"The Parody of the Motley Cadaver": Revolution as Life and Death

Tim Fisken, May 1, 2006

If we still, again, face a crisis of Marxism, it is tempting to quote still, again, Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." But are those of us wrestling with this crisis coming to the recognition that the crisis is the rule, or are we in the melancholy position of the angel of history, seeing crisis pile on crisis with no hope of turning our heads towards the future?[1] The necessity of asking this question can be seen in the fact that contemporary responses to a perceived crisis in Marxism center around attempts to conceptualize differently the locations in which we might uncover a cache of revolutionary potential; the turn to Spinoza is, perhaps the clearest indication. I want to investigate this quest for potential in terms of two sets of concepts: on the one hand, creativity, life, and the organic, and on the other, communication, death, and the inorganic. The relation between the concepts in the first group is, I hope, reasonably self-evident, and their connection to the larger question likewise. Hardt and Negri's discussion of the Multitude in terms of living flesh draws on an organic and vitalist vocabulary, in which the potential of the Multitude results from their expansive fecundity.[2] But Hardt and Negri also call this flesh "an artificial life," and it is in this artificiality that my second set of three terms are linked.[3] I will, I hope, make the precise connection between the three terms clear later, through a discussion of

1 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations* (New York: Schoken Books, 1968), 257.
2 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 192.
3 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 192.

Benjamin's own search for revolutionary potential. The point is to show that severing the link between a transformative potential and a vitalist organicism gives us another way to think through this "crisis of Marxism."

For Marx, potential is visible in the moment of production, in the ability of labor-power to produce more than it costs for it to reproduce itself. Thus the ontology of potential gets worked out in Marx's discussion of the position of labor within the production process. In Volume One of *Capital*, much of this analysis takes place at a high level of abstraction; one exception is Marx's discussion of the development of the labor market, the supply and demand of labor relative to the accumulation of capital. Or, perhaps it would be better to say, of the condition of the mass of laborers at different moments of capitalist accumulation, as Marx explicitly denies that the "law of supply and demand" can be anything more than an abstraction that functions as an apologetics for capitalism.[4]

Rather than the abstractions favored by political economists who explain away the conditions of the working class as results of local and temporary changes in supply and demand of labor, Marx attempts to find in a detailed examination of the conditions of the working class an underlying logic which gives rise to these conditions. Thus, by studying how Marx chooses to figure the working class in these descriptive passages of *Capital*, we can get access to something like an ontology that underpins his theory. Marx begins in the most baldly factual terms, with the calculations of the minimum amount of food required to sustain life undertaking by the British government in 1862. This is not simply a biological investigation, but rather an element of a materialist sociology of the actual conditions of the working class under capitalism, as he makes

4 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 598.

clear when he remarks with some irony that this dispassionate scientific investigation was "practically confirmed in a surprising manner by its agreement with the miserable quantity of nourishment to which want had forced down the consumption of the cotton operatives" of Lancashire.[5] Marx's interest here in the way in which capitalism, through the process of capital accumulation and the consequent creation of an industrial reserve army, is able to put pressure on the living conditions of the working class. This pressure is not absolutely limitless, but nor does it have simple or absolute natural limits, as Marx draws out by his use of material from philanthropic societies and public health inquiries. Marx refers to the large number of cases in which the amount of food available fell below the minimum required to avoid starvation, but also to the hardship that arises "long before the insufficiency of diet has become a matter of hygienic concern."[6] Here, Marx is referring to the poor conditions of clothing, housing, and "material comfort" into which the working class are forced by low wages.[7]

I refer to this economic compulsion as a "pressure" on living conditions to draw out something implicit in Marx's discussion here, which is that the working class do not appear simply as passive in the face of attempts by employers to reduce wages, but rather as responding in various ways to survive despite low wages, as when Marx quotes a public health report pointing out that "the privation of food is only very reluctantly born, and that as a rule great poorness of diet will only come when other privations have preceded it."[8] The working class here have a certain alterity to capital, constrained but not determined by it; thus, while capital can act on the living conditions of workers by, for example, reducing wages, it meets a certain amount of resistance in doing so. The proletariat are not simply an inert mass that can be manipulated by

5 Marx, *Capital*, 612.
6 Marx, *Capital*, 615. Marx is quoting a public health report of 1864.
7 Marx, *Capital*, 615.
8 Marx, *Capital*, 615.

capital, but an active substance that must be constrained, and, if put under pressure, may push back.

This understanding of the working class as an "elastic"[9] substance subject to compression appears more clearly in Marx's discussion of working class housing. Again, this condition is understood as an effect of capital accumulation that puts pressure on the working class, in a more literal sense this time. "The greater the centralization of means of production, the greater the corresponding heaping together of the laborers, within a given space."[10] It is this heaping together into a constant space which is significant, not just because it produces specific hardships at any given moment, but because it illustrates an underlying tendency of capitalism, a tendency towards on the one hand concentration of capital, and on the other compression of workers, forcing greater and greater numbers into smaller areas and fewer jobs.

Thus, one of the central features of the proletariat identified by Marx is a certain sort of *overcrowding*, which functions both as an empirical description of their condition and something more fundamental. See for instance his description of London:

> [The] Strand, a main thoroughfare of London, may serve as an example of the packing together of human beings in that town.... It will be self-understood that every sanitary measure, which, as has been the case hitherto in London, hunts the labourers from one quarter, by demolishing uninhabitable houses, serves only to crowd them together yet more closely.[11]

This compression of the working class into narrower conditions is an outcome of capital's tendency to produce a surplus of workers. This surplus is not simply a numerical matter, but indicates for Marx a more fundamental excessiveness characteristic of the proletariat. In a mirror-image of capital's drive to always accumulate more than it already has, the proletariat are destined to become more numerous than capital can possibly make use of.[12] Hence Marx's

9 Marx, *Capital*, 380.
10 Marx, *Capital*, 615.
11 Marx, *Capital*, 619.
12 Marx, *Capital*, 600. As Marx says, this is "a contradiction inherent to the movement of capital itself," i.e.,

description of the "*overflow* of the *waves* of the ever fluctuating 'reserve army' or 'relative surplus population.'"[13] Numerical excess takes on some of the characteristics of a force, both powering the development of capitalism and constituting a danger to capitalism.

This understanding of proletarian excess as danger is figured in another way, which brings out another side to the adjective "living" in the description of the proletariat as living labor. Marx on a number of occasions quotes, without endorsement but also without specific criticism, those philanthropists and reformers who connect the crowded conditions of the working class with a contagion which is simultaneously biological and moral. "For years the overcrowding of rural labourers' dwellings have been a matter of deep concern, not only to persons who care for sanitary good, but to persons who care for decent and moral life," Marx quotes a public health report,[14] which goes on to explain:

> In showing how frequently it happens that adult persons of both sexes, married and unmarried, are huddled together in single small sleeping rooms, their reports have carried the conviction that, under the circumstances they describe, decency must always be outraged, and morality of necessity must suffer. Thus, for instance, in the appendix of my last annual report, Dr Ord, reporting on an outbreak of fever at Wing, in Buckinghamshire, mentions how a young man who had come thither from Wingrave with fever, "in the first days of his illness slept in a room with nine other persons."[15]

The "thus" in this paragraph is striking, marking the complete continuity of considerations of sexual morality and public health. What interests me here is the way in which the excess of the proletariat is cast in terms of a specifically biological danger arising out of the living conditions of the working class. And not simply a danger to the working class themselves—the sources Marx draws on continually see this as a public danger that can spread throughout society; the dwellings of the most impoverished of the working class are "the centres from which disease and

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inherent to the dependence of capital on the productive power of living labour.

13 Marx, *Capital*, 620, my emphasis.

14 Marx, *Capital*, 641.

15 Marx, *Capital*, 641-2.

death are distributed amongst those in better circumstances, who have allowed thus to fester in out midst."[16] This danger straddles the strictly biological (contagious diseases), the social considered in biological terms (sexual morality) and a more properly social danger which nonetheless retains a certain biological figuration, as with description of the dangers posed by children in factories if "a number of both sexes, of different ages and dispositions, should be collected together in such a manner that the contagion of example cannot but lead to profligacy and debauchery."[17] Surplus population does not just produce the "dangerous" classes ironically identified by Marx,[18] but the dangerous class as such, the proletariat whose excess marks a contradiction in capitalism. Can we conclude, from the fact that this danger is often described in biological terms, anything more about Marx's general account of capitalism?

I have already intimated that I think this gives us a way of seeing more clearly how Marx understands the labor process, or at least seeing one part of that understanding from a particular angle. From this angle, we can see an ontology of potential as production or creation. This is the Marx who emphasizes the excess of living labor over dead (objectified) labor, where living labor here is distinguished on the one hand as human (as opposed to inorganic fixed capital), and on the other as creative of value (as opposed to inert objectified labor). We see this particularly clearly in Marx's discussion of machinery, where the machine, for all its vast productive power, still depends, for its ability to produce value, on the apparently puny worker caught within it, as, for instance, when Marx writes that

> in the form of machinery, the implements of labour become automatic, things moving and working independent to the workman. They are henceforth an industrial *perpetuum mobile*, that

16 Marx, *Capital*, 621, quoting Public Health, 7th Report.
17 Marx, *Capital*, 709, quoting Eden.
18 "Vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes." (Marx, *Capital*, 602).

> would go on producing forever, did it not meet with certain natural obstructions *in the weak bodies and strong wills of its human attendants*.[19]

In this moment in Marx, then, potential is delineated through the distinction between the living and natural, as against the inorganic and inert, with potential connected closely to a vitalistic account of the expansive power of life.

We can see that this is not simply a coincidence of Marx's expression, but forms a central part of his economic method, first in his straightforward dismissal of the idea that machines *could* be productive of value,[20] but more interestingly in the systematic economic discussion which preceded and prepares the ground for the description of the conditions of overcrowding we have already looked at. It's worth looking in the economic argument in some more detail as it makes clear the central location of this excessive productivity of living labor (here in a double sense, living labor produced by living labor) in Marx's economic account.

Marx begins the section which will develop into the discussion of surplus labor by considering the productivity of labor abstracted from its characteristic excess. Accumulation, as opposed to simple reproduction of capital is possible because of the productivity of the working class, that is, the fact that they can produce a surplus value which can be appropriated by the capitalist, producing an increase of capital. This produces an expansion not just of capital as object, but of the capital relation, the employment of labor by capital; in the simplest case, "the demand for labour and the subsistence-fund of the labourers clearly increase in the same proportion as capital, and the more rapidly the more rapidly the capital increases."[21] This production which remains in proportion is a stable form of expansion, and is not dangerous to

19 Marx, *Capital*, 380, my emphasis. It's worth pointing out that in the chapter on machines, we can also find another perspective on Marx which seems opposed to this vitalist perspective, and which we will see more of later.
20 Marx, *Capital*, 368n1.
21 Marx, *Capital*, 575.

capital or beneficial to the workers, quite the reverse, it is this productivity on which labor's subjection to capital depends:

> Reproduction of a mass of labour-power, which must incessantly re-incorporate itself with capital for that capital's self-expansion; which cannot get free from capital, and whose enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom it sells itself, this reproduction of labour-power forms, in fact, an essential of the reproduction of capital itself.[22]

This is not the end of the story, however, because it does not take into account the tendency of capital to convert an increasing proportion of the surplus value into fixed, rather than variable capital, a "growth in the mass of means of production, as compared with *the mass of the labour-power that vivifies them*."[23] It is at this point in the analysis that the productivity of labor becomes an excessive productivity, which is to say, the proletariat takes on the character of an absolute excess. Labor, in the production of the capital relation, also produces labor itself in an ever increasing excess over that demanded by capital, "an apparently absolute increase of the labouring population, an increase always moving more rapidly than that of the variable capital or means of employment."[24] The excess of living labor, then, lies at the heart of Marx's economic analysis.

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* contains a repeated motif in which the city is connected with certain forms of lifelessness, with the inorganic and the dead.[25] So we might expect to find in Benjamin the same account as in Marx of the city as inorganic container of an increasingly boundless life. But this is not what we find in Benjamin at all. Rather, in Benjamin, lifelessness expands to cover the whole of the city, leaving no space for the teaming life we find in Marx. The image that seems to govern Benjamin's account of the city is one drawn from classical

22 Marx, *Capital*, 575-6.
23 Marx, *Capital*, 583, my emphasis.
24 Marx, *Capital*, 590.
25 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). References in the body text are to this work.

sources, and which occurs at the end of the convolute on ancient Paris: the immemorial myth of the deserted city.

> We read of renowned cities in which the streets have become empty, crumbling shells, where the cattle browse in forum and gymnasium, and the amphitheater is a sown field, dotted with emergent statues and herms. Rome had in the fifth century of our era the population of a village, but its imperial palaces were still habitable. (100, quoting Spengler)

This absence of life from the city is not, however, a feature only of ancient cities for Benjamin, at least not in the sense of cities of the past; rather it is a feature of our own "ancient" cities, at the latest point of their development, something produced by the capitalist modernization that, in Marx, produces the excess of life. Benjamin writes that "The new desolation of Paris ... is an essential moment in the image of modernity,"[26] cross referencing this to a passage in the *Arcades* discussing the redevelopment of Paris in the wake of Hausmann (104). To underscore the way in which this absence of life is not simply a contingent absence but a definite production, we can look at the way in which Benjamin locates death at the center of the city. He describes the city as a "labyrinth," which

> includes, as one would expect, an image of the minotaur at its center. That he brings death to the individual is not the essential fact. What is crucial is the image of the deadly power he embodies. And this, too, for inhabitants of the great cities, is something new.[27]

And this "minotaur" at the center is not merely a presence, but something more like a fundamental principle. The essentially deathly nature of the city is made clear in Benjamin's quotation of a description of Baudelaire imagining the cemeteries of Paris as "three other cities within the larger one," which might appear to be only insignificant sites within a city of the living, but are "in reality much more populous, with their closely packed little compartments arranged in tiers under the ground," (99, quoting Porché). It's interesting that this account of the

26 Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 169.
27 Benjamin, "Central Park," 189.

numerical superiority of the dead occurs directly after a quotation which figures the living population of Paris by analogy with the flow of water through the city, allowing the author to describe the population as "overflowing" in a manner reminiscent of the passages from Marx we looked at earlier (99, quoting Romains). Baudelaire functions as a response to this idea, and the dominance of the dead city over the living is confirmed by Baudelaire's location of death right in the heart of the living city, "in the same place where the crowd circulates" (99, quoting Porché). Against (or rather, under) the superficial life of the city, Baudelaire "evokes the ancient ossuaries, now leveled or entirely gone, swallowed up in the sea of time with all their dead, like ships that have sunk with all their crew aboard" (99, quoting Porché).

Here we can see that the absence of life from the Benjamin's Paris is not simply due to a narrowness in his focus or a failure on his part to pay attention to a life which might exist alongside or in opposition to death. Rather, Benjamin shows how death insinuates itself within the apparent life of the city, placing what seems to be life under the sign of death. This is the significance (or part of the significance) of the connection Benjamin draws between the arcades and the underworld. "One knew of certain places in ancient Greece where the way lead down to the underworld," and likewise the world of the dead underlies the modern city, its portals everywhere within "the labyrinth of urban dwellings," openings that "issue unremarked onto the streets" (84). It is precisely the arcades, the most crowded locations within the city, which provide this threshold to the underworld; precisely by expressing the character of the city most clearly, they make visible this connection that can be overlooked elsewhere.

In Paris in particular, this connection is physically instantiated in the catacombs under the city. Benjamin tells us that, in the middle ages, "clever persons" acted as guides to the catacombs, showing visitors the home of "the Devil in his infernal majesty" (85). Benjamin

immediately moves to remark on a feature of the catacombs that may appear entirely separate, but which I hope to show in the course of the rest of this paper in fact has a close connection. The underworld, the "subterranean city had its uses, for those who knew their way around it" (85). The use of this "technological system of tunnels and thoroughfares" is transport or communication, in both commerce and revolution (85). This communication is unrestricted, "Its streets cut through the great customs barriers," and uncontrollable, spreading rumor "in times of public commotion," and, it was suspected, allowing Louis XVI to flee Paris (85).

Benjamin finds in the catacombs a conjunction of two features with particular revolutionary potential: the subterranean and the communicative. Hidden formation and transmission of alternatives is what allows for the sudden appearance of the revolution.[28] The nature of this conjunction in subterranean Paris can be seen from Benjamin's quotation of Dumas's idle speculation (which, contextualized by Benjamin, becomes a fervent hope, or a prophecy) that "one day the inhabitants of the Left Bank will awaken startled to discover the mysteries below" (98). In fact, Benjamin suggests that this awaken has already happened once, in the mania for discovering catacombs that overtook Paris during the Commune: "Everywhere people thought they were finding buried vaults and catacombs" (99, quoting Laronze). The city of the dead that lies under Paris, that is, is also a site of communication in which lies the possibility of revolution.

The figure that connects the inorganic, communication, and revolution is the commodity. The first two are clearly visible in Marx's discussion of the commodity that opens *Capital*. The question Marx is considering here is the genesis of the curious non-natural properties of the

28 This would be a fruitful subject for investigation in its own right, of course, but here I will just gesture towards the remarks on dreams (the hidden precursor of great revolutionary deeds) and on the dialectical image (its sudden realization) and confine myself to one quotation: "The realization of dream elements in the course of waking is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian" (464).

commodity, the value of which "not an atom of matter enters into its composition."[29] The property that makes objects into commodities is exchange value, because they are "repositories of value" as well as objects of utility.[30] What makes it possible to view all commodities as likewise repositories of value is their comparability, the reduction of their different qualities to differences in quantity, the "common 'something'"[31] that allows them to participate in an indefinite chain of equivalences: "A given commodity, *e.g.* a quarter of wheat is exchanged for x blacking, y silk, or z gold, &c."[32]

It is the "&c" that I am interested in here. The generalized exchangeability of the commodity brings it into "communication" not only with those things which it is actually exchanged for, but with anything it *could* be exchanged for;[33] indeed, we could say that as soon as an object becomes a commodity it has already been exchanged for every other commodity in potentiality. It is this entry of the commodity into a boundless circulation that makes it a privileged figure of what I have been calling communication, a generalized transmission which seems to be a form of possibility other than the creative overflowing of life.

This can be seen more clearly by looking at the way in which, as Marx develops the generalized exchangeability of the commodity, he also draws an increasing distance between the commodity and the organic. In the "elementary" form of exchange, the value of one commodity is expressed in the form of another determinate commodity.[34] Here, as in barter, the equivalent commodity is considered as a determinate product of labor. However, what makes commodity exchange different from barter is that this equation also implies the possibility of equivalence

29 Marx, *Capital*, 54.
30 Marx, *Capital*, 54.
31 Marx, *Capital*, 45.
32 Marx, *Capital*, 44.
33 Marx, *Capital*, 48.
34 Marx, *Capital*, 55.

with a range of indeterminate commodities, the "&c" of the "total or expanded form of value."[35] Here we have one step of abstraction—the commodity's value is no longer viewed as due to its equivalence with some specific product of specific labor, but to any product of the same amount of (abstract) labor: "it is a matter of indifference under what particular form, or kind, of use value it appears."[36] But this indeterminate equivalent is "incomplete because the series representing it is indeterminable." The commodity only assumes its full form when this indeterminate equivalent is replaced by a determinate equivalent, but no longer an equivalent considered as a mere from assumed by labor time, but an equivalent *itself* considered as a commodity. In the general form, value no longer makes any direct reference to labor time. Unlike the elementary and total forms of value, which demonstrate the exchange value of the commodity by distinguishing it from use value (and thereby maintain a reference to use value, a concrete product of concrete labor), in the general form, the exchange value of one commodity is given by distinguishing it from the exchange value of other commodities. The commodity here is now apparently liberated from any reference to use value: "The general form ... results from the joint action of the whole world of commodities *and from that alone*."[37] It is by this operation of abstraction, which renders the commodity subsistent and wholly inorganic, that "commodities are, for the first time, effectively brought into relation with one another as values," that their absolutely unbounded exchangeability, or communicability, is produced.[38]

Hence the relationship between communication and the inorganic; but what of the third term, revolution? We need to turn now to Benjamin, who spies in this unbounded communication a certain revolutionary possibility. Benjamin makes the cryptic remark that "The world exhibitions

35 Marx, *Capital*, 68.
36 Marx, *Capital*, 69.
37 Marx, *Capital*, 71, my emphasis.
38 Marx, *Capital*, 71.

were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value" (201). What is the nature of this empathy? The key point seems to be that, the world exhibitions, unlike earlier trade fairs, where designed for the display as much or even more than the sale of commodities (187). Thus (apart from the theoretically more obvious, but perhaps practically less visible, fact of their material poverty), the masses were barred from consumption and at the same time the commodity was barred from being consumed, appearing more purely in its general form, in relation to other commodities with no reduction to use value. Thus it displayed only its exchangeability and communicability, at the same time as the masses, traveling from all over the world (or all over Europe, at least) to visit the exhibition, perceived *themselves* as a communicable mass. In this aspect, the masses do not stand apart from commodities, having an external relationship as producers or consumers of use value; the production of commodities by capitalism also leads to the production of a new form of subjectivity for the proletariat, a subjectivity construed, like the commodity, as boundless communication. It is in this sense, then, that the exhibition, "born from the wish to amuse the working classes ... becomes for them a festival of emancipation" (180, quoting Engländer).

This emancipation is the same emancipation for the proletariat that free trade provides for the commodity, the possibilities implied by movement and commonality. From the beginning, the world exhibitions were conceived by at least some members of the working class as providing new opportunities for political organization (182); this was also recognized by the authorities as a potential danger; the concern was that "foreigners," meaning those workers circulating free from their native countries, their organic communities, would "proclaim a red republic" (190), and workers delegations were banned from the second world exhibition in Paris (182).

This new subjectivity, in which the proletariat acquire the qualities proper to the commodity also appears in contexts less directly related to political activity, in which the production of an inorganic proletariat appears even more clearly: in advertising. Benjamin writes that, "In Jugendstil we see, for the first time, the integration of the human body in advertising" (186). Advertising is the medium through which the commodity form comes to dominate not just exchange in the narrowly economic sphere, but the structure of sociality more generally. The advert, like the working class, is "emancipated" (176) and begins to cover the entire city (177). Benjamin suggests that this is not simply an unchallenged hegemony of capitalism over the psychic and cultural. Rather, as the form of the commodity spreads further from the economy, it takes on a more ambiguous character, becoming a form in which alternatives to capitalism can be articulated, as well as the form through which capitalism is reinforced.

We can see an inkling of this, I think, in Benjamin's remark that "The advertisement is the ruse by which the dream forces itself on industry" (171). Advertising here is not forced *by* industry on anything, which is what we might have expected from the discussion of the increasing inability of art to catch up with technology that immediately precedes this remark. Instead, however, the possibilities provided by increasingly rapid technological change allow the advert to be forced *on* industry. In advertising, the exchangeability of the commodity becomes a way of increasing the distribution of the dream, "the most lustrous and colorful of silks," which, to carry from the realm of sleep to waking world be "to turn the lining of time to the outside" (105-6). This is the possibility held out by advertising, hence its revolutionary potential.

In the form of advertising, the logic of the commodity becomes available for widespread use, and thus allows revolutionary projects to be projected beyond any determinate limits, as with the surrealists who "treat words like trade names, and their texts are, at bottom, a form of prospectus

for enterprises not yet off the ground" (173). Hence the connection Benjamin draws between advertising and utopianism, as in his discussion of a poster for "Bullrich Salt," which he describes as "an image of the everyday in Utopia" (174). Likewise the importance of the "comic-cosmic style of Grandville" to advertising (175), in which the entire universe is comprehended as immediately accessible, "the milky way appears as an avenue illuminated at night by gaslamps" (64). Advertising allows for the generalized distribution of this kind of unrestricted imagination; the universality of the commodity is put to work for other ends.

One of these other purposes is political propaganda. The forms of advertising, particularly the poster, appear to have a particular affinity with the needs of political agitation, as with the "multitude of placards" during the 1848 revolution, which appears as almost indistinguishable from the crowd of *people* involved in spreading the news of the revolution, the "public criers" and "thousands and thousands of Parisians" who became news-vendors (177, quoting Engländer). Again, we see the form of the commodity, in its genericity and expansive communication, transposed into political subjectivity. The inorganic abstraction of the commodity, now in the form of advertising representations, makes possible the subject we are told is the author of the posters of 1848, "Monsieur Everyone" (179, quoting Delrau). This is not a flesh-and-blood person, but an inorganic subject and, like the commodity, not just an abstraction, but an inorganicism that is materially produced.

Benjamin also discusses this process of production, in which the human is recreated as inorganic. The figure under which he describes this operation of the inorganic on and in the human body is fashion, which "creates hybrids; it imposes on the human being the profile of an animal. ... Fashion thus invents an artificial humanity which is not the passive decoration of a formal environment, but that very environment itself" (80, quoting Focillon). The production of

the inorganic here takes place through a relation of the body to technology, whether that is in the velodrome, where "the figure of the woman assumed its most seductive aspect: as cyclist" (62), or in the factories, where the body is formed by the needs of machines.[39]

The example of the cyclist is already enough to show that this action of the inorganic is not limited to the workplace, but Benjamin goes on to show the insertion of the inorganic much deeper into human existence. In his description of the "hallmark" of fashion in the Second Empire as being "to intimate a body that has never known full nakedness," Benjamin locates the anti-organic character of fashion at the center of sexuality. I don't think it would be misleading to consider sexuality as one of the central loci of a certain conception of vitalism, both in connection to biological reproduction and to discourses of immorality and contagion. It is precisely in relation to sexuality as organic, however, that Benjamin positions fashion as the harbinger of the inorganic in the form of the commodity: "fashion has opened the business of dialectical exchange between woman and ware—between carnal pleasure and the corpse" (62). Fashion, by way of sexuality, establishes the inorganic within the organic:

> In fetishism, sex does away with the boundaries separating the organic world from the inorganic. Clothing and jewelry are its allies. It is as much at home with what is dead as with living flesh. The latter, moreover, shows it the way to establish itself in the former.... Fashion is only another way of enticing it [sexuality] into the universe of matter. (69)

Sex is transformed into dead matter, and the inorganic power of the commodity form becomes the principle animating humanity.

It is in this sense that "every fashion couples the living body to the inorganic world" (79). However, this is by no means an equal exchange, but instead marks a re-creation of what had been living in the form of the dead.[40] "Every fashion stands in opposition to the organic,"

39 Marx, *Capital*, 359.
40 See, for instance, the artificial reproduction of "nature" in fashion at 69.

Benjamin writes, and furthermore, "To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse" (79). Through "the sex appeal of the inorganic," fashion joins life to death in a way which is not a simple harmony, but something very different (79). Benjamin writes that in fashion both birth and death are *aufgehoben*, that is, overcome or transfigured; in both cases, human life is reproduced as something non-living.

It is from this transformation of life into unlife that the "eccentric, revolutionary" possibilities of fashion arise (68). This process of non-biological reproduction acts throughout the social world, eradicating completely the organic human and producing instead a proletariat with the limitless, mobile possibility that first appeared in the guise of the commodity. Fashion thus produces a certain sort of freedom, or, better, fashion prepares the way for revolution.

> At the bottom these things are simultaneously free and unfree. It is a twilight zone where necessity and humor interpenetrate.... The more fantastic a form, the more intensely the clear and ironic consciousness works by the side of the servile will. And this consciousness guarantees that the folly will not last; the more consciousness grows, the nearer comes the time when it acts, when it turns to deed, when it throws off the fetters. (68, quoting Vischer)

Through his painstaking study of the conceptual landscape of the 19th century, then, Benjamin poses new questions to those of us looking for the material of revolution, and perhaps, somewhere in the labyrinth of the *Arcades Project*, he answers them. His approach stands opposed to two currents within Marx that have been central to much of Marxism. The first is the temptation to look for alternatives to capitalism in an exterior, in something which capitalism cannot appropriate. As Balibar points out, in *Capital* Marx almost always discusses transformations *from* capitalism alongside the transformation *to* capitalism, which we could read as implying that anti-capitalist possibilities depend on that which is never fully transformed into capitalism.[41] For all their optimism about the new possibilities for revolution provided by

41 Etienne Balibar, "In Search of the Proletariat" in his *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 126.

contemporary forms of capitalism, it is not clear if Hardt and Negri, for instance, remain within this strand of Marxism or not; while the Multitude is in some sense produced by Empire, it also appears to be exterior to it. This is very different from what we find in Benjamin, where the revolutionary potential of the proletariat grows the more they appropriate the forms of capital.

The second approach Benjamin questions is the equation of the opposition between capital and proletariat to an opposition between the inorganic and the organic. Benjamin rejects this opposition, again locating revolutionary potential right at the heart of capital's power, the inorganic commodity. In both cases, Benjamin's audacious move is to suggest that the precisely what makes capital stronger is what provides the strength of the proletariat, reminiscent of Negri's claim that "The weakest link of capitalism is its strongest link."[42] And here, certainly, we find a new way of conceptualizing potential for revolution. This novelty is a challenge, a call to find new forms of political organization that do not succumb to a melancholy desire for an authentic anti-capitalism somewhere "outside," but find glory in our position enmeshed right in the heart of capital, the only position from which we, ourselves, can produce the artificiality that is communism.

42 Quoted in Alex Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," *International Socialism Journal* 92 (2001).

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