

Literature and Politics

Literature and Politics:
Pushing the World in Certain Directions

Edited by

Peter Marks

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INTRODUCTION

PUSHING THE WORLD IN CERTAIN DIRECTIONS

PETER MARKS

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, “I am going to produce a work of art.” I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial purpose is to get a hearing.

—George Orwell 1998, 319.

Arguably the twentieth century’s most read and referenced political writer, George Orwell suggests four great motives for writers in “Why I Write”, the 1946 essay from which the epigraph above is taken: sheer egotism; aesthetic enthusiasm; historical impulse, and political purpose. Perhaps surprisingly he places political purpose at the end, declaring that: “in a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties” (319). For Orwell, context matters, the fact that the ten years leading up to 1946 were anything but peaceful determining the predominance of politics in his writing. What did he mean by political purpose? “Why I Write” offers a generalized definition: “using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society they should strive after” (318). That explanation provides much of the subtitle of this book, but not quite all, for as Orwell himself knew intimately, the “pushing” could come from any number of directions, depending on the kind of societies being striven for. Not all sides enjoyed equal pushing power; some, to quote from *Animal Farm*, “were more equal than others”. And as these two examples of Orwell’s work show, the political arguments themselves could be broadcast in forms far more varied than ornate or merely descriptive

books. Orwell's own corpus includes essays, articles, documentaries, pamphlets, polemics, autobiographical accounts, realist novels, fairy tales and dystopias. The current book deals with many of these forms and modes as well as others—the manifesto, the utopia, poetry, the gothic, postmodern satire—that collectively reveal and critically examine ways in which political writers have attempted to expose lies, to draw attention to unwelcome facts, to get a hearing.

But what, for political purposes, constitutes “the world”? The twenty-first century, we are regularly assured, is the age of globalization, one in which (for some) the triumph of neo-liberalism has overridden nation borders and barriers to create an interactive planet in which finance, information, trade and gossip is carried out or transmitted at light speed around the globe. But while the ideological bipolarity that so shaped the political, military, economic and cultural maps of the mid- to late twentieth century has gone, even two decades after the vaunted end of the Cold War the global political co-ordinates—conceptual and actual—are fluid, and difficult to discern or predict. The events of September 11, 2001, the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the Arab Spring of 2011 continue to have real, if often unintended, political consequences nationally and internationally, while the looming threat of global warming places the whole planet in intensive care. While not wishing to deny the scale and danger of such developments, it is important to recognize the substantially different effects these global or regional events and forces had and continue to have on those at the centre and periphery of the impact zone. The initial surge of international empathy for the United States in the immediate wake of 9/11, for example, quickly ebbed, the Coalition of the Willing by definition signaling the unwilling, even among the US’s long-term allies. The GFC’s impact was never homogenous: Greece’s economic near death experience was a “bullet dodged” by Australia, while China’s apparent invulnerability to the torpor gripping Europe, the United States and other parts of the world registered its seemingly inexorable rise to the top of the economic pile. And the capacious boundaries marked out by the term Arab Spring, which stunned most international and local observers, never obscured the very different political outcomes and prospects for countries such as Egypt, Syria, Libya and Tunisia. Even the more enveloping deterioration of the environment, which in many ways has the most obvious planetary resonance, has failed to produce workable global responses. This in part perhaps reflects the reality that initially the impact of climate change will fall variously in different zones, and that nations have varied abilities to respond to those changes. Nations hesitate to act unilaterally if they suspect that their

actions will jeopardize short-term financial advantages, or that their individual efforts will have no impact when measured against the unchecked activities of major polluters. Ironically, and perhaps catastrophically, the result of what many feel is the greatest global threat to long term human survival has been collective political inaction. Add to these putatively international elements the innumerable local circumstances that still determine political life at the national level—elections won, lost, denied or manipulated; economic health; dictators toppled or still dominant; wars won or lost; economic and military alliances made and broken—and we might consider that for all the undoubted globalization that has occurred in recent decades, the world remains one of fragmented and contested spaces; in other words, “political”.

Political fragmentation and contestation are not twenty-first century innovations, of course. And literature through the ages has attempted to understand the workings of that slippiest and pervasive of all political terms—power. But as well as attempting to understand what power is and how it operates, political writers have also aimed to persuade, interrogate and provoke, to lacerate corruption and inequity, and to speculate about the better or worse futures to come. “The philosophers”, Karl Marx famously wrote in *Theses on Feuerbach*, “have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx 1972, 109). The same challenge might be put to aspiring political writers. It is fitting, then, that the first chapter of the current book deals with Marx, exploring the “fantastical and fictional” elements of capitalism he represented and examined (with Friedrich Engels) in the *Communist Manifesto* and (on his own) in *Capital*. Necessarily, of course, given editorial limits, Matthew Holt can only deal with some of the more salient aspect of these generative texts, but he connects the past to the present by stripping the recent GFC of the status-enhancing acronym and reducing it to nothing more than “the latest global financial crisis”. The chapters in this book trace a roughly historical sequence, but Holt’s examination of the “veritable carnival of images and metaphors” suggests how many of the primary texts examined here illuminate aspects of political life well beyond their immediate focus or moment. Context matters, but it functions as an interpretive starting point, not as a critical straitjacket. Politics is inherently multifaceted, so while Marx sought global revolutionary change in the nineteenth century, other forms of political critique were being activated, as Angela Dunstan shows in chapter two in her close reading of Vernon Lee’s 1884 novel, *Miss Brown*. Dunstan assesses this work as “the first critical interpretation of the sexual politics of the aesthetic movement”, which she judges to be dominated by “degenerative sensuality in which male artists degraded and

objectified their female subjects". By presenting highly critical and thinly disguised portraits of pre-Raphaelite artists, Dunstan argues, *Miss Brown* openly criticized the power imbalances in play in these relationships. Her detailed account of the overwhelmingly antagonistic reception *Miss Brown* initially received reveals the often-neglected power that critics and critical platforms—in this case literary periodicals—can have in stifling or marginalizing contentious political views.

The two chapters that follow also deal with nineteenth century political writing, but highlight its diversity. Gustavo Generani in chapter three examines Richard Marsh's 1897 novel, *The Beetle*, a work that utilises the motif of a monstrous beetle to reveal suppressed anxieties in the Britain of its time. Published two months after *Dracula*, the novel presents the eponymous creature as a figure of evil, a malevolent outsider that in some sense symbolizes a lingering guilt about British imperial adventures, but also suggests broader cultural disquiet about poverty, sexuality and criminality. The material obviously lends itself to a very different treatment than the analysis and exhortation of the *Communist Manifesto* or the realism of *Miss Brown*, and Generani ultimately sees *The Beetle* as "one of the best examples of the Imperial Gothic". Tony Moore also deals with the 1890s in chapter four, but where Marsh's disturbing novel is based in the imperial centre of London, Moore focuses on bohemian writers on the other side of the world in Australia. Moore's historically-based account argues that a "discourse of revolutionary change entered Australian politics amidst the economic collapse of the depression of 1890", and that groups of younger Australian writers took up bohemian stances as a way of rejecting the prevailing social ethos. This bohemianism found important points of reference and common cause with the emerging socialist movement in Australia, and Moore notes that "at root bohemia and socialist politics in the nineteenth century were both influenced by romanticism's critique of capitalist modernity that looked back with a sense of loss to pre-capitalist, pre-industrial, supposedly less alienated communities". In the Australian setting this commonality eventually frayed and faded, but Moore paints a rich picture of some of the enduring elements, suggesting that "the bohemian artist radicals created a valuable legacy for the Left [in Australia], a romantic radical nationalist alternative that would be used well into the 1960s".

Some writers broadcast their political allegiances too loudly, while others, more tactical, remain silent, at least for some time. Peter Kuch takes issue with W.B. Yeats's statement that "we writers are not politicians" in chapter five, charting how Yeats used silence, or at least delay, to withhold the publication of his poem "Easter 1916" until—

among other things—“there was a closer alignment between his evolving political views, the public mood in Ireland, and Irish and English politics”. This complex interplay of factors, along with others that Kuch considers, registers how dangerous it can be to reduce context to a simple backdrop in front of which political and cultural activities take place. The value of recognizing and assessing the complexity can also be seen in chapter six, where Karen Barker returns to the now largely forgotten Australian writer Jean Devanny. Devanny’s novel *Sugar Heaven*, about the Australian cane-cutters’ strike of 1935, was attacked when it was published in 1936 as a “Marxist tract ‘thinly disguised as fiction’”. By going beyond the limited and limiting critical stereotypes, Barker shows how *Sugar Heaven* in fact utilizes two approaches, Marxism and vitalism, that offer “two different and ultimately competing ideas about progressivism and about the future that is promised to all workers through industrial and social action”. While in some ways the novel has links to Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*, the addition of vitalism creates the “double-vision” of the chapter’s title, one that distinguishes it from the socialist realism sanctioned if indeed not mandated at the time by Communist ideologues such as A. A. Zhdanov. In novels such as *Sugar Heaven*, Barker argues, vitalism “introduces a different kind of forward movement, the idea of life itself as an active and open-ended force, that makes a significant break from the socialist *telos* that Zhdanov was promoting under the name of revolutionary realism”. While Yeats and Devanny obviously functioned in very distinct political and literary environments, and from opposed political positions, the need to negotiate deftly and sometimes defiantly within those environments provides one point of association.

Yeats’s awareness of the relationship between “Easter 1916” and questions of Irish nationalism, and Devanny’s understanding of the connection between a global communist future and the activities of Australian cane-cutters provide links to Martin Heidegger’s notions of the earth. The differences between the thinking underpinning Devanny and Heidegger at least are as extreme as they are obvious. Mathew Abbott focuses his attention closely on Heidegger in chapter seven, exploring the ways in which the philosopher understands the earth. Earth, Abbott argues, “forms a highly ambiguous function” in Heidegger, “at times either as a disruptive or deterritorialising force”, while at others functioning “as a kind of absolute *ground* on the basis of which the (German) nation could carry out some originary act of self-appropriation”. The bracketed word carries enormous political weight in light of the context in which Heidegger was operating, but Abbott makes plain that he does not intend

to carry out another critique of Heidegger by drawing a crude equation between his philosophy and his Nazism, but to read himself against himself, attempting to rescue the philosophically valuable aspects of his pastoral.

Mark Steven takes on equally problematic material in chapter eight, the poetry of Paul Celan and the Holocaust. Drawing on the ideas of Alain Badiou, Steven sees the Holocaust as part of a perverse political sequence, the “result of symbolic, systemic and discursively networked conditions rather than unthinkable Evil”. This approach allows him to interrogate Celan’s poems and link them to Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, as well as to argue that: “[w]hen it comes to understanding the Holocaust as the result of a political sequence, volatile and variable media are certainly points of entry but they also form an answer; while we engage with the Holocaust through remnant media, I would argue that closely related technologies ideologically conditioned the atrocity itself”.

Chris Conti uses the ideas of Theodor Adorno as a point of departure for a critical attack on Cultural Studies in chapter nine, noting that Adorno defended art’s autonomy in relation to politics. Conti argues that Adorno “resists the calls for the politicization of art in Benjamin, Lukács and Sartre because, in short, Brechtian production, Sartrean engagement and Lukácsian realism reduce art to political statements, collapsing the distance between art and society that enables critique”. Conti sees a similarly politicized approach, with the deficiencies suggested by Adorno, in the academic field of Cultural Studies. The second half of his chapter mounts an assault on what Conti argues are blind spots and deficiencies of cultural studies approaches, his polemical approach potentially activating the type of reader engagement prompted by much political literature. Carolina Orloff explores political engagement in the real worlds of Argentina and Cuba in chapter ten, with particular focus on the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar. Orloff takes issue with the prevailing view that Cortázar’s first trip to Cuba in the early 1960s marked a dividing line between his “apolitical” work in Argentina and his more overtly ideological work after the Cuban visit. She pays close attention to Cortázar’s early novel *El examen*, written in 1950 but rejected by publishers, “allegedly for its excessive use of vulgar terminology”. She contends that the rejection was an act of political censorship by Perónists, and that Cortázar, understanding the dangers, withdrew the novel, asking it to be published posthumously. It appeared, post-Perón, in 1986 (later being translated as *Final Exam*), and in presenting a close reading of the novel retrieves its anti-Peronist sentiments, and what she terms Cortázar’s “forgotten politics”.

Dimitris Vardoulakis places us in another highly contested political space and time in chapter eleven—post-Second World War Greece—in his study of Aris Alexandrou’s *The Mission Box*. Describing the novel not only as a “masterpiece of modern Greek literature” but also as “the most interesting novel of one of the most traumatic events in modern Greek history, the Civil War that followed World War II”, Vardoulakis offers a detailed reading of the interactive formal, stylistic, thematic and political elements of the text. He treats *The Mission Box* as an “anarchic utopia”, one whose “chief characteristic is the opposition to any form of oppression”, as distinct from the “‘autarchic’ or totalitarian utopia that characterizes the structure of the Communist Party during the Civil War”. Ultimately, Vardoulakis suggests, Alexandrou’s novel enacts a new sense of anarchic freedom that functions to interrupt the imprisoning effect of autarchic utopia. David Williams in chapter twelve transports us only a short distance geographically to another politically troubled state, Yugoslavia, or rather to “the end of Yugoslavia” as a functioning nation. His account of Dubravka Ugrešić’s development as a postmodern writer provides part of the answer to a question he asks at the beginning of the chapter: “how was it possible that the communist Yugoslav federation had boasted any kind of postmodernism”? Alert to the complex political and cultural dynamic of Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe more generally, Williams also situates the work of Ugrešić and others in relation to its (sometimes ill-informed) reception in the world beyond. What emerges from this interweaving of literary experimentation and political upheaval is a telling example of the uncertainties, ironies and challenges facing writers operating in “interesting times”, especially those not of their making. As Williams notes: “Any reconciliation between the writer as *homo politicus* and *homo poeticus* can never be at the expense of surrendering the autonomy of literature”.

Deborah Pike examines the trials facing a writer in yet another troubled nation, this time modern Zimbabwe, in chapter thirteen, which presents a close reading of Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* in terms of the work of the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben and the postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe. Pike opens her analysis with two direct questions: “What is the relationship between politics and literature in [using Agamben’s term] a State of Exception? How can human beings whose lives are stripped of political rights, speak out?” Pike sketches the political circumstances of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe as a way of positioning her reading of *The Stone Virgins*, understanding it as a State of Exception wherein people live lives “stripped of political significance and civil rights”, a “bare life” that not only entails the denial of rights but also

of subjectivity itself. She links this to Mbembe's reading of sub-Saharan Africa, and to the question of "what it means to do violence to bare life", to those without political identity, significance or agency. Questions such as these inform her interpretation of the extreme violence that saturates *The Stone Virgins*, a novel that tracks the history of Rhodesia-Zimbabwe from 1950 to 1986. Despite the often-monstrous action, Pike argues that it is a novel of hope, one that "seeks to 'desilence' the horrendous events of Zimbabwean history and in so doing, resist the master narratives of the Mugabe government". A different sort of horror prompted and informs chapter fourteen, James Gourley's assessment of Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Gourley argues that both writers in the post 9/11 period have "developed in their work a renewed awareness of time, and indeed, a renewed focus on the politicization of time". He draws connections between these moves and Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, a "form of nihilistic transcendentalism in which events were bound, by the operation of time, to recur". Gourley explores how in their own ways these novels deal with the problematic "inevitability" of the future, DeLillo dealing overtly with the events of 9/11, Pynchon incorporating aspects of that day into a far longer temporal narrative that includes "another central theme of *Against the Day*, that of time travel". Gourley contends that while clearly different in many important ways, both novels "propose a reconsideration of the most effective way to investigate the September 11 attacks, whilst manipulating fictional temporality, which lends them a sense of prophecy despite being written after the 9/11 attacks".

Where the events of September 11, for a variety of reasons, prompted many people to think globally, politics in the broadest sense can also be an occasion to act locally, as Lucy Hopkins shows in her consideration of Christos Tsiolkas's provocative novel *The Slap*. As the title partly indicates, this work deals with a very intimate interaction, in this case when a middle-aged man slaps a young boy, who is not his child, at a family party. The ramifications of this impetuous act in a suburban backyard in Australia shatter relationships between friends, families, generations and genders, Hopkins noting how the novel probes the ambiguities and complications around "issues of parenting and ethics, of sex and violence, racism, rights and childhood". Hopkins's particular interest lies in the ethics and politics of childhood, about how children are perceived and acted upon, and about questions of their agency in a world where adults hold power. As she explains, her "exploration of childhood is underpinned by an understanding of the figure of the child and the category of childhood as discursively constructed, and therefore

necessarily politically and socially embedded". Are children "innocent"? If not, what are the ethical and political dangers in treating them as such? Very different questions are raised by a very different sort of political text, former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's surprising memoir *Mein langer Lauf zu mir selbst* (later translated as *My Long Journey to Myself*). Angela Költing in her study of this text in chapter sixteen reveals that while most people expected that "it would contain personal political reflections about the politician's career from street fighter" onwards, in fact it documented "how Fischer had transformed himself from an overweight figure...to a dynamic marathon-proof athlete". As Költing wryly notes: "The author's desire to raise the expectation of a political memoir that reflects the minister's political ideology and then to deliver a story about running marathons poses basic questions: is this story the reflection of his political ideology? And if so, how?" Rather restricting herself to these questions, she interprets the text by focusing on its literary qualities, considering it as a bildungsroman, as metafiction, as an example of life-writing, as a narrative of conversion, as well as analysing the interplay between illusion and reality, and the relationship between literature and (because of Fischer's significant political career) the media.

The intersection between literature, politics and the media also underpins Marise Williams's examination of Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* in chapter seventeen. Auster's novel has as its political focus the "webcast of the beheading of a young American man, Titus Small, a civilian who is kidnapped while working in Iraq". Williams reads the novel in relation to Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* and the curator Nicolas Bourriard's notion of the "altermodern", which he describes as "the kind of modernity that is to come, emerging in, already here-chaotic, teeming, saturated with signs, new modes of expression, communication and travel, mapped by Google Earth". This involves a new globalised perception that is not Western-dominated, with the web inviting "the chaotic and teeming universe into our daily rituals and practices". The invitation, of course, can be dangerous, the webcasting of Small's death, with its potent reference to the webcast beheading of the journalist Daniel Pearl, forcing the narrator August Brill, the eponymous man in the dark (or one of them), to bear painful witness to Small's horrific execution. As Williams observes: "We can only wonder what [Marshall] McLuhan would make of the global village this real and imagined crime scene signifies. It is certainly one of dystopian manifestations". Where *Man in the Dark* exhibits these manifestations, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the focal text of chapter eighteen, more readily warrants the label of a dystopia, although Atwood herself prefers the term "speculative

fiction". As the final chapter in the current book, it is perhaps fitting that her novel is set in the near future (around 2025 by one calculation) and deals with a world where global environmental degradation and rampant consumption have prompted a brilliant megalomaniac, with the nickname Crake, to wipe out almost all humans and replace them with a posthuman race of his own creation, the Crakers. Peter Marks explores the importance of different forms of surveillance that monitor and attempt to manage the various zones that exist in this rapidly deteriorating environment, but that ultimately can do nothing to halt the mass extinction of humans.

The collection as a whole, then, encompasses a considerable historical sweep, bringing together literature over the last century and a half from—or about—Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Argentina, Zimbabwe and the United States, as well the projected world of the future. Simultaneously, it brings together chapters on diverse political forms and modes: manifestoes and novels; poetry and utopia; the memoir and the postmodern satire; dystopia and cultural theorising; the gothic and the bohemian. The range of topics multiplies this diversity, adding informed accounts of Irish politics and the Holocaust, investigating the politics of slapping a child and the subversion of totalitarian authority, the sexual politics of the Pre-Raphaelites, Zimbabwe's murderous history, socialist bohemians in Australia, censorship in Argentina, the possible shortcomings of Cultural Studies and the aftermath of 9/11 among others. While these and other topics are often shaped by particular social and political forces, it should be obvious that the political arguments put forward by the writers, thinkers and politicians considered in this book, as well as the attentive interpretations offered by the authors of the individual chapters, can be applied beyond their specific context. Political literature, by offering us provocative depictions of our situation and those of others, compels us to see the world afresh. These texts require that individually and collectively we act, trying as best we can to push our world in certain directions.

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CHAPTER ONE

CAPITAL AS FICTION: THE *COMMUNIST MANIFESTO*

MATTHEW HOLT

I reflected that there was nothing less material than money, since any coin whatsoever...is, strictly speaking, a repertory of possible futures. Money is abstract, I repeated; money is the future tense. It can be an evening in the suburbs, or music by Brahms; it can be maps, chess, or coffee; it can be the words of Epictetus teaching us to despise gold; it is a Proteus more versatile than the one on the isle of Pharos. It is unforeseeable time, Bergsonian time (Jorge Luis Borges, "The Zahir", 192).

Reflection begins post festum (Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1,168).

One of the most notable features of the latest global financial crisis was the surprise expressed at the depth of abstraction constituting contemporary capitalism. The expansion of new markets, always a feature of capital, was now primarily virtual, and the dizzying array of autonomous money markets and their complex financial products, though having real effects, needed little or no reference to reality to operate and to multiply. In fact, more than ever before, capitalism appeared purely fictional. The question of value could not but arise from the near collapse of such a floating world. Traditionally, the labour or effort behind the production and exchange of something could be envisaged as a source of stable value—and therefore the site upon which to identify exploitation—but now even this anchor to a weightless system had been lifted. While Marx criticised classical political economy thoroughly for not understanding the abstract dimensions of the labour theory of value—socially necessary labour time is much more complex than just the amount of labour expended to create a commodity—even he would find it difficult to find a place today for that theory in terms he would recognise. Nonetheless, and no matter how briefly it will last, the response to this

fictional, “orgiastic” world of speculative capitalism has been a call for a new sobriety, a call for some sort of value to be reinstated into the system to give it meaning or justification.

But capitalism has always been about devaluation, re-evaluation and transvaluation; there has always been something fantastical and fictional about it, and all critiques of capitalism (and any of its primitive forms) have been directed precisely at this fictional element, that is, at the power of money to transform, invert, and pervert anything it comes in contact with, whether material or immaterial, mundane or spiritual. In fact, as will be shown later, money turns the material into the immaterial and the immaterial into the material—money is a form of transubstantiation. The Greeks were clear about the unavoidable tendency to perversion that money induces in both the city and the soul:

Money! Money's the curse of man, none greater.
That's what wrecks cities, banishes men from home,
Tempts and deludes the well-meaning soul,
Pointing out the way to infamy and shame (Sophocles 1947, 134).

And for all its history of institutional corruption Christianity has at its very core the rejection of money as the source of value insofar as money represents that which is in excess of what is needed for a relationship with Christ.¹ The entire premise of socialism in whatever form is to supersede the necessity for the money economy and thereby the culture of devaluation, of egoism, of “mere appearance”, but also of exploitation, and this supersession is the very basis of utopia.² Further, the critique of seduction forms the theoretical backbone of more recent versions of socialist or Left visions of capitalism and capitalist societies as much as the critique of instrumental reason, for example, both the Lukács’ and the Frankfurt School’s analyses of reification, the notion of the society of the spectacle, the sociology of consumption, and post-Marxist theories of symbolic exchange (Baudrillard).

Even though it is based upon—and in many ways is the apotheosis of—a long and predominately religious understanding of the corruptive, transformative power of money, this chapter will argue that this understanding of capital as fictional forms one of Marx’s most radical insights because he provides this heretofore predominately moral insight with both a historical, “sociological” understanding and a technical, economic one. The first aspect appears as a veritable carnival of images and metaphors in the *Communist Manifesto* and the latter, most significantly, in the analysis of the commodity in the first volume of

Capital. I will predominately examine the first aspect but these two aspects are in fact unified. That is Marx's contribution: whereas classical political economy would analyse the market and its laws in a discrete fashion—as a system which requires only an “objective” description to understand it—Marx, as famously expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, is not just describing a political economy but attempting to discover the inevitability of its dissolution. In other words, the radical critique of political economy is to identify the dynamic, revolutionary aspects of capital—its inversions, perversions, its parodic nature, and above all, its exploitative, divisive essence—in order to at first bring it to a halt and then to supersede it.

The first task, then, in attempting to understand the fictional essence of capital is to summarise and explore the parts of the *Communist Manifesto* devoted to the description of what the authors call the “epoch of the bourgeoisie”, and, in tandem, the communist alternative to that epoch. This will give a sense of the kind of picture Marx and Engels paint of what was in many respects still a nascent system of political economy. It will also provide a sense of continuity insofar as that picture is still remarkably congruous to today's world except, of course, for the “inevitable” proletarian revolution. There are three aspects to this picture: the all-embracing aspect of capitalism (understood in terms of an expanding body), the capitalist tendency to degrade not only former structures of political economy but anything it comes in contact with, and the carnivalesque nature of the bourgeois era.

Once itself oppressed, the bourgeoisie grew out of the feudal system, but “sprouting from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms” (Marx and Engels 2002, 220). The bourgeoisie is of the same social body or body politic as that which it will come to destroy and replace. Marx and Engels use “sprout”, “spring” and other verbs associated with growth and expansion throughout the *Manifesto* to describe not only the origins of the bourgeoisie out of the feudal body politic but also to characterise the expansion of the bourgeoisie across the entire planet. In other words, there is both a motif of physical fecundity in dialectical thinking (the antithesis “springs” from and is produced by the thesis), and a constituent fecundity ascribed to capitalism—the propensity of capital to reproduce itself in ever-new forms and ever-new places. This ability to become anything at will is a grotesque, comic principle—that of profusion through mimicry, an excessive production. Marx and Engels entire analysis of capital rests upon this notion of revolutionary and excessive production (it is their way of explaining both the success of capital and the necessity of it reaching a limit).

The authors then go on to describe modern industry as a giant, a “colossus”, that is, a Leviathan, a body that absorbs all other bodies within its ever-expanding limits. “The bourgeoisie”, they write, “has created more massive and colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together” (225). The only limit to the expansion of this colossus is its unwieldiness. That is, when the colossus gets to a point where it can no longer control itself there is seemingly no outside boundary or other social force that can compete with it. Its end can only come from running over its own limits, not unlike *hubris*. Referencing Goethe and continuing to emphasise the idea of expansion beyond “normal” limits, beyond proper dimensions and proportion, Marx and Engels write, “Modern bourgeoisie society with its relations of production, of exchange and property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (225). Again this is a comic convention: the enlarged body, a kind of “gigantism”. In fact, capitalism has an exaggerated, proliferating and devouring body that ultimately turns on itself—“What the bourgeoisie...produces, above all, is its own grave diggers” (233), precisely because of an “epidemic of overproduction”: “... too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce” (226).

But the bourgeoisie also gives birth, as it were, to its negation—the proletariat. Again, the primary emphasis is on the body. The first step in this process is that the individual, proletarian body under capitalism starts to lose its defining qualities: its strength, its age, but also its sexual difference:

The less skill and exertion of strength implied in manual labour...the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women. Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour...(228).

The proletarian body is blended into the mechanistic sexless instruments of production and loses its distinction. In true dialectical fashion this erasure of distinction between the proletariat is in fact its strength: the individual proletarian bodies become a unified mass precisely because of common exploitation and common integration into the instrumental, mechanical body, as it were, that is, there is an “equalisation” of the “conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat” (229). Such is the birth of the Trade Union movement (229). The proletariat is the earthy

amorphous base beneath the “heavenly” bourgeoisie that incessantly threatens absorb them, and indeed Marx and Engels explain class division in terms of such an active topography: “The lower strata of the middle class”, they write, “—the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants—all these sink gradually into proletariat partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on ...” (228). Let us interrupt the quote here so as not to focus on the reason but the image: the lower middle classes *sink* into the proletariat. What does this say about the proletariat? Is this some form of the “material bodily principle” in Bakhtin’s sense? In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues that “the material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed” (19). Here the differentiation is clear between the bourgeois individual and the proletarian mass, between atomistic, unnatural (and therefore legalistic) life and popular, ‘oceanic’ celebration. While many fine distinctions have to be made, the most important being that the model of “the people” for Bakhtin is of course Medieval popular culture rather than Nineteenth Century class politics, there are nonetheless striking similarities in both description and intent—the proletariat for Marx and Engels seems to restore the fertile, populist and creative body destroyed by capitalism.³ (Although the contours and consequences of such a claim are beyond the scope of this present chapter, an interesting problem is posed here: does Marx rely upon a “feudal”, outmoded representation of the proletariat in order to depict that class as “earthy”, “real” and grounded, as it were, in contradiction to the floating, ephemeral, egotistic and sovereign bourgeoisie, or does Bakhtin retroactively impute working class culture of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries to the Middle Ages?)

Capitalism expands (it produces new markets, new commodities, even a new world) but it also degrades. The bourgeoisie epoch pulls down and levels all previous social and spiritual distinctions: the bourgeoisie, “wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” (222). “It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism ...”; the “bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers” (222). What is this sublunary world into which the bourgeoisie pulls traditional structures of power, economic and symbolic, spiritual and temporal? It is a netherworld of cash payment,

of money, self-interest, egotistical calculation, exchange-value, and so on. It is strange, then, that there are two kinds of “lower strata” present here—the egotistical, abstract, money and commodity-driven one occupied by the bourgeoisie, and its counterpart, its generous double, the proletariat, wherein egotism is no longer possible, and equivalence means equivalence of condition and fate rather than the equivalent possibility to be transformed into a commodity. The cold and calculating and self-centred lower stratum of the bourgeois, then, would not seem to be able to produce anything, especially considering that it is exploitative rather than creative. But this is not the case. In fact, it has “accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exodus of nations and crusades” (222). But this productive power, this seeming prolific nature, is only possible through the exploitation of the labour of those who make these “wonders” but do not enjoy their fruit, as it were. Even though the bourgeoisie drags down and degrades everything it comes in contact with, still beneath it remain the proletariat whom Marx and Engels call the “lowest stratum”. But this “lowest stratum” turns out to be the foundation, the earth upon which the bourgeoisie rests, and “it cannot raise itself up with whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air” (232). Again, the Rabelaisian nature of these images is striking; or, more broadly, the comic nature of these images, insofar as they evoke exaggeration, degradation but also renewal.

The bourgeois epoch is, as suggested already, revolutionary. It is revolutionary in the sense that it conquers and displaces and degrades the feudal world out of which it grew. But it is also in a state of permanent revolution itself:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, ever-lasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind (223).

There are a number of points to be made from this famous passage. First, it is resolutely carnivalesque; it belongs to the tradition, if it can be called that, of the *mundus reversus*, or world upside down, the “inverted world”. Kings become fools, fools become kings, shit becomes gold; gold turns to shit. Second, there is no “outside” to this bourgeoisie carnival, it involves and affects all. Thirdly, and what is usually left out in readings of this

passage, is the exhortation to sober up from this drunken, destructive orgy of production, consumption and indeed invention. In other words, the end of capitalist revolution, the proletarian revolution, is an era of sobriety, of coming to our senses; when things come to rest. There is an end to the capitalist carnival. What, exactly, is beyond this conflict?

At present, the world is simplified into two great classes facing each other—Bourgeois and Proletariat. First we can note here the reduction of social groups or classes to type distinctive to the comic. These are characters. And they are clearly protagonists in a narrative, bickering types in a very “real” commedia dell’arte; the former exploits the latter, and that essential conflict will come to a definite conclusion—ultimately the classless society. But in what does this dissolution consist? The *Manifesto* contains a critique of existing forms and ideas of communism, especially what we might now call its “hippie” versions—romantic, pastoral, utopic, quasi-religious. But there is no projection of what communist society might look like—there is no imaginative schema for it beyond “abolition”: communism is defined as an absence of identity. There is abolition of private property, of capital as the sole binding social power, of free trade, wage labour, the family, the “system of wives” (which is to be replaced by the “community of women”, 240); the abolition of nations and nationalism, and then, finally of course, the abolition of class itself. It is as if everything returns to a primordial soup ready for new forms to emerge. Indeed, the establishment of the “community of women” (240) is the only positive, “creative” aspect of communism to be found in the *Manifesto* (everything else suggested is based on dissolution). The authors leave what that means opaque, but no doubt it will resemble the eugenic programmes recommended by Plato in *The Republic*. The only other inkling we have of what communism might in fact look like is the necessary transition to it in the form of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx and Engels do not use the term dictatorship but that is exactly what it is—centralisation of all power, fiscal and productive, in the hands of the one class, which will “rule” until politics necessarily ends as a result of the disappearance of class (243-244). This second transition is not described. It has been of great detriment to Communism that Marx did not describe the future communist society properly, and history has shown that the dictatorship of the proletariat never dissolved, and state-centralism reigned supreme in its stead. In other words, there is a spectacular description of the bourgeois era but none of what it was to be replaced by. Was this merely a failure of imagination? Or is that one cannot actually envisage the end of history, the end of conflict, the end, in fact, of narrative?

In summary, the revolution of the bourgeois epoch breaks the bonds founded on time and tradition, it radically levels all social positions; it destroys social, political and individual merit, that is, chivalry, the honour-code, and all kinds of halos. It shapes the entire world into a market, and promotes free trade as the real freedom over and above all other freedoms. It has reached further than any explorer in history could imagine, and invented and built wonders beyond the ancient wonders; it has rendered the family into a money relation, it has created “enormous cities”, a world literature, systems of communication and, thereby, of commodity distribution, that no civilisation can resist, and has led to increased political centralisation (a new world order); furthermore the bourgeois epoch has subjected the entirety of nature to its desires and, “in one word, it creates a world after its own image” (224). The capitalist carnival in other words is total. It encompasses everything. It has no outside. But importantly it also creates that world.

This constant process of revolution (inversion, turning upside down, metamorphosis) is, in *Capital*, exactly how Marx will describe the form of money (I, Ch. 3). Money renders everything equivalent so that value can no longer be seen to be intrinsic to anything; it brings things “down to earth”, makes everything mundane; but also money is a parody of anything and everything. In other words, money, or what Marx calls the “money-commodity” is fictional: it can become anything; it engenders any commodity; it is both the potential and the actuality of circulation (it is at once abstract and concrete, immaterial and material, social power and a “thing”, that is, a commodity itself). It can give a shine to what is dull, and bring down what is heavenly. When Marx describes this process in *Capital*, he is consciously ascribing to the classical view, as it were, of the transformative nature of money and money culture:

Since money does not disclose what has been transformed into it, everything, commodity or not, is convertible into money. Everything becomes saleable and purchasable. Circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as crystallised gold. Nothing is immune from this alchemy, the bones of the saints cannot withstand it, let alone more delicate *res sacrosanctae, extra commercium hominum*. Just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too for its part, as a radical leveler, it extinguishes all distinctions (229).

Marx’s critique of capitalism is predicated then on what seems to be a contradictory idea of the nature and effect of money. On the one hand, money “fictionalises” whatever it comes in contact with by replacing substance with appearance (use-value with exchange-value) and whatever

becomes thus commodified enters a new, “spiritual” realm with no necessary ties to its past “life”. On the other hand, money degrades the spiritual, or less theologically put, it degrades whatever is not thought to be marketable: it turns anything and everything into a commodity, a thing (*res*: reification) to be bought and sold in the marketplace. The first contains a sense, however phoney or artificial, of transcendence (a lifting, a raising) and the latter powerfully contains the sense of being brought down to earth and of being rendered vulgar and ignoble. But it is important to note here that these two aspects are the one phenomenon and what connects them is the notion of constant inversion—circulation is revolution.

Therefore capitalism is degrading (it is a form of the grotesque insofar as it brings everything into its “belly”, so to speak, and transforms it), capitalism inverts (turns the world upside down), and capitalism—insofar as its central form, the commodity, is in fact the money-commodity—parodies everything it comes in contact with. The age of capital can be defined by the genre of the comic (and its association with the sub-genres or modes of the grotesque, parody, satire, and so on).⁴ This is a unique moment in the relationship between literature and politics. Here a political form, or in this case, a political economy, is not simply described by a literary technique. This is not a case of rhetoric. Nor is this a case of the politicisation of literature, nor the aestheticisation of politics. It is not the political economy of literature. Rather, in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels in effect argue that capitalism—the epoch of the bourgeoisie—*fictionalises* the world, turns all relations, material and social, spiritual and temporal, into fictional relations. More specifically, that fictionalisation is understood under—or rather *as*—the comic genre (as opposed to the tragic, the epic, or the lyric). With one vital difference: for Marx and Engels capital is not humorous. The profound, metaphysical laughter that Bakhtin describes as a defining characteristic of Medieval carnival is completely missing in capitalist carnival, which, as Marx and Engels say, drowns things in the icy waters of “egotistical calculation” (222). The consequences of drawing a direct equivalence between genre and a politico-economic form are profound, and perhaps can only be made of capitalism and no other political-economic form. Some of these consequences may be outlined as follows:

1. That even if capitalism is the outgrowth of technical rationality and calculative reason, its nature and effects is certainly not in any way rational: the notion of permanent revolution and the effects of the capitalist mode of production is a kind of grotesquery—there is little or nothing “classical” or harmonious or conservative about it. To put another way: to

understand capital one must understand the inherent bond between Weber and, say, Pynchon.

2. That all analyses of the society of the spectacle must start with this fictionalisation of relations inherent in capitalism. It also shows that so far anything going by the name of postmodernism is already implicit in the comic analysis of capital given by the *Manifesto*.

3. It might explain why it is extremely difficult to launch a sustainable critique of capitalism. Marx and Engels concluded their description with the idea of “sobering up” but provided no imaginative vision for a post-capitalist society. Perhaps the fictional resources that had at their disposal had been expended on their portrayal of bourgeois society. But more to the point, does parody make sense in a world that is already a parody of itself? In many respects this is the central question Adorno raises in *Minima Moralia* (see 211-212), and remains the question for us today: how to critique, let alone mock and satirise, when the conditions and techniques of satire actually define the object of satire? Differently put, if the only other alternative critical language to capitalism’s “festive” nature—its tendency to invert relations, corrupt and transform identities, unbind and form new social connections—is the severe, monotheistic and parsimonious tone of certain elements of the religious (and predominately monotheistic) tradition, then it is little wonder that such criticism has had little or no effect, inspiring as it sometimes might be. The question here, then, is: can another critical language be found that does not endlessly reformulate and thereby repeat the ancient alternatives between perversion and piety, indulgence and abstinence, between the hedonism of commodity culture and the asceticism of criticism?

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Notes

¹ The much quoted passage from 1 *Timothy* 6:10, "for the love of money is the root of all evil ...", is preceded by the idea of being content with what one has, based on the following deeply existential claim (6:7): "For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out". In other words, there is a true and righteous "circulation"—we bring nothing and leave with nothing—against which money and its false promises of transformation are judged.

² Indeed, the abolition of the money-commodity is a common theme in utopian literature. See for example Thomas More's *Utopia*, where there is neither money nor private property. It seems that at the end of this inverted world of value that capital in any form represents there is a mythical place of peace and stability, a period of rest and recuperation, a society of static relations, but also of rustic enjoyment and creativity as opposed to the frenzy of the city—a "pastoral" as it were. See Empson (1986).

³ The literature on Bakhtin and Marxism is wide-ranging and substantial. There is little if nothing, however, on the relation between carnival, the grotesque and comic (as Bakhtin understands them) and Marx and Engel's description and analysis of the bourgeois epoch in the *Communist Manifesto* (nor of the processes of inversion and conversion constituted by the commodity in *Capital*). Dominick La Capra (1983, 291-324) puts some of these ideas together, for example, but never makes the direct connection between carnival and capital. Nor is this association made in Hyman (1962) or Prawer (1978). The kinds of radical inversions instigated by capital and the idea that under it "all is solid melts into

air”, Marshall Berman (1983) believes is a sign of Marx’s radical modernity or at the very least of his understanding of that modernity. This may be so, but the motifs, metaphors and concepts Marx deploys are clearly “premodern”: the religious critique of money, the Goethe-like Faustian pacts, the use of fairy tales and mythological references, carnival, colossi, feasts, and the constant image of the topsy-turvy, upside down world, etc.

⁴ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes four genres, the tragic, the epic, the comic and the lyric (Aristotle 1996, 8-9). He gives most emphasis to the tragic—but it is well known that the comic section was lost. In what is extant, Aristotle defines the comic as the imitation of inferior people as opposed to the dignified which is the hallmark of tragedy, and says the “laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain” (49a). Clearly this is an insufficient definition of the genre, although it contains the important element of distortion and belittling while not resorting to violence. Nonetheless, what is essential here is that Aristotle considered the comic to be one of the “super-genres”, as it were. For our purposes, the comic also includes the key features of exaggeration, satire, parody, mockery, farce, the reduction of character to type, the multiform, the fecund, proliferation, inversion (as in Carnival and indeed revolution), incessant emphasis on the body and bodily functions, grotesquery, and so on.