

Vampires of Capital: Gothic Reflections between Horror and Hope

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*De Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire,
Suckin' the blood of the sufferers,
Building church and university,
Deceiving the people continually.*

– Bob Marley, Babylon System

Abstract: At the beginning it is creativity, living labour. At the beginning, it is the free play of human beings transforming the life-world of nature through the productive power of their minds and of their bodies. Through his own actions the worker “develops the potentialities slumbering within nature” and “subjects” the play of its forces to his own sovereign power.” At the end, it is capital: “dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” Capital furtively rises among the living and, from then on, “sucks up the worker’s value creating power” “transforming the worker into a crippled monstrosity.” But how can a dead body rise up and live off the living, how can “*le mort saisit le vif*”? This is for us the fundamental question of *Capital*. This is also the juncture through which it will be possible to bridge discussions of political economy, subjectivity/subjectification and commodity fetishism into one gothic metastructure.

Key Words: Marx, vampire, fetish, primitive accumulation, mutilation, carnival

In the preface to the first German edition of *Capital* Marx states: “Perseus wore a magic cap so that the monsters he hunted down might not see him. We draw the magic cap down over our own eyes and ears so to deny that there are any monsters.”¹ The sentence, which comes halfway through the preface, is left suspended by Marx and is not qualified or commented upon further. And yet, the whole of *Capital* could be read under the ethereal light left behind by this gothic-mythological metaphor. As Marx himself comments on the preface to the third French edition, *Capital* should be understood as an attempt to construct a scientific analysis of the capitalist mode of production. “There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.”² Throughout his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, Marx aims his analytic razor at piercing the “magic cap” which prevents us from seeing and hearing; we must interpret the world, in order to change it.³ These two moments – critical theory and revolutionary practice – cannot be separated, because behind the comfortable darkness of our induced blindness, there dwell the monsters. And these are, we will see, *real monsters*, which cannot be dispelled by reason alone. In the “enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world” of *Capital* the Feurbachian spectre has finally found a body.⁴

Alchemists and hobgoblins, werewolves and dancing tables, the abundance of gothic metaphors in Marx’s writings have not passed unnoticed by past commentators of *Capital*. Especially after the publication of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, there has been a growing interest on the role of the ghostly and the spectral within the general structure of Marxian thought.⁵ This essay tries to set itself apart from the stream of works, which, in form of comment or criticism, gravitate around Derrida’s deconstructive reading. I intend to do this in two ways. First of all, I focus on the use of a gothic metaphor, the vampire metaphor, which has been largely overlooked by past commentators. I take the vampire

¹ Marx, K. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Penguin Classics, 1990: 91.

² *Ibidem*: 103.

³ “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” Marx, K. *Theses on Feurbach in Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume One*. Progress Publishers, 1999: 15.

⁴ Marx, K. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III*. Penguin Classics, 1992: 809; for a discussion of the relationship between Marx and Feurbach see Avineri, S. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge University Press, 1968: 8-30.

⁵ Derrida, J. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Routledge, 1994. See also: Sprinker, M., and J. Derrida. *Ghostly Demarcations*. Verso, 1999.

as a central metaphor in Marxian writings and I try to show how it might be used to bridge discussions of political economy, subjectivity/subjectification and commodity fetishism. The article aims first of all at uncovering the existence of a significant gothic thread passing through much of Marx's writings. Following this thread, punctuated by the recurrence of vampiric metaphors, I hope we will be allowed to open up the Marxian text to productive readings, in particular concerning the relation between dead and living labour. So far as previous discussions of the ghostly and the spectral have limited themselves to the nature of alienation and fetishism, this might be a valuable contribution.⁶ Moreover, in the following section, I try to locate Marxian vampires in a general reading of the significance of magic in Marx's understanding of history.

Monsters, Sorcerers and Life Out of Balance

Certainly monsters are terrifying, misshapen creatures which personify our innermost fears and radically destabilize our symbolic order.⁷ But monsters are also warnings, disquieting omens of a looming catastrophe. What else is the Latin *monstum* if not the one which *monet*, literally the one which “warns”? Abnormal or prodigious animals continue to be regarded, in many folkloric traditions, as signs of some impending calamity.⁸ The same is true for Marx. As shown by the work of Parinetto, if we look at the insistent use of magical metaphors employed in Marxian texts in order to evoke capital, “capital as vampire, or as *maison hantée*, is a figure which imposes itself side by side with the one of catastrophe, [. . .] a catastrophe that the nature of magic imposes.”⁹ To understand the “warning” that the Marxian monster howls to the world it is then

⁶ The literature on the ghostly/spectral is now too numerous to list. For an introduction see: Carver, T. *The Postmodern Marx*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. For an alternative reading of the vampire metaphor, focused exclusively on political economy see: Neocleous, M. “The political economy of the dead: Marx's Vampires.” *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 4 (2003).

⁷ For a psychoanalytic account of the monstrous see: Schneider, S. J. *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*. Cambridge University Press, 2004. More specifically on vampires see: Gelder, K. *Reading the Vampire*. Routledge, 1994: 42-65.

⁸ In Homer, *teras* – from which teratology, the study of monsters – takes first of all the meaning of “sign.” Equally the Latin grammarian Sextus Pompeius Festus in his *De verborum significatione* defines *monstum* as “quod monstrat futuram et moneat voluntatem deorum” (122, 8). This understanding of monstrosity as omen is common to many folkloric tradition as shown extensively in: Gilmore, D. *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

⁹ Parinetto, L. *La rivolta del diavolo. Muntzer, Lutero e la rivolta dei contadini in Germania*. Rusconi, Milano, 1999: 189 (my translation).

necessary to take a step back and look at how Marx reflects on the nature of magic *within* capitalism.

Although at this point it is not possible to discuss at length the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism, and its relationship with the alchemic nature of the sphere of exchange – circulation as the “alchemical social retort” “into which everything is thrown, to come out again as a gold-crystal”¹⁰ – it is maybe sufficient to signal the distance that this concept opens up between the Marxian reading of history and the ideas of classic Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire or early sociologists such as Max Weber. If Weber, indeed, argued that the birth of a distinct capitalistic reason brought to fulfilment “the great historical-religious process of disenchantment of the world,”¹¹ Marx, through the concept of commodity fetishism, intends to demonstrate the opposite. Not only the world of capital is not a world freed from its magical element, it is, even more radically, a world where magic, in the form of fetishism, remains an integral part of the totality of the social relations of production. This does not mean that Marx misrecognized the revolution sparked by the advent of capital: the eulogy that we find in the *Manifesto* shows the point at which he perceived the radical transformations brought forward by the bourgeois class.¹² What we must recognize is that the Marxian eulogy is a *dialectic eulogy*, the other side of which is precisely the reading of the movement of capital as a process of enchantment. Only in this spirit we can understand why Marx gazes with awe at “all the mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities.”¹³ The process of transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production, then, resolves itself in a transition not from religion to reason, but from religion to magic. It was the “strange God” of capital – and not the reason of the Enlightenment – who “perched himself side by side with the old Gods of Europe on the altar, and one fine day threw them all

¹⁰ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 208 and 229.

¹¹ Weber, M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958: 105; similarly Voltaire notices in his entry for “Vampires” in the *Dictionnaire philosophique (1764)*: “The result of all this is that a great part of Europe has been infested with vampires for five or six years, and that there are now no more; that we have had Convulsionaries in France for twenty years, and that we have them no longer; that we have had demoniacs for seventeen hundred years, but have them no longer; that the dead have been raised ever since the days of Hippolytus, but that they are raised no longer.”

¹² Marx, K., and F. Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Classics, 2002.

¹³ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 169.

overboard with a shove and a kick.”¹⁴ For Marx, then, we are still fully within that “nonsensical pre-history of human society”¹⁵ which finds its foundation in the alienation of man from his “social powers.”¹⁶

The “nonsensical pre-history of human society” continues today and takes new forms under the God of capital. The Enlightenment has not brought the “rule of reason”; it is capital instead which rules as “a lord, at once aristocratic and barbarous.”¹⁷ But what is most important, for Marx and for us, is that capital is a lord; dead labour which rules over the living, which *cannot* have reason. And it cannot have reason because, as Marx wants to uncover, capital is nothing else but a “blind and measureless drive,” “insatiable appetite for surplus labour, which oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits” imposed by nature. Vampire-like, capital is condemned to chase endlessly his apocalyptic drive “shortening the life of labour-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.”¹⁸ It is life itself that is destroyed by the necrophiliac unfolding of capital; as famine, misery and the destruction of Nature disappear from sight, capital finally proclaims “the making of profit as the ultimate and the sole purpose of mankind.”¹⁹

This is the nature of the crisis we live in, this is the omen which the monster of capital screams everyday in our ears. This is also the reason that Marx, in the *Manifesto*, implicitly rewrites the text of the celebrated Goethian ballad *Der Zauberlehrling* (The Sorcerer’s Apprentice).²⁰ The distance between the Goethian version, and the Marxian version signals a definite divergence between the reason of the Enlightenment and the *ratio* of capital, which Marx wants to uncover and criticize. The content of the ballad is renowned: the sorcerer’s apprentice, desiring to emulate the *Hexenmeister* (the Master

¹⁴ *Ibidem*: 918. This change of religion is also reflected in the penal code: “At the same time England ceased burning witches, she began hanging the forgers of banknotes.” Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 920.

¹⁵ Marx, K. and F. Engels, *The German Ideology in Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume V*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979.

¹⁶ “Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man [. . .] in his everyday life, in his work, in his relationships, has become a species-being; and *when he has recognised and organised his own powers as social powers*” Marx, K. *On the Jewish Question*, in T. B. Bottomore, *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, Penguin Editions, 1963: 24-25.

¹⁷ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 344.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*: 375.

¹⁹ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 918.

²⁰ Goethe, J.W. *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* in Appelbaum, S. *103 Great Poems: A Dual-language Book*. Dover Publications Inc., 1999: 127.

Sorcerer), spells magic formulas which he does not master, therefore leading to the unfolding of a disaster. In the ballad emerges, then, that within the culture of the Enlightenment the irrationality of magic, caused by the ignorance of the people, can certainly lead to disaster but can also be dispelled by the light of scientific knowledge. The same is not true for Marx. What is striking about the reference to Goethe in the *Manifesto* is that the sorcerer's apprentice has disappeared from the story and it is now the *Hexenmeister* "who is no longer able to control the powers whom he has called up by his spells."²¹ The variation introduced by Marx has an evident motivation: the world of capital is a world out of balance, governed by blind drives and not by reason. If in Goethe we still find the confidence that the unleashing of irrational forces can be dominated by the good reason of the master, in Marx, the boundless drives of the vampire/capital have spun forever out of control. "His action," as Bram Stoker says of his *Dracula*, "is based on selfishness, he confines himself to one purpose, and that purpose is remorseless."²² That is to say, capital's egotistical drive for self-valorization offers no space for rational-technical mediation. The magic world cannot be governed anymore, as it used to be in Goethe, within its own categories, simply by the skilful mastery of its own logic. The *Hexenmeister* is finally hopeless. As readers, we are confronted by the necessity to accept the catastrophe or endure a break, a radical discontinuity.²³ The bourgeois class has recalled a force at once subterranean (*unterirdischen*) and violent (*Gewalten*), which now it must faithfully serve: this is the vampire of capital which "will not let go while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited."²⁴

²¹ Marx, K., and F. Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*.

²² Stoker, B. *Dracula*. New York, Signet, 1992: 342. Here the parallelism with Marx's description of capital is almost striking: "capital has *one sole driving force*, the drive to valorise itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour." Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 342.

²³ "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." Marx, K., and F. Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*: 52. Taking at the centre of his analysis this quote from the *Communist Manifesto*, Parinetto has convincingly argued for the open ended character of the Marxian philosophy of history. See Parinetto, L. *La rivolta del Diavolo*: 189. For a summary genealogy of the Marxist idea of history as an open-ended process of class-struggle see also: Policante, A. "War against Biopower: Timely Reflections on an Historicist Foucault," *Theory & Event*, 13.1 March 2010.

²⁴ Engels, F. "The English Ten Hours' Bill"; as cited in Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 416.

Vampiric Metaphors and the Political Economy of the Dead

Gothic and magical metaphors serve, in Marx's writing, as a rhetorical mirror. Through the Marxian looking glass the comforting, mystifying world described by classical political economy is turned swiftly upside down. If Adam Smith, then, describes capital as the "life-blood of society," soothing blood, whose circulation revitalises all aspects of production, Marx shows exactly the opposite: that capital *is* not blood, that capital is a monster, a vampire that lives on blood. Behind the putative vitality of capitalist production, comes into view "the sickening consumption of the parasite."²⁵ This inversion suggests an affinity between Marxian social analysis and gothic literary creations. Both "negate, deny, bury in shadow that which had been brightly lit, and brings into light that which has been repressed."²⁶ Both "show the darkness hiding in the light, to pursue a form of social criticism through cultural re-presentation."²⁷ As Bourdieu suggested, gothic literature – as well as Marxian metaphors – "unveils the world by veiling it."²⁸ The vampire of *Capital* rises to unsettle the sanitized categories of bourgeois thought; but the soil on which the monster grows is much more disturbing, much more profound and much more *unheimlich* than that.²⁹ To understand the nature of the vampire we must then, as argued convincingly by Mark Neocleous, situate its body in Marx's critique of political economy; we must enter the sphere of production to see how the vampire metaphor can be put to work.³⁰

At the beginning it is creativity, living labour. At the beginning, it is the free play of human beings transforming the life-world of nature through the productive power of their minds and of their bodies. Through his own actions the worker "develops the potentialities slumbering within nature" and "subject the play of its forces to his own sovereign power."³¹ At the end, it is capital: "dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks." Capital furtively

²⁵ Parker, M. "Organisational Gothic." *Culture and Organization* 11, no. 3 (2005): 159.

²⁶ McGrath, P. "Transgression and Decay" in Grunenber, C. *Gothic. Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*. Cambridge, 1997: 156.

²⁷ Parker, M. "Organisational Gothic": 158.

²⁸ Smith, A. "Reading Wealth in Nigeria: Occult Capitalism and Marx's Vampires." *Historical Materialism* 9, no. 1 (2001): 44.

²⁹ Haraway, D.J. *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_Onco Mouse™*, London, 1997.

³⁰ Neocleous, M. "The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires": 679.

³¹ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 284.

risers among the living and, from then on, “sucks up the worker’s value creating power.”³² But how can a dead body rise up and live off the living, how can “*le mort saisit le vif*”? This is for us the fundamental question of *Capital*. Let us then sketch a brief summary of its unfolding; we must leave behind the vampire for a moment; he will be the one to come back to us, “dripping with blood” under the name of capital.

First of all, we must recognize that *the commodity is dead labour*; its value is nothing else than accumulated labour, past labour congealed in the commodity form.³³ The means of subsistence – agricultural products, housing, clothes; the means of production – manual tools, mechanical machines, digital computers; all of human production enters in the market in the form of abstract social labour embodied in the commodity form. This means that, for Marx, products can be exchanged only on the basis of a common feature: being the product of human labour of some sort. Only the abstract socially necessary labour-time that every commodity embodies makes it quantitatively commensurable with other commodities in the market. But this reification of the doing into the done not only makes commerce as quantitative exchange possible, it also forms the basis of the first accumulation of capital and, subsequently, of that “Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities.”³⁴ The relationship between commerce, commodity fetishism and capital is a highly complex and contested issue. Nevertheless, at the risk of oversimplifying, we may follow Marx’s suggestion and therefore posit “external trade” as the origin of the historical process that turned social activity into a production taking place “only in connection with circulation, a production which posited exchange values as its exclusive content.”³⁵ The gradual commodification of social activity, then, which can reach full extent only under capitalist production, not only “converts every product into a social hieroglyphic”; it also requires “the guardians” of the commodities exchanged “to place themselves in relation

³² *Ibidem*: 342 and 716.

³³ “The communal substance of all commodities, i.e. their substance not as material stuff, as physical character, but their communal substance as commodities and hence exchange values, is this, that they are objectified labour.” Marx, K. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin, 1973: 263.

³⁴ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 165. In the previous page see also: “Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself.”

³⁵ Marx, K. *Grundrisse*: 256.

to one another, as persons whose will resides in those objects.”³⁶ This means that the movement towards the establishment of exchange value is also the movement towards the establishment of the world of the fetish where the products of men’s hands and brains “appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race.”³⁷ The world of the fetish, to be clear, is not yet the world of the “strange God of” capital. This is not where the vampire dwells. And yet we may glimpse with unease its shadow if we remember the lesson of anthropology: “a fetish is a god under process of construction.”³⁸

We must follow the shadow of the commodity-fetish, as it turns and dances within the market, to locate whence its corpse metamorphosed, transformed and took the form of the capitalist monster. In the widely popular 19th century serial *Varney the Vampire*, one of the most probable sources of Marx’s own metaphor, vampirism is a punishment for earthly sins like the murder of one’s wife or sons.³⁹ In *Capital*, equally, the vampire rises as a result of the original sin of primitive accumulation; it is the direct result of the violent separation of the worker from the common means of production and subsistence. Only after this original expropriation is the worker reduced to the condition of proletarian and the process of capitalist exploitation can start. “Precisely from the fact that labour depends on nature, it follows that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power must [. . .] be the slave of other men *who have made themselves owners of the material conditions of labour.*”⁴⁰ Primitive accumulation, as the original sin, at once reduces the worker to a crippled being – always already dependent on his expropriator to reproduce himself – and the capitalist into an empty mask possessed by the vampiric drives of capital. Hence “the rule of the capitalist over the worker is nothing but the rule of the independent conditions of labour over the worker [. . .] the rule of things over man, of dead labour over living.”⁴¹ In other words, it is with the violent process of

³⁶ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 167.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Graeber, D. “Fetishism as Social Creativity” in *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion and Desire*, AK Press, 2007: 138. It is as commodity fetish that the “strange-god of capital” perched himself for the first time “side by side with the old Gods of Europe on the altar.” It is as capital that threw them all overboard with the violence of a shove and a kick . . . and of primitive accumulation.

³⁹ Auerbach, N. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. University Of Chicago Press, 1995: 32.

⁴⁰ Marx, K. *Randglossen zum Programm der deutschen Arbeiterpartei*, Berlin, 1922: 22. As quoted in Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, 2002: 658.

⁴¹ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 342, 989-90.

expropriation of the commons that the capital-relation is established and dead labour is transformed into capital. After this original sin, the dead body of the commodity not only rises up and dances but it turns towards its own creator to feed itself on his living flesh.⁴²

Marx was at pains to show that it is only the social relation of dominion of the dead over the living that stamps the commodity with the character of capital. As he points out, “capital does not consist in accumulated labour serving living labour as a means for new production. It consists in living labour serving accumulated labour as the means of preserving and multiplying its exchange value.”⁴³ The monstrous metabolism of the vampire necessitates the subordination of living labour to the power of the dead. This is a necessary feature of capitalist production since commodities, be they bibles or mechanical machines, cannot produce new value. Commodities, as dead bodies, remain silent, motionless, utterly incapable of (re-)generation. Without the creative power of living labour, then, “iron rusts, wood rots. Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit is cotton wasted. Living labour must seize on these things and change them from merely possible into real and effective use-values”; it must “awaken them from the dead.”⁴⁴

The process of production, the expenditure of labour-power, is always a process of value (re-)production. This means that the worker throughout the working day both reproduces past labour objectified in the means of production – that otherwise would decompose and gradually disappear – and adds new value through the expenditure of its own labour-power. So the worker is both a reproducer of past, already-embodied value and a producer of new value, surplus value, equally embodied in the commodity form. In the first sense, “living labour appears merely as a means to realize objectified, dead labour, to penetrate it with an animating soul while losing its own soul to it.”⁴⁵ But as value-creating power living labour is also the creator of surplus value, which, once realized into the market in the form of money, allows the progressive accumulation of capital: “the working class creates by the surplus labour of one year the capital destined to employ additional labour in the following year. This is what is called creating capital

⁴² Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 932-933.

⁴³ Marx, K. *Wage Labour and Capital in Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume V*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979. Marx signals this diabolic inversion also in the form of writing through the use of antimetabole and chiasmus as recurrent figures of speech.

⁴⁴ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 289.

⁴⁵ Marx, K. *Grundrisse*: 460.

out of capital.”⁴⁶ It is living labour to extend the dominion of the vampire through its own blood tribute, but this is labour reduced to its bare state of wage-labourer dependent on the capitalist for access to his means of subsistence. The *impersonality* of the expropriated worker is here shown in all its *internality* to the monstrous vampiric metabolism of capital.⁴⁷

The immortality of the vampire is, then, ultimately founded on a constant process of regeneration *via* living labour. The surplus value extracted by the blood of the workers exits the factory in the form of commodities; then it is realized into the market and takes the form of money; and finally it reappears as capital in the process of production metamorphosed into a surplus of constant capital and variable capital: more machines, more raw material, more workers. In other words, capital “posits the permanence of value by incarnating itself in fleeting commodities and taking on their form, but at the same time changing them just as constantly. Permanence is posited as the only thing it can be, a passing passage – process – life.”⁴⁸ The lesson may be, as hinted by Walter Benjamin, “that capital will not die a natural death.”⁴⁹ After all, Marx himself has suggested that “the *immortality* which money strove to achieve by setting itself negatively against circulation, by withdrawing from it, is achieved by capital, which preserves itself precisely by abandoning itself to circulation.”⁵⁰ But capital obtains this diabolic miracle only by sucking the marrow of life out of the workers’ bones, extending at every cycle the dominion of death over life. “Past unpaid labour is the *sole* condition for the appropriation of living unpaid labour on a constantly increasing scale.”⁵¹ The lesson, then, is not only that the vampire will not age and die in peace; it is rather that the world will not be allowed to age and die in peace confronted by an immortality that can exist only in the form of viral growth. This is the way Stoker’s *Dracula* “cannot die, but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world. . . . And so the circle goes on, ever widening, like the ripples from a stone thrown in the

⁴⁶ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 729.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*: 451. For a theory stressing the peculiar political position of the working class, “at once within and against capitalism,” see: Tronti, M. *Operai e capitale*, Einaudi, 1971: 1-40.

⁴⁸ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 638.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project*: 659.

⁵⁰ Marx, K. *Grundrisse*: 261.

⁵¹ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 729

water.”⁵² Like capital, Dracula is cursed into an eternal striving for new victims, for new fresh blood, bones and muscles to agglomerate into its burgeoning metabolic activity. This is the only way it can live. Dracula travels to London, relocates its drives, batters down all Chinese walls; his vampire thirst only slightly quenched by each new acquisition. The vampire, “in one word, creates a world after its own image.”⁵³

Living in a Spelled Carnival: Vampiric Possessions and Monstrous Subjectivities

In the previous section we have covered a limited part of Marxian political economy, showing how it might be read through the lenses of the vampire metaphor. As we have seen, Marx’s vampire image relates to the circular process through which surplus value arises out of capital, and more capital arises out of surplus value. First of all, it portrays how, throughout the process of capitalist production, dead labour is regenerated while surplus value is created anew. Surplus value therefore emerges through a sucking process, which also fills with new life dead labour otherwise destined to a natural process of decomposition. But the vampire metaphor is also a metaphor hinting at the creation of capital out of surplus-labour. This is the power of the vampire to multiply itself, transforming everything that is still outside his realm into new capital: nature and technology, which become constant capital, and human beings, which are reduced to the zombie-like condition of variable capital. In this section then we must continue our analysis of the process of capitalist production, looking at how the vampire cripples the human life it has been feeding on, reducing proletarians and capitalists into *inhuman* fragments of a monstrous mechanic metabolism.

As we have already seen in the previous section, the process of primitive accumulation is always also a moment of original violence, constituting the wage-labourer as an incomplete and ultimately dependent subject. The original violence that gives form to the capital-relation, then, is nothing else than an act of mutilation: “for the second arrest for vagabondage the whipping is to be repeated and half the ear sliced off.”⁵⁴ Capital, like the delezoguattarian state apparatus, “needs, at its summit and at its base, predisabled people, preexisting amputees, the stillborn, the congenitally infirm, the

⁵² Stoker, B. *Dracula*: 214.

⁵³ Marx, K., and F. Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*: 6.

⁵⁴ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 896.

one-eyed and one-armed.” This horror of amputated limbs is a necessary feature of the origin of capital, it is the necessary bases on which the vampire moves his first steps. So long as the immediate producer can produce for himself, “capitalist accumulation and the capitalist mode of production are impossible.”⁵⁵ *Primitive mutilation* – as the separation of the worker from the conditions of his own labour – is a violence that must “posit itself as preaccomplished, even though it is reactivated every day. This is the place to say it, if ever there was one: the mutilation is always prior, preestablished.”⁵⁶

The original mutilation, in its quality of violent act of severance, is only apparently left behind, at the margin of the capitalist realm. In fact, as soon as capitalist production “stands on its own feet, it not only maintains this separation, it also reproduces it on a constantly increasing scale.”⁵⁷ Mutilation, in other words, although always preestablished, reflects itself on the whole movement of capitalist accumulation, giving it a specific gothic character. The separation of the doers from the conditions of doing leaves behind bodies severed from their vital organs, but it is the whole process of capital production that reproduces and radicalizes this separation. Capitalist production is always a process of *zombification*. This is why Deleuze and Guattari have talked of the zombie as a work myth, not a war myth. The appearance of the zombie signals the horizon of a world fully inhuman, i.e., a world where the human subject himself is made by and for the capital-vampire. The mutilation of the working class – its increasing condition of dependence – is a process unfolding side by side with the continuous radicalization of the despotic power of the abstract over the concrete, of the dead over the living. After the capital-relation is firmly established, it is no longer the living who employ the dead, but the dead who employ the living. The means of production, “instead of being consumed by the worker as material elements of his productive activity, consume him as the ferment necessary to their own life-process.”⁵⁸

The first technology utilized by capital in order to squeeze more relative surplus value from the workers was the simple division of labour. This particular form of cooperation found its maximum expression in the development of the English

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*: 933.

⁵⁶ Deleuze G. and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, The Athlone Press, 1988: 470 and 494.

⁵⁷ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 874.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*: 425.

manufacturing industry in the early 18th century, and yet specialization and parcelling of labour remains a central characteristic of capitalist production, even today. What interests us here is that, for Marx, the social division of labour in industry, as any technology caught up within the capitalist mode of production, is not only a means to maximize relative surplus-labour; “it also does this by crippling the individual worker, thus producing new conditions for the domination of capital over labour.”⁵⁹ The capital-vampire, hence, with the same kiss, both feeds itself on the blood of the workers and reduces it to an appendage of its necrotic metabolism. “While simple cooperation leaves the mode of the individual’s labour for the most part unchanged, manufacture” – as a capitalist practice of production based on a systematic division of labour – “truly revolutionize[s] it and seizes labour-power by its roots. It converts the worker into a *crippled monstrosity* by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing-house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations.”⁶⁰ Labour, under capital, does not make men free – as some signs in Auschwitz once used to say; labour, to the contrary, transforms the independent worker into a *natural slave* of capital. Freed of his “knowledge, judgement and will,” “unfitted by nature to make anything independently,” the manufacturing worker is more and more forced by the process of individuation prompted by capital to abandon him/herself to the mortal embrace of the vampire. If, in the first place, “the worker sold his labour power to capital because he lacked the material means of producing a commodity, now his own individual labour-power withholds its services unless it has been sold to capital.”⁶¹

For Nietzsche, as for Marx, the subjectivities emerging from the new processes of production appear like “inverse cripples”: “men who lack everything except one thing, of which they have too much – men [. . .] as fragments and limbs of men.”⁶² Like in the absurd fable of Menenius Agrippa the workers now cannot live without the mediation of their master-vampire, who offers them only a “life sick with inhuman clockworks and mechanisms, with the *impersonality* of the worker, with the false economy of the division

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*: 486.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*: 481.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*: 482.

⁶² Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Penguin Classics, 2003: 160. To avoid misunderstandings it is maybe better to underline that, although the “images of the modern worker” presented by Marx and Nietzsche share certain common characteristic, they are also based on a very different understanding of “*what is dangerous, what gnaws and poison life in our way of carrying on*” (Nietzsche, 1992: 54).

of labour.”⁶³ The introduction of the factory system, centred on systems of machinery aimed at maximizing the extraction of surplus value, only radicalizes this deskilling and crippling of the worker, thus completing the manufacture of a subject perfected for capitalist exploitation. “The most powerful means of shortening the working time needed to produce a commodity becomes, as a repository of capital,” “the most powerful means of enslaving, exploiting and impoverishing the worker,” “a martyrology for the producer.”⁶⁴ Technology, under the power of the dead, suffers a true dialectical inversion. Instead of bursting asunder the chains of physical need, freeing up time for the open development of human creativity, it becomes the ultimate instrument serving capital in its drive to ever more efficient means of exploitation of the dead over the living. This means that the rule of the dead over the living finally takes a motorized form, as if the vampire in its endless metamorphoses had taken the appearance of a “mechanical monster” with “gigantic members” and “demonic powers.” While in manufacture “the workers are the parts of a living organism – the collective worker; in the factory we have a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its living appendages.” Here the “automaton itself is the subject, and the workers are merely conscious organs, coordinated with the unconscious organs of the automaton, and together with the latter subordinated to the central moving force.”⁶⁵ Capitalist mutilation first acquires a technical and palpable reality, revealing itself as *a total process* of “physical deterioration,” “moral degradation,” and “intellectual degeneration” of the human species, a process through which the individual is finally made into a zombie, inert food for vampires.⁶⁶

For Marx, then, the worker, caught up in the necrotic metabolism of capital, is a false subject, a void filled up with the desire of the vampire to conserve and valorise itself. “As something which creates value, as something involved in the process of

⁶³ Nietzsche, F. *Ecce Homo*, Penguin Classics, 1992: 54. Marx was very fond of the Roman fable of Menenius Agrippa, which he cites several times throughout his work. The fable shows, through a holistic metaphor, how the Roman plebs were incapable of survival without the apparent idle class of the patricians. For Marx, though, it is only with the rise of capital that “the individual himself is made the automatic motor of a fractional operation, and the absurd fable of Menenius Agrippa, which makes man a mere fragment of his own body, becomes realised.” Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 481.

⁶⁴ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 526 and 638.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*: 503; 548 and 544.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*: 517-523.

objectifying labour, the worker's labour becomes one of the modes of existence of capital, it is incorporated into capital as soon as it enters the production process."⁶⁷ This inversion is not only important to understand the relationship between capital and the subjectivity of the worker. It reflects itself in the ideology of the capitalist class and invests the capitalist subject with a consciousness and a will that are external to him and heterodirects his actions. Indeed, "the functions fulfilled by the capitalist are no more than the functions of capital – viz. the valorisation of value by absorbing living labour – executed consciously and willingly. The capitalist functions only as *personified capital*, capital as a person, just as the worker is no more than labour personified."⁶⁸ Marx is very clear that if we assume the eyes of classical political economics, which represents in its purest form the point of view of the vampire-capital, "the proletarian is merely a machine for the production of surplus-value, but the capitalist too is merely a machine for the transformation of this surplus-value into surplus capital."⁶⁹ What Marx is trying to show is that – although the capitalist always appears as a miser "fanatically intent on the valorization of value," and although, with his "ability to supervise and enforce discipline over the workers," he "forces the human race to produce for production's sake" – his actions are not the effect of the mania of a vicious individuality but "the effect of a social mechanism in which the capitalist is merely a cog."⁷⁰

This all-powerful social mechanism is simply the reality of market competition, which, as a fractal panopticon, regulates all social relationships between people. "By its means, what corresponds to the nature of capital is posited as external necessity for the individual capitalist," in other words "competition subordinates every individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production, as external and coercive laws."⁷¹ As noted by numerous critics, from Voltaire to Cortázar, capitalists have always behaved like vampires.⁷² But this is ultimately the effect of the law of competition, which reduces

⁶⁷ Marx, K. "Results of the immediate process of production," published as an appendix to Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 988.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*: 989.

⁶⁹ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 742.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*: 739.

⁷¹ Marx, K. *Grundrisse*: 650; and Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 381. For a view of market competition as a fractal panopticon regulating social relationships between people see De Angelis, M. *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. Pluto Press, 2007.

⁷² Voltaire, F. "Vampire" in *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Classiques Garnier, 1935: 386; Cortázar, J. *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales*, Excelsior, 1975.

the capitalist into nothing more than a mask, a puppet or a false subject. Market competition, for Marx, acts as a spelled mirror continuously reflecting the nature of capital upon the body of the capitalist. Capital is the only true vampire “the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationship of capitalism as is his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in a quite different manner.”⁷³ This means that the subject in capitalist society can not be the capitalist, and not even the capitalist class; the real subject can only be value, capital, accumulated labour, dead labour. When seen through the lenses of Marxian analysis, the capitalist is nothing but a human mask behind which the monstrous appearance of capital is kept concealed with all its obscene, excessive drives, with its necrophilia and self-destructive desire. Behind the human, Marx shows the vampire. Behind the ascetic protestant ethic of abstinence, the obscene Dionysian drive to consume, devour, spoil all that is life.

As we may expect, the original sin of primitive accumulation is also the source of the enslavement of the capitalist to the power of the vampire. On this point Marx, already in the *Jewish Question*, noticed that: “the right of man to private property [. . .] makes every man see in other men not the realization of his own freedom, but the barrier to it.” The right to enclosure, then, not only constitutes the true foundation of capital; it also prefigures the alienated form of the capitalist subject, upon whom the vampiric nature of capital is immediately reflected: “man as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself.”⁷⁴ As Parinetto has convincingly argued, the paradox is that exactly when the ruling class poses a set of barriers that segregates the workers from property – and one property from the other, thus establishing the framework for competition – it also creates *another* subject who has the power to control the social relationships of each individual property owner; a subject which, therefore, speaks through the person of the capitalist – and of the worker since “the competition among workers is only another form of the competition imposed among capitals” – precisely as a theatre actor speaks behind a mask.⁷⁵

The social world created by capitalism could then be compared to a spelled carnival in which dwell not men but masks of men. “Here the persons exist for one

⁷³ Marx, K. “Results of the immediate process of production”: 990.

⁷⁴ Marx, K. *On the Jewish Question*: 22.

⁷⁵ Parinetto, L. *La rivolta del Diavolo*: 187-218. The citation on that form of capitalist competition, which tends to force proletarians to act socially as isolated monads, is from Marx, K. *Grundrisse*: 650.

another merely as representatives and hence owners, of commodities [. . .] the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations.”⁷⁶ If in the traditional carnival, represented for example by the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, we find monstrous masks behind which really live human subjects,⁷⁷ within the capitalist carnival we find human masks behind which really live monstrous beings: vampires and zombies.⁷⁸ The idea of a *capitalist carnival* and the notion of *possessed bodies* – as they emerge from an analysis of *Capital* particularly concerned with the use of gothic metaphors – represent in a different form Marx’s understanding of history as “nonsensical prehistory.” As we have seen in the first section, Marx saw capitalism as the last in a long series of social formations collectively characterized by the rule of economic imperatives over human will and desire. Capitalism, then, reproduces a world where man is really a character-mask, a facade behind which dwell objective economic categories that govern and rule his life. When we talk of vampires, zombies and possessed bodies we do it because for Marx, as long as we are within capitalism, as long as we don’t project ourselves beyond the nonsense of prehistory, men are inevitably to be governed by *another* subject. The vampire of capital is the *inhuman* subject of capitalist prehistory; men are only its conscious organs. Today, as in the days of its first preface, we must read *Capital* to break through our Perseus’ cap; we must read it to see that it is not man who uses capital to make his own history; it is the vampire that uses man to make “a world after its own image.”

Conclusion

This essay has been a long scream of horror. We have glimpsed at the vampire that Marx described in full light throughout *Capital*. We have tried to describe its movements in relationship with the magic of fetishism, the political economy of the dead and the processes of individuation which give shape to the masks of the capitalist and the proletarian. We have looked at the capitalist mode of production as a spelled carnival. We have tried to break

⁷⁶ Marx, K. *Capital, Volume I*: 178-179.

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968.

⁷⁸ “If I characterise man as an ‘exchange value,’ this expression already implies that social conditions have transformed him into a ‘thing.’ If I treat him as a ‘productive force,’ I am putting in the place of the real subject *a different subject*, I am substituting another person for him, and he now exists only as a cause of wealth. The whole of human society becomes merely a machine for the creation of wealth.” Marx, K. “Draft of an Article on Friedrich List’s Book *Das nationale System der politischen Oekonomie*” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume IV*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979: 285.

through Perseus' cap and to look at the monster in the eyes in order to comprehend the meaning of its omen.

As we have seen, where the monster reigns, there is danger in the gravest sense. "But where danger is, grows the saving power also."⁷⁹ After all, capital never ceases to depend on living labour to continue its monstrous life, to complete the endless process of its valorisation. The vampire, despite all its powers, "is a real illusion, a real process in which the done never ceases to depend on the doing."⁸⁰ As shown by Marx, if the workers stop the production process not only is profit endangered; capital itself enfeebles and dies away. Chapter X, when the vampire metaphor first comes to the forefront of *Capital*, is exactly the *loci* where we are shown at once the most horrific, outraging tendencies of capital and its very real weakness. It is exactly when the worker seems to be exposed naked as the humblest slave of capital – bare life to be exploited, fermenting blood to be sucked – that we see his power against capital, the possibility of his liberation from capital. Our scream is then at once a scream of horror and hope. To go beyond the gothic realm of the monstrous it will be necessary to overcome the false subjectivities that mirror the capital-vampire. It will be necessary for the proletarian to recognize the inhuman identity that capital has imposed upon him, to become other from himself escaping the constriction to *identity*. "If the slave understands the artificiality of his condition in the consciousness of being person, the proletarian understands his alienation in the consciousness of being *thing*, that is to say in understanding his reification. When he stops recognizing himself in his identity, the proletarian, at least at the level of consciousness, opens the possibility of becoming finally human."⁸¹ The central subject of *Capital* is of course the *exploitation* of labour, the extraction of surplus-labour from the living body of the worker, but it also contains a radical critique of capital as a process of *subjectification* by which the worker himself is produced as a commodity, the human commodity (*Menschenware*). There is no naturally revolutionary class and there never has been. Emancipation will require much less and much more than any party; much less and much more than the working class itself. There is no revolutionary subject without a place and a time in which revolutionary processes of subjectification can rest. And yet, as Raoul Vaneigem wrote, "the same people who are murdered slowly in the mechanized slaughterhouses of work are also arguing, singing, drinking, dancing, making love, holding the streets, picking up weapons and inventing a new

⁷⁹ Heidegger, M. "The Question Concerning Technology" in Lovitt, W. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Harper&Row, 1977: 34.

⁸⁰ Holloway, J. *Change the world without taking power*, Pluto Press, 2002: 125.

⁸¹ Parinetto, L. *Corpo e Rivoluzione in Marx*, Contemporanea Moizzi, 1977: 380-381 (my translation).

poetry.”⁸² Outside capital there is a world. It is only there, in the everyday life – in that different space fed by the commons that we create, we defend, we struggle for – that new subjectivities may emerge, open a new space and grow. It will be necessary first of all to undo the original sin that gave birth to the diabolic inversion, reinvent the commons and re-appropriate a time to live, to think, to become other from what we are. And yet this is only the beginning. If we are interested in re-appropriating the wealth produced by the General Intellect – *our* brains, *our* hearts, *our* bodies in communication – it is not in order to survive a little better, and get the full value of our working hours. More than ever, we need the space and the time of the commons in order to have a place in which to invent a new way of life, where labour would become (again) like art – that which is *the free expression of human creativity*.⁸³ “The supersession of private property is therefore,” as the young Marx once dared to say, “the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively. The eye has become a *human eye*, just as its object has become a social, *human* object, made by man for man.”⁸⁴

⁸² Vaneigem, R. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Rebel Press, 2003: 24.

⁸³ Marx, following Fourier, opposes the de-humanizing process of subjectification that takes the name of labour under capital to what he calls *travail attractif*, i.e., truly free activity, labour that is the self-realization of the individual. In the *Grundrisse* he suggests that technical progress, when not employed for the self-expansion of capital, may drastically reduce the time of necessary labour – the labour required to satisfy the basic reproductive needs of the individual. Most of the daily time would therefore be left for free activity and self-activity as a process of conscious self-improvement, collective subjectification and care of the self. See also Marx, K. and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*: 242.

⁸⁴ Marx, K. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in T. B. Bottomore, *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, Penguin Editions, 1963: 155.