinct from other kinds of socialism, it clearly entailed the abolition of private property and all associated forms of institutionalised class power (see Marx 1996, 12-20).

Reasoning by means of assertion and simply drawn imagery, the *Manifesto* presented class struggle as an explosive energy directing events just beneath their surface. It supplied a potted account of Marx and Engels's new materialism with an eye to building alliances with other democratic movements (rather than conducting philosophical debate or clandestine politics) as well as distinguishing the League from competing socialist organisations. Its abrupt "paratatical" style of assertion after assertion, its numerous voices (historical narration, hortatory dismissiveness, the use of counterfactual questions and answers), up to its final exhortation – "Proletarians of all countries unite!" – condense into a thrilling display of rhetorical invention (see Martin 2015). Here was evidence, if any was needed, that class politics required its practitioners to hold firm ideas about themselves and their place in the wider situation.

Written shortly after the failure of the 1848 revolutions and subsequent authoritarian reaction, Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* replaced the urgent, inspirational tone of the *Manifesto* with a distant, ironic stance on the *coup d'état* in France in 1851 by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, the grandson of Napoleon Bonaparte (see Marx 1996, 31-127). In this text Marx offered up some of his most colourful – not to say scathing – accounts of class politics in Paris. His tone was now that of the cynical observer, not the advocate of an alternative social order. The *Eighteenth Brumaire* is, at first glance, a narration of the events leading to the *coup*, understood in several "phases" of class coalition following the conflicts of 1848. First, there was the alliance of the republican bourgeoisie, which successfully eliminated the proletariat as a political force; second came the alliance of royalists, petty-bourgeoisie, and large bourgeoisie, which eliminated the republicans and brought Louis-Napoleon to the Presidency; and third was the disintegration of that alliance and the emergence of a new

coalition of bourgeoisie, peasantry, and aristocrats, which supported Bonaparte's *coup*. Marx described with derision the successive failure of each alliance to sustain a unified front without falling into contradiction. Bonaparte, he continued, whose *coup* aimed to restore "order" given the governmental instability, cut an absurd, comical figure, representing a parodic image of Imperial France with the support of the peasantry. He was "like a conjuror who has to come up with constant surprises, [and] brings the bourgeois economy into confusion"; he "profanes" the state and makes it "loathsome and laughable" (1996, 126-127).

Writing "factual" commentary allowed Marx to caricature the various agents involved and to ridicule their aims and achievements. The *Eighteenth Brumaire* was, therefore, neither a wholly "neutral" analysis of politics nor an overtly theoretical intervention. As such, it has been hard for later readers to classify it as a self-evidently "Marxist" text (see Cowling and Martin 2002). Marx was engaged in a bitter recounting of events that moved not from any explicit theory (although there are some passing theoretical claims that guide the narrative) but, rather, from the observation that classes were compelled to "dress up" in various guises to advance their interests, nonetheless finding themselves restricted in doing so. Rather than unveiling their immediate connections to relations of production, the different factions of the French bourgeoisie sought to feign some linkage to the revolution of 1789 in order to give themselves legitimacy. For Marx, then, class politics was unavoidably tropological, a figurative play of confused appearances and miscues that he now scorned as "low farce" (1996, 31).

These two texts are not the only writings on class politics that Marx produced. But they exemplify a rhetoric that situated classes in the dramatic interplay of image and symbols with interests and other constraints, not in the mechanical unfolding of abstract "forces" and "relations" of production. Whereas the *Manifesto* promoted this drama as the site for a decisive, heroic intervention by the proletariat, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* derided its descent

into the hapless self-deluded posturing of the bourgeoisie and its fissiparous alliances. In each instance, however, Marx (and Engels) sought to ascribe (imagined) motives to the agents involved, to narrate their behaviour as a consequence, at least in part, of (inflated) images and purposes they gave themselves. Marx's rhetoric of class politics, then, was never exclusively the forensic description of interests working beneath the surface but a stylised rendering of situations through which such interests were figured – and disfigured – in public discourse.

4 *The Rhetoric of Political Economy*

Following the demise of the revolutionary uprisings in Europe, Marx and his family moved into exile in London, away from the threat of arrest but also at a distance from direct party political activity. In addition to contributing commentary for newspapers, he renewed his attention to the field of political economy. Marx's explorations of this period deepened his already critical account of the structure and dynamics of capitalism, which he viewed as intrinsically unstable. The texts written in the 1850s and 60s comprise numerous dense studies of which only a handful – such as volume one of his magnum opus, *Capital* – were published in his lifetime. Marx was notoriously unable to complete many of his planned book projects, preferring instead to bury himself in his research in the British Library.

Marx's later studies on political economy are notoriously *not* focused upon class, conceived as the active agent of social and political transformation, but upon the inner logic and conceptual structure of the capitalist "mode of production." Marx continued to see capitalism as a historically distinctive yet intrinsically unstable economic system, but no longer was his attention on its wider societal impact or concrete political effects. In the changed political situation, Marx took up the role of a scholarly theoretical analyst with writings dissecting complex and abstract issues of political economy, drawing upon vast amounts of other scholarly work and statistical data. These are not avowedly "revolutionary"

writings for popular digestion, although their orientation is, in part, to demonstrate the improbable durability of capitalism. Their intended audience was surely those with education and sympathetic to the socialist cause but there is no urgent political message. Whereas his lecture, *Wage-Labour and Capital*, of 1849 had highlighted capitalism's "industrial war" against the working class (see Marx 1977, 248-270) – in anticipation of an insurgent popular uprising – Marx now wanted to reveal the self-destructive laws of capitalism, *quite apart* from the question of who or how those laws may provoke unrest.

Marx's critical studies on political economy thus constitute another, distinct strand of his rhetorical repertoire. They have a forensic and explanatory purpose, elucidating economic categories familiar to political economists and situating them within a narrative of inquiry that unveils the "mysteries" of market production and exchange. While that makes these writings evidently drier in tone than, say, the *Manifesto*, nonetheless they bring together elements of his earlier rhetoric, not least an interest in metaphor, symbols, and their relation to ideology. As Terrell Carver (1998, 63-86) argues, Marx is interested in capitalism not as an object to be quantified or measured but rather in terms of the language used by political economists to describe and account for its operations – hence *Capital* is subtitled *A Critique of Political Economy*. Marx was not an "economist," nor was he doing "economics" as it is understood today. The categories of political economy were taken to be part of the way capitalism was itself experienced and "explained." Concepts such as "commodity," "capital," "value," "price," and so on were, he argued, not self-evident descriptions of discrete entities but ideas invested with powerful qualities that only functioned as part of a wider set of conceptual relations. Bourgeois political economists certainly treated the market as a "natural" coming together of material products to be rationally exchanged. But that only happened under social conditions in which products, including the efforts of working people,

were viewed as embodiments of equivalent types of activity invested with a universal value separable from the particular uses such products supplied.

Capitalism, for Marx, comprised a system of social organisation that generated conceptual relations between objects, ideas, and activities. To be an agent in market exchanges meant entering into – and submitting to – figures of speech that transformed our needs and desires, as well as the intrinsically distinct objects we purchase, into communicable entities. These figures were often taken as real and treated as quantifiable components of an intelligible system. But political economists' regular appeal to imagined conditions of "scarcity" or to innate human rationality ("Robinson Crusoe stories" that Marx dismissed in his unpublished *Grundrisse* as "the insipid illusions of the eighteenth century," 1977, 345) in order to explain the workings of the market failed to grasp how attributes were ascribed historically to objects and practices. As he continued in *Capital*: "The categories of bourgeois economy . . . are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production' (1977: 439).

For example, uniquely in capitalism human labor was itself a commodity that could be exchanged for wages to enable subsistence. For that to happen, individual workers had to act as if they themselves were embodiments of a value that is notionally separable from the work they physically undertook. Only then could their work potential (or "labor power") be quantified and recompensed. But, as Marx pointed out in the first volume of *Capital*, the sleight of hand in this "free" exchange was that the labor power realized in the worker's activity is much greater than the cost of reproducing the worker (1977, 421-435). In submitting to exchange the worker ended up producing more value than she/he received in return. That, according to Marx, was the fundamentally exploitative relationship between workers and capitalists that enabled "surplus" human labor to generate profits.

The abstract notion of value in capitalism was therefore premised upon an unrecognized and pernicious inequality disguised as “fair” exchange. Marx characterised that appearance of equal exchange, behind which sat a real but necessary inequality, as a form of “fetishism.” Commodities – the objects produced and exchanged in capitalist markets – were endowed with a “mystical character” that enabled them to move as if independent from the social relations that produced them (Marx 1977, 435). Objects such as money or goods were treated as though they expressed intrinsic properties; they were prized for the power over others they commanded and the future profits they promised. The labor power invested in products was understood, by bourgeois economists among others, as a “magical” property and not, as they really were, the embodiment, or “congealment,” of human labor under specific social relations (432).

Far from being a world of cold, unemotional self-interest, Marx presented capitalism as one of inescapable fantasy that seized control of individuals and forced them to enact all sorts of cruelty upon themselves and others. Individuals in capitalist conditions found themselves acting out the logic of its categories as if expressing their own freely formed intentions. In the desperate pursuit of surplus value, for instance, capitalists ended up extracting as much value as they could from workers, forcing them ever closer to the edge of their own subsistence. Marx described this in vivid terms with the Gothic metaphor of vampirism in which “dead” labor invested in products sucks at the very life of workers, who are sacrificed by a maniacal thirst for value (475-476).

Marx’s critical analyses of capitalism located his rhetorical interests inside the semi-fictional world of a social system where objects and roles were allocated independently of the wishes or intentions of individuals. In describing and explaining that world and its trajectory towards crises of “over-production,” Marx was offering different types of argument about capitalism and its future. On the one hand, he appeared to be accounting for the objective

internal processes of the capitalist mode of production, which he "predicted" would ultimately collapse on the basis of its own mechanical logic. On the other hand, however, his account of the way that capitalism functioned through conceptual embodiment pointed to a linguistic understanding of economic relations. In that respect, it was the way that individuals became subjectively complicit with the roles, demands, and aspirations of exchange-value that came to the fore. The figurative language that Marx employed to describe and account for that conceptual world implied that the future of capitalism depended as much on the way its demands were experienced and imagined as on its own relentless and destructive dynamic.

5 *Conclusion*

Marx argued in many voices. Some were abstractly philosophical and closely involved with conceptual relations, others more politically engaged, declamatory or ironic, and yet others more scholarly and distanced from immediate circumstances (see Carver 1998, 163-180). What we understand as Marx's political theory is drawn from a collection of different rhetorical strategies and techniques that blend his distinctive, critical analysis of capitalism with a penchant for the melodramatic as well as the perceived needs of the moment. I have tried to survey some of the notable elements of this rhetoric across his key writings, but it would be wrong to fold them into one type. Marx adapted his rhetoric to the circumstances he faced and the kinds of audiences for whom he was writing. His political theory therefore emerges through various argumentative stances, differently targeted and inflected. To say that Marx had a generic outlook that informed all his writings, or that it hinged upon a unified "materialist" system or "scientific" disposition, would be to ignore the very particular circumstances in which he wrote. Indeed, it risks neglecting the inventiveness of his rhetorical style and his ability to craft arguments that suited (and sometimes didn't suit) the intended audience and moment as well as his own intellectual preoccupations.

It is difficult, therefore, to distil Marx's thought into a series of statements from which an authoritatively derived position on most major matters might then be taken, although this is what later Marxists sometimes sought to do. His rhetoric suggests a much richer, more versatile but often inconsistent communicator. Marx took seriously the critical value of philosophical enquiry, but he cruelly ridiculed philosophy and philosophers; he placed classes at the forefront of historical change, but he obsessed over the ideas of individual adversaries and competing opinions; he proclaimed the presence of a "more or less veiled civil war," but promoted democratic alliances; and he foresaw the self-destruction of capitalism, but nonetheless devoted volumes (and decades) to exploring its complex inner workings. It is certainly possible to identify common intellectual threads across Marx's political theory. But his radical critique and political opposition to capitalism were, I have tried to suggest, rhetorically crafted. Reasoning critically, analyzing class struggles, or laying bare the workings of capitalist political economy inevitably involved adopting certain attitudes, characterizing the positions taken by others, and imaginatively figuring the wider contexts in which choices were to be made. The sheer breadth of Marx's rhetorical achievements in his political theory should not be underestimated.

Although it is always tempting to unify a thinker's ideas, or to ascribe to them an intent that aligns with how we may feel about them subsequently, in Marx's case this easily misses what is interesting. As an agitator and intellectual, regularly moving himself and his family to places where he could find an audience and safely publish his controversial views, Marx fashioned his arguments to be as effective as the situation and his own character demanded. In so doing, he advanced a rich lexicon of concepts and analyses whose rhetorical importance lies not simply in explaining the objects they describe but, moreover, in provoking his readers' attention and stimulating their allegiance to radical social change.

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