

Between Use and Exchange:

The Commodity-Form, the Work of Art, and Consumption

Is there such a thing as a vacancy of capitalism? If Karl Marx is taken seriously, the answer is a definitive and resounding “no.” Capital has remade the world in its image. The way capital organizes human social life leaves it with no constitutive outside. Capital has infiltrated even the most “private” bits of our existence, our bodies and our sex. We now speak of “human capital.” We no longer have husbands and wives, but “partners.” One is reminded of the scene toward the beginning of *American Beauty* wherein Col. Frank Fitts is welcomed to his new neighborhood by a resident gay couple. The first of the couple, introduces himself and his partner, Jim Berkley. Frank responds, “You said you’re partners, so, uh what’s your business?” To which one Jim responds, “Well, he’s a tax attorney,” and the other, “And he’s an anesthesiologist” (*American Beauty* 1999). The professional success of these gay men has allowed them to assimilate into white US suburban culture, but, as if to vanquish the threat of their particularity, they grab the most “universal” language within reach: the economic.¹

Many professed Marxists fail to appreciate just how totalizing capital actually is. Post-Marxists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe fault the new social movements for attempting to insert women, blacks, and gays into the hole left vacant by the New Left’s disillusion with the proletariat as the privileged revolutionary agent. What Laclau and Mouffe fail to appreciate in their groundbreaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is that Marx never expected mere

Those who are familiar with Moishe Postone will notice his influence throughout this essay. To those who are not, I could do no better than to recommend his *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. That said I take full responsibility for the views expressed herein.

¹ It is difficult not to appreciate the fact that these two characters share the same (eminently ordinary) name, as if by being so general they have effectively bled into one another. They’re even both brunette!

revolution to dissolve capitalism. For revolution to be a successful emancipatory strategy, there would have to be some constitutive outside to capital, some point unsullied by its greedy hands. It is through this point that revolution would be enacted, while itself surviving the revolution unscathed. The seamlessness of capital, however, ensures that such purity could never be found. Indeed, Marx directly discusses revolution but once in a short political pamphlet co-authored with Friedrich Engels by the name of the “Manifesto of the Communist Party.”² The impact of this seemingly minor text on the whole of Marxist scholarship has been enormous and devastating. For those seeking to bypass the hundreds upon hundreds of pages composing *Capital*, the Communist Manifesto, as it has come to be called, tantalizingly promises to articulate the core of Marx’s vision. It does not, however, do this. It is not the case that Marx was simply a pedant who wanted to fill in the “fine print” of the kernel of a theory explicated in the Manifesto, which was actually nothing more than a piece of agitation. It is rather evidence of that for which countless other theoreticians have been despised: direct intervention in the struggles of their day.³ Many worn-out Marxist tropes can be traced to this intervention; among them, the reduction of all struggle to class struggle, the messianic longing for revolution, and the vilification of private property. Once the Manifesto is read alongside *Capital*, it becomes clear that capital only makes all struggles *appear* to be class struggles, that revolution is incapable of striking at the root of capital, and that it is capital that spawns private property and not vice versa.⁴ To myopically focus on the issues brought to the fore in the Manifesto is to trade the

² It is unclear to me, at least, how much of an idea Engels had as to what Marx was really up to.

³ It comes as no surprise that it was Marx who all-too-quotably told us, “The philosophers have merely interpreted the world, in various ways: the point, however, is to change it” (Marx 1972, 145).

⁴ We can even see glimmers of this within the Manifesto itself. For example, Marx and Engels stipulate therein, “In bourgeois society... the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past” (Marx and Engels 1972, 485). Rather than reinterpreting the past

treatment of the cause for that of the symptom and it is all too easy to see the appeal in such a maneuver: anyone who has ever been ill knows it is often far easier to mask a symptom than to find a cure.

On the contrary, Marx has but one goal in his mature social theory: to describe the dynamic of capital.⁵ This project begins with Marx's interpretation of the commodity in the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*.⁶ This was not Marx's initial starting point. The *Grundrisse* (short for *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* or in English, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*), Marx's so-called "rough draft" of *Capital*, opens not with a consideration of the commodity-form, but instead with his theory of surplus value, something he does not get around to until Part Three of *Capital*. After nearly nine-hundred pages, however, the Marx of the *Grundrisse* has torturously returned to the commodity-form and it is here that he begins his work in *Capital*. The amount of attention Marx devotes to the commodity at the outset of *Capital* might annoy those who think it is self-explanatory.⁷ Marx was fully aware of this: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx 1977, 163).

or searching for the future within it, both of which are reactionary, communism is always (to modify Jacques Derrida's "democracy-to-come") "communism-to-come." While Marx gives us powerful tools for understanding capital, he cannot tell us how it is to be overcome or what life might look like afterward, at least as long as he is engaging in an immanent critique (more on this later).

⁵ I should say that I am not one of those readers who posit a sharp break between the younger "moralistic" Marx and the older "scientific" Marx. Although I admit that there is certainly a shift between his early and late writings, the moralistic tones are not absent from *Capital*; e.g., its chapter on the working day.

⁶ All references to *Capital* in this paper are to only its first volume.

⁷ Indeed, the "communist schools" frequently skipped over the beginning of *Capital* to the theory of surplus value, where the story supposedly "really began."

The commodity-form presents us with something which is two-in-one. Although the commodity has a single material existence, it takes two phenomenological forms.⁸ On the one hand, the commodity is used, and correspondingly possesses a “use value.” On the other, the commodity is bought and sold, and correspondingly possesses an “exchange value.” It is the strange dance between these two forms that for Marx propels the engine of capital. While the commodity certainly possesses these two potentials, we only see one of them at a time: we are always either buying in order to sell (and only actualizing the commodity’s exchange value) or selling in order to buy (and only actualizing the commodity’s use value).

As commodities possessing seemingly no use value, works of art ostensibly represent the height of bourgeois excess. Although such an observation seems commonplace, it seems to me to be the only adequate way of describing art at our present moment in that such a definition neither succumbs to a nostalgia for aesthetic foundationalism (i.e., an agreement about what constitutes beauty) nor to speculation about the artist’s intent, which seems irrelevant insofar as the entire point of art (and, further, production tout court) is to create an object that is no longer dependent on its maker for its staying power in the world. Yet, Marx is certainly no primitivist advocating a return to a state of healthier engagement with commodities (assuming both that such a condition ever really existed and that there is such a thing a “healthy” way of engaging with commodities in the first place). Against this interpretation, I will argue that although art may indeed be a byproduct of the capitalist mode of production insofar as it absorbs the excess labor-time freed by the ever accelerating pace of technological innovation, it is ironically one path toward anti-capitalist struggle. In order to make this argument, however, and in the interest of transparency, I

⁸ By “phenomenological” here, I just mean “in practice.”

will reopen a distinction which is collapsed in Marx's oeuvre: the difference between "use" and "consumption."

One of the most remarkable things about Marx is his contemporary relevance with regard to human social life, despite the century separating his time from our own. One source of this resilience is Marx's incredibly elastic understanding of the meaning of "use." Within the framework Marx proffers, it makes no difference whether we actually "need" something (i.e., whether we will literally die if we don't have it) or whether we "need" something the way a seventeen-year-old girl NEEDS a cute prom dress.⁹ Indeed, the insidiousness of capitalism is its ability to create new "needs."¹⁰ One interpreter remarks,

The intense need for the constant expansion of the economy has created a culture that requires both saturation via need creation, or advertising, and new techniques and powers to create these needs. If you had confronted Marx with things like the billion dollar market in diet dog food that exists today, he likely would have thrown up his hands in despair, and justly so. Part of what we are discovering is that there is no limit thus far (Pippin 2011).

⁹ Marx clarifies this on the very first page of *Capital*:

The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no differences. Nor does it matter here how the thing satisfies man's need, whether directly as a means of subsistence, i.e. an object of consumption, or indirectly as a means of production (Marx 1977, 125).

¹⁰ I would normally shy away from such personification, but Marx makes it clear that such instances of figurative language aren't mere *façons de parler*. While I don't have sufficient room to do justice to Marx's theory of reification, one can see it articulated in a nutshell in the Preface to First Edition of *Capital*: "My standpoint... can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself against them" and he elsewhere compares his engagement with classes to the character masks of ancient Greek theatre, which dehumanize the actor in order to allow her to portray cosmic forces (Marx 1977, 92). On this point, *Capital* is not altogether at odds with the Manifesto, wherein, "Capital is... not a *personal*, it is a *social* power" (Marx and Engels 1972, 485 emphases added). There is, however, a glimmer of agency in Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach": "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself" (Marx 1972, 144).

I would like to differentiate between the commodities that serve these manufactured “needs” and works of art. No matter how superfluous the desires that come to be reinterpreted as needs in fact are, the commodities serving these need-wants are used and ultimately used up in the course of fulfilling their purposes. This is true not only for our superficial teeth whiteners and baguettes, but also, albeit more slowly, for our houses, cars, and books. All of these things are ultimately destroyed by use. Returning to my earlier example from *American Beauty*, I would even go so far as to claim that capital has permeated our consciousness to such a degree that we have even begun to treat one another as commodities, devouring one another’s time with the same voracious hunger with which we eat to sustain our bodies. Although it is utterly unclear what life is actually good *for*, we seem certain that whatever it is good for, we certainly want more of it.¹¹ This valorization of life as the highest good tout court corresponds to our valorization of the medical doctor as the “good man” par excellence.

In contradistinction to that which is consumed, works of art present an anomaly: one’s “use” (i.e., viewing, listening, reading) of a work of art does not degrade it the way one’s sitting on a chair slowly but surely destroys it. Further, works of art could be called the most “durable”

¹¹ I think a similar process is underway vis-à-vis technological innovation. To continue in the vein of referencing US movies from the 1990s, in *Before Sunrise*, Jesse remarks,

You know what drives me crazy? It’s all these people talking about how great technology is, and how it saves all this time. But, what good is saved time, if nobody uses it? If it just turns into more busy work. You never hear somebody say, “With the time I’ve saved by using my word processor, I’m gonna go to a Zen monastery and hang out” (*Before Sunrise* 1995).

On a related note, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry shows us in *The Little Prince* that technology is paradoxically preventing us from living the life it aspires to actualize, something even children can apparently appreciate. When approached by a merchant selling pills which by quenching thirst would save him fifty-three minutes a week, the Prince muses, “if I had fifty-three minutes to spend as I liked, I should walk at my leisure toward a spring of fresh water” (de Saint-Exupéry 1995, 63).

of all objects, if that adjective even makes sense anymore. Even if we were to destroy every sheet of music upon which “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” is written, we would still be able to sing it from memory. Although admittedly not rivaling the eternity of gods and nature, art has the potential to obtain that very ancient yearning for immortality. Unlike Aristotle, for whom our inescapable mortality is “escaped” through the transgenerational succession of our progeny, the fabrication of art objects adds something potentially permanent to the world of human artifice, which we all enter through birth and depart in death.¹² It is this shared world which outlasts our brief sojourn on earth.¹³

Of course, it is not as if Marx merely forgot about art, he just understands it differently than I do. It is easy to imagine theorizing art as simply another means of advancing bourgeois snobbery. Here, there would be nothing distinguishing works of art from sleek Mies van der Rohe couches (in black leather, of course) as evidence of one’s “good taste”; one could very well imagine an orthodox Marxist objection to privileging art at the expense of other commodities along these lines. Against such an interpretation, I will offer what might be described as an Arendtian qualification.¹⁴ With regard to the vast literature on Marx, Arendt’s reading is not especially compelling, to put it mildly. Despite Arendt’s ungenerosity, I still believe that there is

¹² Although, to be fair, in Aristotle nature only guarantees the perpetuity of the species, not the individual.

¹³ I am borrowing this distinction between the earth and the world from Martin Heidegger, for whom, “The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing” (Heidegger 1971, 47).

¹⁴ The aesthetic construction of communal boundaries is clearly not limited to those on the higher rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. One need look no further than punk to witness how social groups are policed aesthetically. We appear, though, to be in danger of losing this connection between aesthetic and subculture. Richard Hell said of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s recent *Punk: Chaos to Couture* exhibition, “It’s treating what was a whole view of the world that had substance to it as a kind of Halloween costume” (Spiegel 2013).

something among her objections that is worth retaining: the contrast in *The Human Condition* between what she calls “labor” and what she calls “work.” While labor signifies the satisfaction of the biological cycles of our bodies, work erects the relatively permanent world in which we live.¹⁵ As previously argued, Marx’s critique derives much of its force from its ability to reduce *all* products to congealed labor-time, but I worry that something is obfuscated in this bargain.¹⁶

If we allow some daylight to filter in between consumption and use, we begin to see that works of art occupy a special position within human experience. Even once these terms are differentiated from one another, we remain within a situation wherein we must obviously purchase everything, meaning that all commodities possess exchange value (i.e., art is no exception). But when it comes to the other side of the coin—use value—the picture becomes a bit blurrier. Marx is ruthlessly consistent and within his framework, art simply serves our needs, just like any other commodity. In contrast, the Marx-Arendt hybrid I am proposing reads the work of art as distinguished from other commodities by its unrivalled endurance. While food and clothing and cosmetics are eventually exhausted through feeding and dressing and beautifying, the work of art emerges unscathed from each and every interaction. Of course, the rates of decay differ between different commodities; while we may pray to the Lord for our “daily bread,” our cars, houses, and chairs are degraded much more slowly. What is interesting about art is that our “use” of it does not damage it. It is not our looking at a painting which causes it to slowly disintegrate, but rather the relentless march of time. This process is only taken

¹⁵ In Arendt’s own words, “Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor” and “Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life cycle” (Arendt 1958, 7).

¹⁶ Of course, there are also things obscured by my refocusing. All I can say in my defense is that any attempt to introduce or collapse distinctions in the work of another does this.

to a higher degree once art moves into the digital realm; here, it seems there is no limit at all to art's longevity, insofar as it has deftly escaped from the confines of our material existence.¹⁷

Unlike that which is *used*, I am uncertain whether it makes sense to talk about *use* vis-à-vis works of art at all. Could it be that the work of art is that commodity which has somehow shrugged off the use-value side of its phenomenological potential?

This is undoubtedly a very controversial claim and one which I will be unable to defend adequately here. That said, I do not suggest this merely with the aim of being controversial. I have proceeded as I have because I hope to explain how works of art could potentially catalyze anti-capitalist struggle by inviting us to recognize the commodity's historical specificity. Allow me to unpack this a bit. Earlier I mentioned the uncritical Marxists who project Marx's diagnosis of capitalism upon the whole expanse of history, reinterpreting all struggle as class struggle, etc. Another contributor to this misunderstanding is Marx's commitment to immanent critique, the idea that the critique must be internal to the critiqued. What this means is that rather than proposing some radical alternative (which is, strictly speaking, impossible), the goal of an adequate critical theory is to unearth the existing contradictions in society via its own terms and concepts, which explains Marx's intensive study of the so-called "bourgeois political economists."¹⁸ Hence, it sometimes appears as though Marx is offering a comprehensive theory

¹⁷ Yet, any social climber knows that the internet is not the only pathway to immortality; as with "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," all it takes for something to stick around forever is for it to never fade away from our memories by being continually interpellated, as Louis Althusser would say, into our world, by becoming a constantly reiterated point of reference within it.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault is incredibly sensitive to the limitations of radical politics and was perhaps the first to realize that "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978, 95). In other words, it isn't possible to propose a truly radical alternative insofar as it is impossible to fully escape what Foucault described as "governmentality," or the production of a certain sort of subject who is then "ruled." In one of his lecture courses at the Collège de France, Foucault goes

of the entirety of human history, a view at times underscored by his own remarks, such as when he explains,

My dialectical method is... not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking... is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought (Marx 1977, 102).¹⁹

Here, it seems as though Marx has merely flipped Hegel in that for Hegel the “causal arrows” run from the ideal to the material while for Marx they run from the material to the ideal. But whereas Hegel is intensely interested in coming to terms with the grand expanse of human history, Marx’s inversion of Hegel does not leave him with a conception of history as totalized as Hegel’s. Hence, Marx avoids that ironic reversal that so often happens when one philosopher claims to have turned another upside-down. For in this inversion, Hegelian history somewhat unexpectedly transforms into the Marxian commodity rather than the Marxian conception of history (which, strictly speaking, does not therefore exist). Unlike Hegel, for whom history has a dynamic, for Marx the only thing that has a dynamic is capital. One of the difficulties in understanding Marx is that he pushes us to realize how capital, a historically specific form, has caused us to retroactively reinterpret the vast expanse of human history through it. Those who fail to understand the immanence of Marx’s critique are hence liable to fall into the very mode of thinking against which Marx sought to warn us: the projection of a unique historical vantage point upon the whole of history. One of the chief difficulties of reading Marx is that his immanent critique couches his argument in the language of the very schemas he is overcoming.

so far as to argue, “The individual is not... power’s opposite number; the individual is one of power’s first effects” (Foucault 2003, 30).

¹⁹ Compare to the Manifesto: “When people speak of ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express the fact that within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence” (Marx and Engels 1972, 489).

While his presentation requires us to be careful readers, it is the only way of honestly confronting just how totalizing capital is. This point is lost on those so-called Marxists who analyze all historical conflicts through the optic of “class.”

Thus, if we disagree with Marx and locate the uniqueness of the work of art in its being-good-for-nothing unlike other commodities, in its certainly-not-absent-but-perhaps-attenuated use value, then we might ironically find through the work of art some potency as a result of its impotence.²⁰ While the cruel cunning of capitalism is that it refracts our past back to us through its own seemingly edgeless lens, art has the potential to begin the process of commodity de-fetishization by allowing us to see the commodity for what it really is: a historically localized and hence ultimately surmountable form. Works of art, as products that at least muddy the definition of what “counts” as a commodity, even if they do not entirely escape its orbit, slowly loosen the cold iron fingers with which the commodity-form grips our psyches. Once we see that not everything can be unproblematically subsumed under the arch-category “commodity,” the boundaries of this form might begin to come into focus. Although there is nothing inherently *political* about this realization, at least as long as we hold that politics is “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter,” without knowing that it is indeed possible to organize human social life along lines not drawn by the commodity/capital, any hope of moving beyond capitalism remains quixotic (Arendt 1958, 7). In conclusion, it seems as though there is one sense in which capitalism is seamless and another in which it is not. On the one hand, capital has violently forced the entire globe to submit to its

²⁰ Obviously, I have been referring to works of art in very broad strokes in this paper. Different ways of making art certainly have different relations to the commodity-form. For a consideration of this vis-à-vis sculpture in particular, see Benjamin Buchloh’s “Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture.”

logic. On the other, works of art *do* occupy vacancies in capitalism by potentially catalyzing the undoing of the commodity form. And these are surely not the only alternatives.

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