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Satire

Daniël de Zeeuw

Hegel, or at least this is the impression we get of him as we browse through the *Wissenschaft der Logik*, wasn't exactly your average funny guy, that much is clear. Yet there's actually a lot of humor and ironic wit to be found in notoriously difficult works such as the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Similarly, the work of Marx is considered solemn and serious, simultaneously a work of high theory and a moral and political condemnation of the grave injustices of the capitalist system. Yet throughout his work Marx also showed himself a great literary satirist of capital and its protagonist class, the *bourgeoisie*. In *To the Finland Station*, Edmund Wilson attributed to Marx "the satanic genius of the satirist" (1940, 256) and crowned him the greatest ironist since Jonathan Swift, whose *Directions to Servants* can be read as a user manual for domestic class struggle.

However, whereas Hegel's witty remarks appear at most as an aside - a brief moment of comic relief in between two twisting movements of the Dialectic and thus remaining external to the System - in Marx satirical deconstruction seems to penetrate much further into the method of critical exposition itself, marking an immanent and constitutive moment thereof (Gandesha and Hartle 2017). This immanence of satirical laughter in the practice of philosophical critique is one important characteristic separating the German *idealism* of Hegel and his younger

followers from Marx's *materialist* understanding of society. Given that literary form is never merely an ornament to thematic content, but is interwoven and expressive of it, just as the content in turn dialectically informs the mode of its presentation (or *Darstellung*), how does Marx's satirical rhetoric link up to the larger project of establishing a historical-materialist world view?

In an essay on the literary status of Marx's *Capital*, Keston Sutherland argues that style cannot be separated from the critical thrust of the work as a whole: "Marx was the author not simply of a theory of capital and of social existence under capital but also of an immensely daring and complicated satire of social existence under capital [...] in which risks and failures of style are arguments in themselves, irreducible to theoretical propositions." (2011, 5). Woven through the formal schemes of *Capital* are Marx's descriptions of the exploitation of labor as a Dantean inferno where "all is cruel discomfort, rape, repression, mutilation and massacre, premature burial, the stalking of corpses, the vampire that lives on another's blood, life in death and death in life." (Wilson 1940, 313).

The laborious cutting off of the scientific concept of capital from its satirical and bodily grotesque staging largely defines much of the subsequent reception of Marx, not in the least those committed to working out a proper "Marxist" method and theory, Sutherland argues. The impulse to arrive at the pure theoretical essence of *Capital* by thinkers such as Louis Althusser proceeds by filtering out and eliminating the rhetorical force of *Capital* qua literary performance intended to critically affect, shock, disgust and transform its readers. These readers are not abstracted as "rational persons" as in the liberal-humanistic tradition, nor idealized as principally open to the communist case as in orthodox Marxism – but rather as duped and malleable, two-faced actors in the capitalist tragi-comic play that Marx sets out to describe, in a way that presumes a post-naïve conception of theoretical discourse as part of a permanent conflict over the meaning and constitution of the social world, even when materialist critique rehearses social contradiction without pretending to resolve it.

In contrast to recognizing the import of literary style in *Capital*, the impulse to get at its pure conceptual essence by Althusser and others, Sutherland observes, is ultimately still a bourgeois and idealist desire that, neutralizing the uncomfortable uncanniness of reading Marx as he journeys through history and its various modes of production, succumbs to that philosophical desire for Form that Marx mocks, and that a materialist method was to overcome by forcing thought to turn against itself, to violently bend its Icarian upward movement, to face the dirt head on. Part of this violence is self-inflicted, in that critique cannot exclude itself from its own destructive, cannibalistic moment. Through satire it turns against itself, tearing at its own outside until it reaches philosophy's imaginary center, inciting "the hatred of philosophers for those blind realities that are as insensitive to philosophical categories as rats gnawing books" (Bataille 1985, 35).

Sutherland discusses several recurring instances of satirical invective in *Capital*. He analyzes at length Marx's use of the term *Gallerte* (which translates as "gelatinous mass") to provide a grotesque image of life under industrial capitalism as a supplement to the more scientific category of abstract labor time. The collectivized chains of laboring bodies represent a massive 'expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, and so on'. *Gallerte* signifies this formless, monstrous mass of perfectly quantifiable and exchangeable commodities. Another concept Sutherland considers to be of an essentially satirical nature is that of fetishism (which is one of the concepts in *Capital* Althusser will attempt to downplay as pre-scientific). By showing that the modern world of capitalism is possible only through the establishment of the commodity as a fetish, Marx inverts the smug truism, in the false consciousness of the enlightened citizen, that he - and with him European civilization as a whole - has finally overcome the crude, cannibalistic and superstitious primitivism of non-western social forms; the infantile, speechless speech of the barbarian being the necessary counterpart to Kant's *Mündigkeit*, as the inhuman that negatively delineates the human from without. The work from which Marx borrows this term is representative of the misplaced superiority complex that Marx satirically undermines by applying it to the colonizers: de Brosses' *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches* (1760).

For Marx, however, the fetish is real precisely insofar as it is an illusion. It would not do justice to this paradox of the “objective appearance” to attribute to the hidden abode of production more ontological primacy than the stage on which bourgeois ideology plays out. If anything, for Marx the latter is *more* real, given that what counts as real is always already a projection *by* the stage, *of* its supposed outside, such that the stage erases itself as excluded from the reality it constructs, a result of which being that the reality appears to retrospectively determine the stage as *its* illusionary outside. But this is precisely why Marx’s own entrance on the stage of ideology counts: the literary trope of the hidden abode is one of his most powerful props, a theatrical asset in one of philosophy’s most influential productions. The mask is the metaphor or symbol that captures this curious epistemological threshold, where neither the image that the mask projects nor the underlying face that it hides is primordially real or given. Rather, it is only the structure of dissimulation that the mask in its inherent duplicity inscribes that is real. Just as, when unmasked, the mask stands exposed as projecting its own reality as external to itself, so any invocation of reality remains trapped in its own referential logic and can only be an effect of *another* mask.

One does not, to return to the first paragraph, simply “browse through” Hegel’s work as one would with an illustrated magazine at the dentist’s. Instead, such works are laboriously studied. Additionally, my choice to refer to the German rather than English titles of Hegel’s works satirically flags the German language as pompous and pretentious—mocking the ostensive display of cultural and academic capital implied in fetishizing the text’s language of origin. Marx’s choice for using “bourgeois” over the more conventional “Bürger”, besides signaling the crucial difference between *bourgeois* and *citoyen*, produces a similar effect from a German-English perspective, where French signifies the language of pretense and free-floating Philosophy *par excellence*.

This adds to the more general rule that words from languages other than the primary language of the text tend to invoke their own conventionality and, by implication, that of language as such, rather than acting as the self-erasing, transparent vehicle for their referent, as words are supposed to do for them to achieve any kind

of ideological effect. The same effect is achieved by the mixing of different genres and rhetorical repertoires. Most people think that the etymology of satire refers to the satyr, a Greek Dionysian mythical figure, but it actually traces back to *satūra*, which means to *mingle* or *mix* (different artistic genres, forms of speech, etcetera). (Ullman 1913). Marx’s *Capital* is a satire in this etymological sense too, as factory reports, newspaper articles, long forgotten scientific tracts, philosophical systems, jokes, proverbs and anecdotes, ancient myths, are all dragged into the same whirlwind of chapters, sections and overly elaborate footnotes.

This deconstruction of the “signifying effect” of discourse – the magic convergence of words with things – by emphasizing the conventional and contingent character of language, forcing it to fold back onto and so partly undo itself, is also one of the main effects of satire, especially in its use of parody. Appropriating an established literary form from without, forcing it to become self-reflexive, and dismantling its magical powers of (dis)simulation, parody reveals any argumentative structure to depend on a seemingly infinite repertoire of rhetorical tropes, sophisms, metaphors and analogies. As such, parody is profoundly anti-philosophical, at least in the Platonist and Christian traditions, which assume as a necessary condition of truth the eradication of the materiality of language, its transcendence of rhetoric and style toward the Idea. Instead, satirical parody constantly invokes and lives off precisely this, its own materiality and that of the discourses it mimics and parasitizes.

Seen in this light, Marx’s use of the French *bourgeois* has the critical effect of showing that what this term refers to is far from given and must be constructed as an object of critique through the very satirical gesture that suspects its deflected existence. ‘It is tempting to doubt that the bourgeoisie was a definable entity at all’ – ironically, it is with this observation that Peter Gay concluded his massive five-volume work *The Bourgeois Experience* (1984–1998). But the bourgeoisie is an especially classless class in that it does not seem to need or want to recognize itself as a class, at least not in the way of the ruling classes that went before it. “I find it hard to understand why the bourgeois dislikes to be called by his name ... kings have been called kings, priests priests, and knights knights; but the bourgeois likes to keep his incognito.” (B. Groethuysen, *Origines de l’esprit bourgeois en France*, as

cited in Moretti 2013, 6).

But this refusal of self-identification as a class, I would argue, is paradoxically constitutive of its very identity and functioning as a class. The identification of the bourgeois with its own class is “displaced” in the psychoanalytic sense, either onto a fictitious middle class or onto the plane of generic humanity, so that when the bourgeois says “we” he never means “we, the bourgeoisie”, but “we, humanity”, “we, the people”. This displacement of one’s identity as the ruling class, and the concomitant evacuation of power from the realm of public representation, presents a unique problem for the practice of ideology critique. Although the task of critique is still to unmask the image the bourgeois falsely upholds of himself, here it is in fact the *absence* of a clear image, of a delimited class identity, that must be countered, by constructing such an image through which the bourgeois is forced to become, for himself, part of the class that he refuses to identify with. Always stalling reconciliation, satirical invective is one of many critical tools at Marx’s disposal for generously inviting the bourgeoisie to finally become what it is – and suffer from it.

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Social Reproduction

Ankica Čakardić

If our task is to propose a theoretical and historical model best suited for understanding the origins of the oppression of women under capitalism, then we should without a doubt consult Marx. Although we cannot speak of a systematic analysis of the oppression of women in any of Marx’s work, his explanatory methodological framework is key for a feminist analysis of women’s oppression. Marx’s critique of the trans-historical assumptions of classical political economy, his definition of the specificity of capitalist societies as a “collection of commodities”, as well as his account of the circulation of capitalist production and reproduction as a whole, are fundamental elements of social reproduction theory (SRT). Starting from these theses developed by Marx in *Capital* (Marx 1982), SRT focuses on one specific aspect of the relation between productive and reproductive labour which is left under-theorised and undeveloped in Marx. What we are referring to are the implications of Marx’s famous theory of the circular course of capital, which describes how surplus value is created through the processes of production and reproduction. It is exactly this theory that serves as a starting point for SRT because it provides an entry into the “tacit” issue on the link between the market and household relations. Following from the above, the goal of SRT is to grasp also what is not “visible” in the process of production – it asks what kind of