

Marx and the Aesthetics of Political Economy

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Abstract

In what way can Marx's analysis in Capital be described as an aesthetic project? Perhaps counter intuitively, we could argue that Marx's economic texts, Capital in particular, enact a linking of aesthetics and politics through the staging of the politics of method (of analysis) and the latter's aesthetic affinities. The goal of this discussion is simply to characterize certain dimensions of the movement of Marx's method of analysis and exposition in Capital, and to argue that we can aptly characterize this movement by way of the category of the aesthetic. This effort is an attempt to rethink the Marxian critical procedure as an aesthetic movement, as presupposing those dynamics that have since been identified with the ascent of an aesthetic modality of subjects and objects: an experiential movement of critique, the affective comportment of that critical-analytical movement, the embodied character of power-knowledge. An aesthetic comportment of Marx's method of analysis expresses itself in one other way: in the engagement and provocation of what I will call "experience," the intersection of an abstracted conceptuality and an embodied knowledge-sensation. This characterization of Marx's method contributes to a larger project dedicated to articulating what I have called a Marxian aesthetics of political economy.

Introduction: The Aesthetic, or, the Return of a Category

The notion of the aesthetic has made a comeback of late. Contemporary analyses of the historical formation commonly called "everyday life" in northern, globalizing consumer societies, routinely identify certain kinds of aesthetic modalities—lifestyle branding, the prerogative of the image, obligations of visibility, "truthiness"¹—as governing everything from the democratic process, the nature of work, and the dynamic of the public sphere, to processes of subject formation, community formation, resource allocation, and so on. The present historical conjuncture, many argue, bears witness to Oscar Wilde's contention that in matters of grave importance, style, and not substance, is the crucial thing. More and more, it seems, everyday life and its popular cultures ask us to assume, to use Peter Osborne's phrase, an aesthetic point of view.²

Recently, the category of the aesthetic has also taken up a recurring role in theoretical discourse. In some cases, a notion of the aesthetic has filled the vacancy of the objective or the universal in the now perfunctory presupposition of the irreducible indeterminacy of truth-claims. The aesthetic plays a role in various new strains of materialism involved in rethinking the agency of the object-world. It ascends as the dominant mode of organization in the era of cynical reason's multiple viewpoints; it articulates the dynamic of presence of the embodied sensorium; and it signals the unmediated movement of affective modalities of biopower. It would appear that, today, theory also situates us as aesthetic subjects.

In the first half of the 20th century, aesthetics were indelibly linked to politics in the project of critical theory. For all its analytical iconoclasm and innovative grafting of intellectual movements, the latter was squarely a *Marxian* project and, as such, oriented by a historically defined ethic of emancipation.

¹ The notion of "truthiness" is Stephen Colbert's satire of the present tendency in public discourse to hang the validity of truth-claims, not on empirical evidence, reasoned or objective analysis, or universal criteria, but rather on the truth-claim's effective and affective capacity, on whether or not it makes people "feel good." Colbert's satire, therefore, contests the now commonly construed immediacy (unmediated situation) of the affective modality of power.

² Peter Osborne, *From An Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000).

Today, aesthetics and politics are linked once again; however, today, this linkage stages the explicit rejection of what are considered to be the false presuppositions of the critical Marxian project, along with the critical Marxian operation itself.

Post-critical theory, or “the critique of critique,” posits that an aesthetic modality can and does participate in altering the field of the possible, but only in its distance from an outmoded notion of collective emancipation and, more importantly, from the presupposition of any totalizing social entanglement that grounds (structures) the emancipatory gesture in the first place. What if, instead of taking the post-critical turn, we were to distance ourselves from that distancing, and return to Marx’s analysis of the capital formation from an aesthetic point of view? The following discussion is an attempt to rethink the Marxian critical procedure as an aesthetic movement, as presupposing those dynamics that have since been identified with the ascent of an aesthetic modality of subjects and objects: an experiential movement of critique, the affective comportment of that critical-analytical movement, the embodied character of power-knowledge. If the earlier critical theorists were Marxists “doing” (theorizing) aesthetics (in the service of better understanding what obstacles prevented collective emancipation from the capital formation and how those obstacles could be challenged), today, as aesthetic subjects, how do we “do” (theorize) Marxian analysis for a similar purpose—the same project, only different?

Perhaps counter intuitively, Marx’s economic texts, *Capital* in particular, stage another way of linking aesthetics and politics, in this case, staging the politics of method (of analysis) and the latter’s aesthetic affinities. The goal of what follows is simply to characterize certain dimensions of the movement of Marx’s method of analysis and exposition in *Capital*, and to argue that we can aptly characterize this movement by way of the category of the aesthetic. This characterization of Marx’s method contributes to a larger project dedicated to articulating what I have called a Marxian aesthetics of political economy. In an earlier work, I focused on the way in which a Marxian aesthetics of political economy takes as its principal task the renovation of a collective and historical mode of perception and representation.³ Here, I will focus on another dimension of the aesthetic movement of Marx’s method: the engagement and provocation of what I will call “experience,” the intersection of an abstracted conceptuality and an embodied knowledge-sensation. I will invoke some compatible figures of the aesthetic put forward by others and which I would articulate with the one I conceptualize here.

The Use-value of Analysis and its Aesthetic Surplus

The following discussion is framed by a simple observation, a banality even within Marxist and critical theory—though, thoroughly problematized over the years—but which it seems necessary to articulate as a starting place nonetheless. This is the simple, yet complicated, idea that the aim of Marx’s analysis in *Capital* was to transform how his working class readers perceive their relationship to the social totality, to each other, to the bourgeoisie, and to history in such a way that would have an impact on what they do next. The analysis in *Capital* was intended as an aid in mobilizing a self-conscious (“for-itself”) collective subject around the structural possibilities for social revolution—the weak messianic power—of its place and time. Marx intended his centerpiece of critique, which Jameson reminds us is, on its face, an *economic* rather than political text,⁴ to participate in creating a popular desire for a different kind of social world by exposing the irrationality and violence that supports the civilizing veneer of the capitalist one—a desire strong enough and imaginative enough to fuel the movement, the revolution, it would require to get there. This aim, as Marx expressed in a letter to the French publisher of *Capital*, is “a consideration which... outweighs everything else.”⁵

What is immediately striking, when considering what for Marx was the use-value of *Capital*, is just how at odds is the depiction of a single-minded, tenaciously purposeful, instrumental even, analysis with the actual text, which could not be, it would seem, more exuberant, more in excess of that singular purpose, more maze-like and journey-oriented, more full of hidden treasures, more delightful to literary theorists and consternating to economists, and protracting on so many conceptual registers as to keep philosophers employed for a century and a half. Already, I would argue, we have stumbled upon one of the text’s many dialectical reversals, one that we could call the dialectic of instrumentality, or, alternatively, the purposefulness of the text’s aesthetic surplus.

³ Beverley Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital* (London & NY: Verso, 2011).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 104.

Those elements of *Capital* that are in excess of the text's central purpose—the long historical excursions, the polemical position statements, the literary allusions, the caustic name-calling, the “attitude”—themselves *perform* the critique of instrumentality that is, in one sense, the text's main purpose. In this way, Marx's text is a response to the topsy-turvy world of capital's inverted social forms where human life itself is turned into an instrument for the production of wealth.

Picked off, it seems, one by one, with capital's continuing development, the various facets and capacities of human life are made to serve that particular end, which breaks off from any collective purpose and achieves an autonomy in the popular imagination as a good in its own right. If the goal of *Capital's* analysis is to expose such a dominant social logic of instrumentality, and thereby to affect a perceptual and *experiential* reordering of that means-end dynamic, those non-instrumental moments of the journey of the analysis are, at the same time, turned into instruments of the rearranging of the perceptual force field. We've all, I'm sure, turned away from some immediate task at hand with *Capital* and found ourselves wandering throughout the text, having gone there for some reason and coming away after much time spent with something else altogether that we didn't know we were looking for. “Not all those who wander are lost”; the statement would capture the revolutionary aesthetic call to the everyday heroes of *Capital* as much as it calls to the heroes of Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring*.

Terry Eagleton reminds us that the modern comportment of the autonomous work of art, in expressing a profoundly creative uselessness, an affront to the ethos of practicality, efficiency and instrumentality, is the true harbinger of communism (and according to which, the Soviets could not have gotten it more badly with the hammer and sickle): “The work of art, in its ludic, pointless, gratuitous... way, offers us a foretaste of how men and women might themselves exist under transformed political conditions. Where art was, there shall humanity be.”⁶ The dandy, then—or the aesthete—and not the proletarian, is the image of post-capitalist humanity in Eagleton's formulation. Eagleton's suggestion that an aesthetic surplus is a counterforce to the alienating thrust of instrumentality shares an affinity with John Holloway's call to subvert the rhythm of capital by taking back one's own time, by insisting on a different pace of life, by fighting for the right to be lazy. Confronting capital's global drive to increase labor productivity and intensify the exploitation of surplus-value, Holloway locates insubordination in the form of a stubborn and willful laziness, in the form of “parents who want to play with their children, lovers who want to spend an extra hour in bed, students who think that they can take time to criticize, humans who still dream of being human.”⁷ *They*, Holloway argues, are the crisis of capital, “they who do not bow low enough or run fast enough.”⁸

The Analytical Performance

That the movement of *Capital* interrupts its own analytical instrumentality through a purposeful aesthetic surplus allows Marx to *perform* the critique of the social inversion of means and ends endemic to the capitalist formation instead of (literally) “spelling it out.” This may be only one of Marx's many representational strategies in *Capital* (and it will be key to an “experiential” dimension of the text's movement that I will explore further on), but it is kin to what I think is Marx's principle *aesthetic* (as I choose to call it) strategy in the text of obliging the reader to enact along with the narrator the conceptual process of reconstructing the object of analysis after following its breaking apart into its categorial bits and bites, its most elementary building blocks, its economic cell-form. The goal of the conceptual reconstruction, one dimension of Marx's dialectical method and an expression of the power of abstraction in action is, in one sense, mimetic—not in the sense that it narrates a historical or linear emergence and development of the capital formation (it is well established by now that Marx's is a logical rather than historical reconstruction of the object in *Capital*) but that it enacts the twin phenomena of movement and transformation themselves as the characteristics of an object that is also a process.

Here is how this enacting is staged: Marx begins the analysis in *Capital* by positing what appears to be a simple, immediate, and empirical “fact” of the capitalist mode of production, namely, the commodity as the elementary unit of bourgeois wealth. From here, the analysis proceeds through the various forms of the production process, ascending in complexity with each progression until a more complex and totalized form of capital can be posited.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, “Communism: Lear or Gonzalo?” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso, 2010), 104.

⁷ John Holloway, Closing Plenary Lecture (paper presented at the Left Forum, Pace University, New York, March 16-18, 2012).

⁸ *Ibid.*

In the language of dialectical thought, Marx derives the form of capital from the commodity form. It is not until Marx reaches the *end* of the series of derivations—not until capitalist production has been arrived at (constructed) in the analysis in its approximate complex, concrete, and totalized form—can the author/reader *reflect back* upon the initial point of departure, the empirical commodity, as something *conceptually transformed* in the course of the analysis. The commodity as the starting point for the mapping of the capitalist formation, by the end of the mapping process, is revealed/re-presented as the logical *result* of capitalist production.

In other words, the resulting concept of the commodity is not the same as that which was posited at the outset. Nor can it be; the end point of the analysis of the commodity must be different from the point of departure in order for the analysis to capture the movement of the process and escape circularity. By the end of the process of its theoretical reconstruction, the commodity emerges for the first time as a concrete and totalized entity, as a product of a mediated structure that is at the same time a fluid, volatile process. At the start, the concept of the commodity can only be posited as a contingent, empirical fact—i.e., an abstraction (or, as GayatriSpivak calls it, a catachresis, a useful abstraction whose positing allows one to unfurl a certain narrative). By the end, the commodity, as something “grounded in the totality,” can appear as the necessary expression of the general form of the product of labor. The commodity’s role as an abstraction cannot be immediately perceived as such, at the outset of the analysis. Through the development of the commodity-category to its conclusion in the form of capital, the category of the commodity reflects back on itself in a moment of self-critique and reveals its initial identity *as an abstraction*. Capitalist production, as a totality, is conceptually reconstructed through the “negation” of the commodity-category. In this way, the analysis performs the continuous movement and transformation of the object of analysis. Just as the totality of the system of capitalist relations cannot be immediately perceived on the part of its agents and thus must be reconstructed through the mapping of its various mediations, Marx cannot begin his analysis of capitalist production as a whole.

The totalized concept cannot be the point of departure, as it cannot be immediately given. The starting point, therefore, of a dialectical analysis of a totality, is a representational problem; I would also call it an aesthetic problem. Marx’s addressing of this representational problem *accounts for the movement* of the analysis or the process of theoretical reconstruction that follows, the steps of which *must be performed*, enacted, staged. However, my point is not to hang the thesis of the aesthetic character of Marx’s method only (or even at all) on the fact that a particular representational dilemma is at the heart his analytical and, by extension, revolutionary project. Rather, what I would call the aesthetic dimension of Marx’s method has more to do with the mimetic strategy of the analysis that I referred to earlier, namely that the experience of transformation is reproduced in the subjectivity of the reader herself. Simply, the goal of Marx’s method is to transform the reader—the reading, conceptualizing, participating subject—through the journey of the analysis of the object, a transformation that is mimicked or, perhaps more appropriately, allegorized, by the transformation of the object that takes place in the course of the analysis. This is the occasion on which Marx takes up Hegel’s standard lesson in collapsing the opposition between subject and object, now transcoded as agency and structure, in the recognition that what we call structure is only the continuation and reified othering of—in other words, the *history* of—collective agency.

To use Hegel’s phraseology, the object is the externalization of the subject through productive activity, and this recognition of the identity of subject and object, intended by Hegel as an affront to the liberal empiricist concept of their irreconcilable division, is Marx’s answer to the historical state of alienation. Alienation, reconfigured and resignified later by Marx as the more structural process of fetishization, speaks to the subject’s inability to recognize her own agency as the creative source of the object world that otherwise limits and contains (and produces). For both Hegel and Marx, this simple shift in perspective initiates the transformation of an identity or class *in-itself*, to an identity or class *for-itself*. For Hegel, this transformation is a condition for an adequate knowledge of the world; for Marx it is a condition for changing it with a *plan*, in other words, for intentional, political action, or praxis. The movement of Marx’s analysis then becomes an allegory for social change itself, in the portrayal of the mutual and dialectical transformation of subject and object, as well as, the transformation of the experience of the relationship between subject and object through the demonstration—the performance—of their identity.

Experience (as an Aesthetic Category)

I want now to take up the category of experience, which I have invoked twice so far without qualification, but which I would like to articulate explicitly with a notion of the aesthetic in two ways.

In the first case, the transformation of the reading subject in the course of the theoretical (categorical) reconstruction of the object of analysis involves what Jameson has described as a dialectical shock effect in the reader. The collapsing of the subject-object opposition in the subject's recognition that she is continuous with the social totality she once supposed to be alien, of which she is both product and producer, generates a defamiliarizing shock to the system, not unlike the effect of Benjamin's dialectical images that startle the viewer into a collective and historical consciousness from the dream-walking state induced by the immersion in the anaesthetizing sensory chaos of industrial/consumer society.

In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson refers to this defamiliarizing, dialectical self-reflectivity as "thought to the second power," and describes it as a kind of intellectual, but more significantly, "experiential" shock that accompanies the moment of the theorist's self-consciousness of the unity of her own activity and the object under investigation:

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness—something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator's fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner—that recalls us to our bodies much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. The shock indeed is basic, and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naïve position, there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness.⁹

I have chosen, for the purpose of this discussion, to call this defamiliarizing self-consciousness, the perceptual demeanor precipitated by the dialectical jolt, "experience," and I would have it refer to a register of knowing, sense-making, grasping that exists at the intersection of a cognitive or conceptual faculty, on the one hand, and a sensory or somatic faculty, on the other. Experience does not refer to a pre-conceptual knowledge (at least, not in the way I am choosing to figure it). Nor does it refer to affect *per se*, or to any category that has come to express a will to immediacy that I would like to avoid. Rather, I would use it as a category for displacing the conceptual-sensory dichotomy altogether. Buck-Morss invokes a similar undecidability in her discussion of aesthetics as a form of cognition engaging along with the brain those perception machines located on the surface of the body, on the mediating border of inside and outside the body—the eyes, the nose, the ears, the mouth, the skin.¹⁰ The sensory circuit begins and ends in the "external world," beyond the body's discrete limits, remapping those limits, obsolescing the opposition between subject and object, and constituting the field of experience that Buck-Morss calls the aesthetic system of sense-consciousness. "External sense-perceptions come together with the internal images of memory and anticipation," according to Buck-Morss.¹¹ "Perception," she writes, "becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories of the past."¹² Experience, I would argue, is therefore a specific comportment towards history; it is the combination of a conceptual and bodily (sensory) experience of history.

At this point, I would like to take the risk of banalizing my thesis by inserting an example of the notion of experience I am attempting to formulate.¹³ At present, one of the largest and most sustained student movements in the history of North America is unfurling in Québec, where I live. The protests, which began in February 2012, are a response to planned post-secondary tuition hikes by the Québec government. On May 18, 2012, approximately three months after the daily protesting of students and supporters began, the premier of Québec instituted a special law (Bill 78) in an effort to arrest (quite literally!) the protest actions and bring Québec back to a state of "normalcy."

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 308.

¹⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, 62 (Autumn, 1992): 6.

¹¹ Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 13.

¹² Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 17.

¹³ I describe this insertion as taking a risk because "real-life" examples of theoretical formulations will always banalize the theory. This situation is built-in to the process of abstraction that constitutes what it is to theorize; theory and "real life" are never a perfect fit. Some time ago, Gayatri Spivak made the same point when she argued that, inescapably, theory norms our practice, and practice norms our theory (Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic*, (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1990)). To this day, it is uncommon for theorists to mix discussions of theory and practice—empirical or phenomenological descriptions of "real life"—in the same statement (except in the case of several "new materialisms," which solve the problem by doing away with the theory altogether). Žižek is an exception to this tendency and has been duly admonished, most often by those critics who do not recognize that the imperfect fit of theory and practice is constitutional. In fact, it is nothing other than the imperfectability of such a fit that pushes forward both our theory and our practice.

The legal convolutions of Bill 78 outlaw virtually all expression of public protest, peaceful or otherwise.¹⁴ The law was widely denounced, not only by “progressive” citizens and organizations, but by a large number of mainstream (and conservative) organizations, such as the Québec Bar Association and other constitutional “experts,” as an infringement on the liberty of association, the liberty of expression and as an abuse of state power.

Having the opposite effect of the one intended by the premier, Bill 78 precipitated a widening and mainstreaming of support for the student movement, which now incorporated a large anti-Bill 78 cohort.¹⁵ One expression of this widening of support took the form of “*les casseroles*.”

Les casseroles are decentralized protests that take place in various neighbourhoods simultaneously wherein people come together to bang pots and pans.¹⁶ In Montreal, initiated and organized through a social media campaign that cited its history in Latin America as inspiration, *les casseroles* protests swept across the city for a period of several weeks. Each night during that time, at 8 pm, lasting anywhere from half an hour to two hours, people came out onto their balconies, out on their front steps, met each other on street corners, or paraded up and down their block banging pots and pans. The participants in *les casseroles* were noticeably diverse in age, more so than was the case with the other protests. The student activist core and their supporter fringe were now joined by parents, kids, teenagers, grandparents and retirees—from a wide range of political and class affiliations (signified by the various participating neighbourhoods).

These protests have many valences, but at least one, I would argue, speaks to the kind of political and aesthetic category of experience I am attempting to figure. On the one hand, *les casseroles* seemed to epitomize a visceral, bodily, sensory expression of resistance and dissent (primal, even; don’t infants assert their agency through the noise of banging objects together?). The scheduled yet impromptu localized street and sidewalk parades had the “look and feel” of the carnivalesque, even more so given the inevitable chaos and discord: the street corner debates between supporters and non-supporters, the expressions of anger over woken children and interrupted meals, and so on. It seemed as if that concrete and immaterial thing we call the collective (or, community) coalesced into material form—or, into a stage play—every night at 8 pm.

On the other hand, the protests constituted a specific discursive formation; they were situated as continuous with a long and mythical history of Québécois rebellion in the 20th century. The running commentary throughout the protests—in social media and street corner debate, in (predominantly Francophone) mainstream and alternative media—explicitly linked the protests (and the student movement more generally) to a history of Québécois popular struggle since the 1950s. Journalist Joan Donovan (quoting Montreal writer, J.B. Staniforth) describes the current protests as mediated by a “Francophone cultural memory... rooted in protest and rebellion.”¹⁷ “The Québécois owe much of their present identity to rebelling against the authoritarian rule of Dupl  ssis in the fifties.’ Maurice Dupl  ssis, Qu  bec’s Premier from 1936 to 1939 and 1944 to 1959 is best remembered for corrupt politics and violently suppressing the left.”¹⁸ However, popular commentary was just as likely to situate the contemporary protests as continuous with an equally rebellious Qu  bécois identity forged in the Quiet Revolution.

¹⁴ The law prohibits all spontaneous protest involving more than 10 people; outlaws all demonstrations that fail to vet the venue or march route with the police eight hours prior to the demonstration; prohibits protesting within 50 metres of any educational institution (turning the downtown core of Montr  al, the location for most action, into a protest-free zone); outlaws the inciting of others to protest; and so on.

¹⁵ For example, on May 22, 4 days after Bill 78 was instituted, an estimated 400,000 people marched through the streets of Montr  al in defiance of the law.

¹⁶ Bourgeois women in Chile during the Allende period were the first to bang together pots and pans from their kitchen windows to protest the empty market shelves that often characterized that time. Later, when Pinochet outlawed all forms of public or street protest, it was taken up as a method of resistance that could be practiced in the relative safety of the home. Student and proletarian protesters in both Chile and Argentina subsequently adopted this form of protest.

¹⁷ Joan Donovan, “Translating the Quebec Student Protests,” *Waging Nonviolence: People-powered News and Analysis*, June 7, 2012, <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2012/06/translating-the-quebec-student-protests/>.

¹⁸ Joan Donovan, “Translating the Quebec Student Protests.”

The 1960s and 70s in Québec, an era referred to as the *Révolution Tranquille*, is marked by Québec's secularization (its liberation from the political and moral domination of the Catholic Church), educational reform including a commitment to the value of accessible education for all (and witnessing a robust student movement that engendered the student association CLASSE—a leader in the current movement), a growing nationalist movement agitating for Québec's separation from the rest of Canada, and the emergence of a cultural policy agenda aimed at protecting Québécois language and culture.

Les casseroles expressed the intersection of the sensory-somatic and cognitive-conceptual modalities I am attempting to capture—the combination of a conceptual and a sensory (or bodily) experience of history. It was as if the physicality and musicality (the noise of the banging pots was often described by commentators as the music of *les casseroles*) of *les casseroles* were interpreted through the cultural memory of Québec popular politics.

Echoing my formulation above, *les casseroles* represented a particular comportment to history, either a sense-memory of “direct” experience¹⁹—the memory of those who were there in the 60s and 70s—or the sense-memory of succeeding generations who grew up on first-hand stories, folklore, textbook and media versions, and who identify with the rebellious Québécois as an inheritance.

As much as *les casseroles* were mediated by a specific historical narrative, they were, at the same time, entirely new, never before experienced or witnessed in Montréal, thoroughly contemporary. The defamiliarizing jolt to the “physical-cognitive apparatus”²⁰ occasioned by *les casseroles* is the experience of the social totality as a subjective and objective engagement all at once. Here experience signifies its own sort of faculty, an aesthetic faculty, a mode of depicting what is, in Lacan's language, unsymbolizable about history. This is how I understand Jameson's claim in *The Political Unconscious* that, in capitalist society, totality is an experiential phenomenon. The depiction of Marx's method as concerned with creating conditions for the experiential grasping of totality, the experience of articulating past and present, creating conditions that encourage the cultivation of new perceptual faculties is still, I think, a helpful one. For Marx, the collective, revolutionary subject possesses the perceptual faculties required to apprehend and imagine an alternative to the empirical status quo, to be sensitive to the weak messianic power of their generation,²¹ to be able to pick up signals from the “non-fictional but non-existent” future, to invoke Jameson's definition of utopia.²² The revolutionary subject requires the faculty to recognize “the truly new, the truly ‘contemporary’, that which Nietzsche called the ‘untimely.’”²³ These faculties are not strictly intellectual or analytical ones. As I have been arguing, and as I have attempted to describe in the case of *les casseroles*, we could describe them as aesthetic faculties.

Marx recognizes that capitalist production creates new subjects as well as new objects, new subjects whose sensorium has been reorganized for the labor process, fragmented, honed, reassembled through the division of mental and manual labor, subordinated to the requirements of the factory and the machine, to the time clock, to the rhythm of shift work, to exhaustion, to monotony, to the collapsing of time and space, to a shorter horizon of possibility. It is in the capitalist nature of modern industry to continuously revolutionize itself, which it does with respect to its “technological basis, to the functions of the worker, and to the social combinations of the labor process.”²⁴ The constant revolutionizing of industry, therefore, necessitates an ever-expanding repertoire of skills and dexterities on the part of the worker; it necessitates what Marx calls the expanding “variation of labor, fluidity of functions, and mobility of the worker in all directions.”²⁵ For Marx, however, the historical consequence of this variation of labor enacts a dialectical reversal—it represents the structural possibility of turning into something else. For it is, precisely, the variation of labor—a condition that emerges in the service of capital—that enunciates the future possibility of the fully realized individual, the individual who, famously, fishes in the afternoon and criticizes after dinner:

¹⁹ Direct experience is always already mediated in a variety of ways.

²⁰ Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 6.

²¹ Susan Buck-Morss, “The Second Time as Farce ... Historical Pragmatics and the Untimely Present,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 77.

²² Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004).

²³ Buck-Morss, “The Second Time,” 77.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 617.

²⁵ Ibid.

This possibility of varying labor must become a general law of social production, and the existing relations must be adapted to permit its realization in practice. That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labor required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn.²⁶

A post-capitalist movement will create new subjects again, not, of course, “from scratch,” but rather from the possibilities inherent in the existing social, sensory and cognitive material.

It will involve, in Michael Hardt’s words, “the production of subjectivity and the production of a new sensorium” exploiting the full range of creative and productive powers.²⁷ In “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” Buck-Morss reads Benjamin’s famous concluding two sentences of the artwork essay—the twin injunction to beware the aestheticization of politics and to politicize art in turn—as Benjamin’s call to “undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation” and, we could say, for the sake of preserving the potential of what might come next.²⁸

The idea of the production of a new sensorium invokes the earliest of modern conceptions of aesthetic knowledge. In the mid 18th C, Alexander Baumgarten’s concept of the aesthetic rehearses the role of the senses in the judgment and knowledge of beauty and perfection, the mutual dependency between cognition and sensory perception, and the ideal of a balanced harmony between them. Later on, Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, will articulate the concept of “the appropriation of human reality” entailing a new holistic assembly of human faculties, a new reordering (not a restoration) of what has been fragmented in the capitalist mode of production:

Man appropriates his total essence in a total manner, that is to say, as a whole man. Each of his *human* relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving—in short, all the organs of his individual being, like those organs which are directly social in their form, are in their *objective* orientation or in their *orientation to the object*, the appropriation of that object. The appropriation of *humanreality*;...²⁹

Here, the notion of aesthetic is developed not just in reference to the human sensual faculties but, more specifically, to the experiential potential offered up by the *harmonious collaboration* of the human senses. Drawing on this same formulation, Melvin Rader has also chosen to describe Marx’s proposal for the possibility of a “whole concrete person” as an aesthetic project:

If we employ the word “aesthetic” in its original etymological meaning, namely, “pertaining to the senses,” we must conclude that Marx’s ideal of human life is strongly aesthetic in tinge. By the term “senses,” Marx means “not only the five senses, but also the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (desiring, loving, etc.)” The realization of the human potential brings into play the whole concrete person, including his individuality, his emotional and sensory versatility, and his capacity for love and fellowship.... Although this human fulfillment is “aesthetic” in the widest meaning of the term, it includes “aesthetic” fulfillment in its more limited artistic meaning.³⁰

The Art of Persuasion

I will conclude this case for the relevance of a category of the aesthetic for Marxian analysis—for a Marxian aesthetics of political economy—by making an appeal for reconsidering the question of *persuasion*, an idea that is now typically dismissed as rather tarnished and outmoded in contemporary critical theory (especially the “post-critical” variety).

²⁶Ibid., 618.

²⁷ Michael Hardt, “The Common in Communism,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 141.

²⁸Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 5.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 138-9.

³⁰ Melvin Rader, *Marx’s Interpretation of History* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), 160.

Martin Jay argues that Hannah Arendt is responsible for putting forward what may be the most promising articulation of aesthetics and politics.³¹ For Arendt, aesthetic judgment can be a model for politics in its inclination to the building of a shared community of historical knowledge and taste—a shared set of references, in one sense—and in the nimble use of persuasion to this end. My own inclination is to concur that this may not only be the most promising articulation but, today, the most urgent, and for the following reason: I would propose that the most intransigent obstacle to profound social transformation today, at least in the global north and to a large extent globally, is not a lack of the social, technical, administrative know-how to engineer a different mode of production, to build a different kind of society “beyond capitalism,” but the lack of a generalized sense of the desirability to do so, even on the part of those whose most basic material needs are violently disdained by the status quo. Changing this situation will require the application of the art of persuasion, the art of mobilizing a popular inclination to build a shared community around a taste for the “non-fictional but non-existent” alternative—a matter, perhaps, of the biggest ad campaign in history to date.

On its face, *Capital* is an economic text; it is not political in the sense of delivering a theory of political struggle or strategy, it does not map a theory or practice of social revolution or post-revolutionary society, and its historical treatment of past political, working class struggle is limited. *Capital*'s political dimension exists between the lines, in its intention, an intention to persuade its proletarian readership that the capitalist formation *can* be obsolesced and that it *should* be. To revert to blunt political categories, the Right has long realized, and used to its advantage, an idea that the Left may want to come to grips with, namely, that persuasion, and all its unsavory connotations, is at the heart of every political project that aims to have a practical impact on the world. And if this sounds undemocratic, it is (another detail that the Right has a much easier time negotiating than the Left). It is the irreducible undemocratic pit at the centre of every political project even those—or, especially those—articulated by way of the category of democracy itself.

Jacque Rancière is one post-critical theorist who has rejected the call to refocus critical theory around the goal of persuasion; the latter is too “end-game” driven, too closely associated with an old-fashioned, Marxian critical project of emancipation against which Rancière has argued for some time.³² For Rancière, the old critical project is unfeasible in light of certain faulty presuppositions: that the capitalist formation is a total social process and a process of self-concealment; that capital, as a total social process, incapacitates perceiving subjects in the detection of its effects; that this incapacity of perceiving subjects cannot be resolved; that, therefore, any vision of a post-capitalist formation is endlessly postponed, in effect, foreclosed.³³ Instead, Rancière invokes a different approach: what if we were to start from a different presupposition? What if we were to suppose that people *are not* incapacitated by the systemic movement of capital; what if we were to presume that people *are* capable of cracking open every situation from the inside, of reconfiguring a different regime of perception and signification, of altering the field of the possible?³⁴

According to Rancière, taking this alternative analytical approach—that is, starting off with these alternative suppositions—is to move away from a traditional Marxian critical project. But, is it, indeed? If it were true that Rancière's alternative approach takes us afield from “Marxian critical theory,” I would argue that it returns us directly to Marx. If meandering through *Capital* leaves any impression, certainly it is how infinitely *capable* Marx supposed his readers to be, not just sufficiently intellectually capable (of getting through the damn text, for instance!), but capable of making history, with all the necessary imagination, guts and know-how that such a project requires.

³¹ Martin Jay, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (Oxford & NY: Routledge, 1993), 82.

³² Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 42-43.

³³ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 43-44.

³⁴ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 48-49.

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