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The Turn to the Political: Post-Marxism and Marx's Critique of Politics

By

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Abstract

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Recent political theorists have emphasize the importance of the concept of the political, and criticized earlier theorists, especially Marxists, for dissolving the political in other concepts, especially reducing politics to economics. Marx, however, did not reduce the political to the economic, but instead subjected the category of the political to a sophisticated critique, in his early work, which influenced the direction of all his later work. Following Marx's critique of politics, this dissertation argues against the autonomy of the political, and proposes a political theory which sees politics as inseparable from a wider social and economic context.

The dissertation begins with a discussion of four post-Marxist authors, Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, who respond to perceived problems in Marxism (particularly the Marxism of Althusser) by emphasizing the autonomy of the political. It then traces Marx's critique of politics throughout his work, beginning with his early identification of the separation of the political and the economic as a "practical illusion," a kind of appearance which is not simply a pretense or error, but which has material effects. The dissertation then discusses how Marx developed this account of the relationship between politics and appearance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Communist Manifesto*, before turning to Marx's most sophisticated analysis of the logic of appearance, the identification of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the implications of Marx's critique of politics for contemporary political theory.

The analysis of post-Marxism and of Marx in this dissertation, then, shows the limitations of the turn to the political, and the ways in which a focus on the political as an autonomous sphere produces a political theory that is incapable of understanding the richness of politics. The reading of Marx also demonstrates a better approach to political theory, one which, through an analysis of politics as appearance, reveals the many intersections and imbrications of the apparently political and the supposedly non-political. In many ways, this analysis is only the beginning, the announcement of a further research program which would found political theory not on the political alone, but on politics, economics, aesthetics and all the other fields into which our discussion of political

concepts might take us. Such an investigation could draw on Marxist and non-Marxist theories, being limited neither by the purified notion of politics of post-Marxist, nor by the parochial textualism of too much Marxist theory. What this dissertation proposes is a reconceptualization of political theory which, by rejecting the autonomy of the political, is able to pay full attention to the richness of politics.

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Introduction

On August 6, 2011, following the shooting of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan police, riots broke out in Tottenham, North London, which spread sporadically over the next seven days to other areas of London and other cities in England. The riots and the looting that followed were widely condemned for violence and lawlessness, but in addition some (including some on the left who spoke positively of the political significance of earlier London riots), chose to criticize these riots for being apolitical.¹ Why was the political or otherwise nature of these events the ground on which people chose to make their critique? Why has “apolitical” become a term of abuse, and “political” a term of praise, particularly for those on the left? This is hardly an isolated incident: the decline of the political is a common complaint on the left, with the political apparently being wiped out by economics or technocracy, sometimes combined under the name “neoliberalism.” In this dissertation, I will consider what I call a “turn to the political,” in which the political has come to be seen by a number of left-wing theorists as a crucial theoretical category, with one of the most pressing theoretical tasks being the defense of the idea of the autonomy of the political. I ask how “the political” came to be the site of such investment for left-wing political theorists, as well as how it came to seem so fragile, such that the protection or reinvigoration of the political came to be seen as an essential task for political theory.

The “turn to the political,” that is, a position that values the political by sharply distinguishing politics, on the basis of certain essential characteristics, from the non-political, produces its own political problems. A definition which draws a sharp line between political and non-political, risks missing the political significance of events and activities which, intertwined with the supposedly non-political, fall outside the strictly-drawn lines of the political. The case with which I opened, the 2011 UK riots, is one example where a strict definition of politics led theorists to miss the significance of events, but such cases seem to be increasingly the norm. If politics is tied to particular organizations (parties, unions), particular sites (legislatures, the media) or particular forms of action (from electoral participation to petitions and demonstrations), the political seems to be a contracting and ever less relevant sphere. From the new social movements of the 70s and 80s (criticized as apolitical for their focus on single issues) to the anti-globalization movement of the 90s and early 2000s (criticized as apolitical for its unwillingness to unite issues into a coherent critique of contemporary institutions), to the occupy encampments which arose in US and Euro-

¹See Swallow, “Politicians Condemn Tottenham Riots”, as well as Bauman’s claim that those involved in the riots exhibited literally no subjective agency at all, that their minds contained only “the explanations they heard on TV and read in the papers,” and so the events can only be explained in terms of causes, not meanings, “can be only explained in terms of ‘because of’, not in terms of ‘in order to’” (Bauman, “Fuels, Sparks and Fires”, 12).

pean cities in 2011-12 (criticized as apolitical for their unwillingness to make demands or express a positive vision of the society they desired), the last few decades have been characterized by collective action in opposition to the prevailing organization of society in ways which are not fully or at least not straightforwardly captured by definitions of the political. A political theory which is concerned with maintaining the distinctiveness of the category of the political by purifying that category, by determining precisely what is political and what is not, prevents us from seeing these movements as political, and in particular it prevents us from considering that it might be their “impurity,” their combination of political, social, economic, and other tropes, which allows them to *be* political.

The disconnection of politics from a consideration of society and the economy explains why the turn to the political is a problem for political theory. A political theory predicated on the autonomy of the political encourages us to explain political concepts only by reference to other concepts which we can be sure are also political; indeed, any attempt to relate politics to non-political categories comes to be viewed with suspicion, as involving a reduction of the political to some other, non-political, sphere. My view, which I will attempt to substantiate throughout this dissertation, is that any satisfactory investigation into politics will involve explaining how what appear to be political concepts are necessarily related to other, less obviously political, concepts. This is not a reductivist move, because the apparently non-political concepts imbricated with politics are no more purely non-political than political concepts are purely and solely political. If politics involves action, that action takes place in a world, and that world cannot be explained solely in political terms, so any adequate theory of politics will need to be open to all the categories and areas of study necessary to understand the world in which political action takes place. We cannot say anything useful about justice without considering the economic organizations which control distribution, nor can we say anything useful about power without considering the institutions through which power is exercised, nor about identities without considering the histories which have produced and continue to ascribe these identities. The turn to the political, by focusing our attention on politics considered as autonomous, encourages us to forget these necessary supplements to our political categories.

In this dissertation, then, I will explain why the categories of the political cannot be treated as self-contained, and I will give some examples of analyses of political concepts which take us outside of the sphere of the political. I will proceed in these two tasks through a reading of Marx, a methodological choice which requires some explanation. The initial reason for engaging with Marx is that a number of the authors who advocate a turn to the political have a background in the Marxist tradition, that is to say, the turn to the political, at least in one of its forms, is a broadly post-Marxist project. Four of these post-Marxist authors—Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière—provide me with the model of the turn to the political which I will explore throughout the dissertation.

Considering the relationship of Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière to Marx is useful in understanding their reasons for emphasizing the autonomy of the political, but it turns out that Marx’s work is also useful in providing an alternative to the post-Marxist turn to the political, and it is this alternative that I explore for most of the dissertation. The reason Marx’s work is helpful in constructing an alternative to a narrow focus on the autonomy of the political is that a critique

of the autonomy of the political runs through his work, from his early critique of young Hegelian theories of political emancipation, to his mature critique of political economy. Furthermore, this critique of the autonomy of the political is not a straightforward rejection of the political or a reduction of politics to something else, as is sometimes charged. Rather, for Marx, while politics is not in fact autonomous, modern society does *present* politics as autonomous, and this presentation is itself an important part of how modern politics functions; so the autonomy of the political cannot merely be wished away or explained away as a mistake, but must be understood through reference to the wider social organization in which politics is embedded. Much of Marx's work is taken up with developing the concepts required to explain the curious status of politics, and so his work is useful in developing a political theory with a more expansive understanding of politics, the kind of political theory I argue that we need, which does not sequester political concepts out of reach of economic or other considerations. The diversity of Marx's work—which spans philosophical debates with the young Hegelians, histories of contemporary revolutionary moments, manifestos, and critical engagements with political economists—provides us with opportunities to consider Marx's expansive understanding of politics from a number of different angles, while we can also observe the development of the concepts he used to understand the inseparability of politics and economics.

In pursuing this reading of Marx on the political this dissertation also presents an example of how we can read Marx in a post-Marxist era, and proposes some reasons why we might want to. The intellectual current called post-Marxism has typically been concerned with disentangling itself from Marxism. Post-Marxist authors, although they acknowledge the influence of Marxism, are concerned not to have the tradition of Marxism weigh on their minds like a nightmare, determining and constraining their thoughts. Sim, in his intellectual history of post-Marxism, writes of post-Marxism issuing from a certain “incredulity” towards Marxism, an unwillingness to let a supposedly Marxist fidelity to Marx always set the terms of debate. Sim quotes Lyotard to give a flavor of this incredulity:

We no longer want to correct Marx, to reread him or read him in the sense that the little Althusserians would like to “read Capital”: to interpret it according to “its truth.” We have no plan to be true, to give the truth of Marx, we wonder what there is of the libido in Marx, and “in Marx” means in his text or in his interpretations, mainly in practices. We will rather treat him as a “work of art.”²

I admit to feeling a certain incredulity towards this account of incredulity itself: was there ever really a time when discussions took place in anything other than “a world of competing narratives, where Marx's would be merely one amongst many”?³ Of course, there are good reasons why post-Marxists have felt themselves to be writing in opposition to a monolithic and totalizing Marxism, which I explore in some detail in chapter 1, but the point I want to make here is that the existence of this totalizing Marxism is a feature of a particular time. I first read Marx in 1997,

²Lyotard, quoted in Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 109.

³Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 109. Sim himself complicates the idea of Marxist discussions as containing a single narrative, pointing out Marxism's “de facto” pluralism; but admittedly all these plural strands of Marxism attempt to legitimate themselves on the same ground, that of fidelity to Marx (Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 5).

five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and so my reading of Marx is post-Marxist in the most banal and inescapable sense—I am reading Marx after “Marxism” ceased to be something with an active presence in the world. This is not to deny the valuable contributions of Marxist authors to our understanding of Marx, or to deny the importance of understanding Marxism as a historical phenomenon in understanding these authors. But the inescapability of my own post-Marxist location requires a different reading of Marx from that provided by authors such as Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, for whom post-Marxism as a theoretical orientation is a matter of (sometimes contentious) choice.

Readings of Marx in this post-Marxist era have tended to be defensive in one of two ways. Those who identify as post-Marxists are keen to defend themselves from what they see as the dead weight of the Marxist tradition, and so their readings of Marx are always on guard against what they take to be the worst aspects of that tradition: essentialism, determinism, totalization. The worry of post-Marxists is that, unless they exercise great care in their use of ideas from Marx, they risk unwittingly bringing these flaws of the Marxist tradition into their own work.⁴ This worry is particularly marked in post-Marxist discussions of the political, as post-Marxists hold that the Marxist tradition, including Marx himself, has at best neglected and at worst actively sought to marginalize, politics. Post-Marxist readings of Marx thus seek to defend the political from Marxism.

Readings of Marx from those who consider themselves not to be post-Marxist but still to be Marxist, on the other hand, have tended to react to what they see as post-Marxist “betrayal” of Marxism⁵ by seeking to defend Marx from those who would distort or reject him. This emphasis on reading Marx in order to defend him too often leads to hermetic or parochial readings of Marx in which Marx’s texts are treated as objects to be understood in a purely self-contained way, and attempts to draw Marx into conversation with contemporary authors and concerns are treated as at best irrelevant and at worst suspect. Of course, many have responded to our post-Marxist era by not reading Marx at all, or by treating him as a figure of only historical or antiquarian interest.

My goal in this dissertation is to demonstrate a reading of Marx which is not defensive (in which I neither defend Marx, nor defend myself *from* Marx), and in doing so to present a case for the relevance of reading Marx. Throughout his career Marx engaged in a critique of politics, and so all his work is animated by an investigation of a category which is, by definition, central to political theory. Further, Marx’s own conception of politics is expansive, seeing connections between politics and both the lived experience of modern subjects and the organizing structures of the capitalist economy. This expansive conception of politics leads Marx to develop a political theory which is similarly expansive, and so a reading of Marx is of broader interest than might be supposed from reading those Marxists who focus solely on specific technical (and typically economic) minutiae of his work. Reading Marx can help us see that, whatever approach we take to analyzing politics, and whichever categories we take to be central to that analysis, our analysis will be incomplete if we restrict it solely to these political categories. I have argued above, and will continue to argue in some detail in the body of the dissertation, that the focus on the autonomy of

⁴This fear of the unintended consequences of their readings of Marx marks post-Marxist readings as what Sedgwick calls “paranoid readings” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading”, 130).

⁵Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 39.

the political which I call “the turn to the political” is a problem for political theory. Beginning with a discussion of a group of post-Marxist authors who focus on the political, I trace the critique of politics through Marx in order to suggest what political theory could look like, and what it might accomplish, if it embraced the non-autonomy of the political.

In chapter 1, I attempt to explain the origins of this defensiveness, at least for a group of post-Marxists who began their work within the orbit of Althusser. I trace how the perception that Althusser’s theory was incapable of accounting for change and subjective agency arose, and how “the political” came to be the name for the theoretical category which was to resolve this difficulty. Some problems with these post-Althusserian accounts of the political motivate a reconsideration of Marx’s critique of politics, which I undertake in chapter 2. Through a discussion of *On the Jewish Question* and the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, I take issue with views, such as that of Avineri, which see Marx as criticizing the political sphere as unreal, as opposed to the reality of civil society. Instead, I argue that Marx saw the distinction between state and civil society as a “practical illusion,” and it is this concept of an appearance which is false but at the same time real which guides the reading of Marx’s subsequent work in the later chapters.

In chapter 3, I turn to the relation between politics and appearance by considering the work in which Marx addresses this relationship most explicitly: the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. I argue that the category of appearance allows for the articulation of material circumstances and political agency which contemporary authors often label “performativity,” but unlike post-structuralist understandings of performativity, Marx’s theory is aesthetic rather than linguistic. However, the theory of politics and appearance leaves two main questions unanswered: the relationship between appearance and agency and the relationship between appearance and materiality. The first of these is explored in chapter 4, through a consideration of the figuration of futurity in the *Communist Manifesto*, in which I contrast spectrality (an appearance of the future in the present, drawn from Derrida’s reading of Marx) which enables agency, to both the determinism sometimes attributed to Marx and the voluntarism of Laclau’s critique of Marx.

The relationship between appearance and materiality is the subject of chapter 5 on *Capital*, in which I read the theory of commodity fetishism as a theory of material appearances (Marx’s final development of the theme of “practical illusion”). This leads to an interpretation of the later parts of *Capital* as based on a reciprocal process of appearance and witness, which is the process—neither simply political nor simply economic—within which Marx places the proletarian political organization of his time, which Marx was, throughout his career, struggling to grasp. The final chapter takes this understanding drawn from Marx and uses it in an attempt to understand the contemporary intermingling of politics and economics; this attempt to relate Marx to contemporary debates proceeds by a discussion of the limitations of post-Marxist focuses on the political, and some trends within today’s political thought which may be more useful.

“Politics” is, inescapably, a central term in political theory. While a number of recent political theorists (including those I will discuss in detail, Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière) have thematized the importance of the category of the political to political theory, they have tended to approach the category itself uncritically: they have assumed that the political is unified and self-contained, that politics can and indeed must be studied with a theory that attends solely to the political. This dissertation argues for a critical account of politics, one which rejects the au-

tonomy of the political and with it the idea that we can ever nail down exactly what is political and what isn't; rather, any investigation of political concepts involves discussing how these concepts are embedded in what we had previously thought was non-political. Further, this dissertation demonstrates the possibility of providing a critical account of politics by finding such an account in Marx. Marx's work, when read in his light, thus functions as an example of the sort of political theory that can we derive from a critical reformulation of one of the central categories of political theory, and ends by indicating how this reformulation of politics provides us with new ways of approaching the tasks and methods of political theory.

Chapter 1

Post-Althusserian Turns to the Political

There is a consensus that we live in what is, or threatens to become, a post-political epoch. The end of politics continues to be both hoped for and announced by politicians and pundits. Politics ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, ended again with the election of the post-ideological Bill Clinton in 1992; again, with George W. Bush's self-description as a "uniter, not a divider";¹ and politics seemed to have ended once again in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama, who proposes that "we are all connected as one people," in opposition to "the spin masters and negative ad peddlers" who "are preparing to divide us."² That the end of politics continues to be announced so triumphantly after politics has already ended so many times might lead one to wonder how final this "end" actually is; however, much left critical theory has not expressed such scepticism, but has rather seen the repeated invocations of the end of politics as being a warning that politics is under threat, that a process of depoliticization is occurring. For many of these theorists, struggling against this depoliticization and effecting a return of the political is one of the most vital tasks facing the contemporary left.

This chapter concerns a subset of left responses to depoliticization, those who approach the subject from a broadly Marxist background.³ As Marxists, including these authors, have been and continue to be involved in political activity, it may seem surprising that they are expressing

¹In a 1999 interview, Bush amplified on this catchphrase of his campaign, explaining that this meant he "refuse[d] to play the politics of putting people into groups and pitting one group against another" (Horowitz, "I'm a Uniter, Not a Divider").

²Quotations from Obama's 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention. Of course the trope of the decline of politics has a much longer history than this, occurring in discussions of the post-war welfarist consensus and late nineteenth and early twentieth century discussions of liberalism, not to mention Strauss's contention (echoed by Rancière) that politics did not survive past Socrates (Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 27).

³Indeed, it concerns a subset of this subset, those who accept "the dominant perception of Marxism as first and foremost a theory of systematic transformation, one which necessitates supplementing by specifically 'political' theories of antagonism, hegemony and subjectivation" (Toscano, "Chronicles of Insurrection", 78). Toscano points out that the Italian "workerist" tradition rejects this interpretation of Marxism as an "economic" theory in need of a "political" supplement (this would include authors such as Agamben, Hardt, Negri and Virno). I will also not consider authors who, though they reject what they consider to be Marxism's economic determinism, do not explicitly propose that this can be replaced with a discrete and separate sphere of the political; foremost among these authors are Hindess and Hirst, whose relation to post-Marxism is discussed in detail in Sim, *Post-Marxism*, ch. 4.

concerns about the decline of politics. Dean suggests that these authors confuse the failure of Marxist politics in the past 30 years with a more epochal decline of politics *tout court*. The idea that politics is in decline is attractive to Marxists and post-Marxists, according to Dean, because a grand narrative of the decline of the political provides an explanation for the decline in effective Marxist movements specifically, which explanation, furthermore, is likely to absolve theorists of any blame for the failures of Marxist politics.⁴ While I have some sympathy with this analysis, it does not yet explain why the category of politics has been taken up as a response to this failure of Marxism. Post-Marxist advocates of the political do have a response to this question, as they argue that a failure to pay attention to the category of politics bears much of the responsibility for the failures of Marxism. This general critique of Marxism, however, sits uneasily with the way in which the end of politics is supposed to be a particularly pressing problem *now*. The employment of the political, that is, seems to function both as a critique of Marxism in general and as a claim that Marxism is particularly ill-suited to comprehend various recent developments, such as the shift to neoliberalism and the rise of new social movements that do not express their resistance in class terms. It is certainly not inconsistent to argue that a failure to pay attention to the political has always been a problem with Marxism and that this failure has particularly marked consequences today, but post-Marxist accounts do not generally make a clear distinction between criticisms of the whole history of Marxism and more conjunctural or historically-specific criticisms of contemporary Marxism. I will argue that the attempt to frame the reclamation of the political as a criticism of Marxism in general occludes the way in which the perceived importance of the political derives from specific features of the particular Marxist discourse in which the post-Marxists are situated. Furthermore, this confusion of a particular form of Marxism with Marxism as such precludes a re-reading of Marx on the political which could provide a useful response to the changed political circumstances identified by post-Marxists as challenges to traditional Marxist politics.

In this chapter, I will discuss four authors, Laclau, Mouffe, Badiou, and Rancière, all of whom are in critical dialog with the Marxist tradition, and all of whom emphasize politics as a central category in their thought. Furthermore, for all four of these authors, “Marxism” denotes first and foremost the Marxism of Althusser, and there are many points in their work where for “Marx” or “Marxism” we might do well to read “Althusser.” In any case, I will argue that the particular way in which politics is construed by these four authors, and the importance it assumes, is essentially shaped by Althusserian theory. Locating these authors within a post-Althusserian trajectory reveals this shared horizon, a horizon which, in part, limits their thought. I conclude by arguing that a direct return to Marx (as opposed to an unreflective engagement with a “Marx” defined by a certain Marxist tradition), if animated by the same concerns that led post-Marxists to turn to the political, may expand our horizons *beyond* the political.

⁴Dean, “Politics Without Politics”, 23.

1.1 What is Politics?

To discuss a “turn to the political,” we need to have some idea of what we mean by “politics” or “the political.”⁵ I will discuss in some detail the specific way in which concepts of the political arise in the theories of four post-Marxist authors (Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, Rancière), but it may make the discussion of these specific concepts of the political clearer by laying out some general features common to uses of “the political” in contemporary theory. Surveying these uses of the term, we might agree with Schmitt that politics “is most frequently used negatively, in contrast to various other ideas, for example in such antitheses as politics and economy, politics and morality, politics and law.”⁶ Defining politics in opposition to the economy is particularly important for post-Marxist authors, as I will discuss shortly; nonetheless, these authors also attribute a number of positive properties to politics. The first distinctive quality of politics accepted by post-Marxists is that it concerns “the most intense and extreme antagonism.”⁷ That is, politics exists where we have some kind of fundamental opposition. The opposition might be between incompatible interests (for example, the antagonism between bosses and workers), or between incompatible identities (for instance, those who identify a nation state with a particular ethnic identity, and those who live in that state but have a different ethnicity), or a more fundamental inability of a social structure to recognize all its members (I will explain this form of antagonism in more detail in my discussion of Badiou and Rancière). What makes an opposition fundamental in the particular way required to make it political is that there is no way of resolving the opposition that all parties would, or ought to, accept. The lack of a mutually acceptable resolution differentiates political conflicts from other oppositions: for instance, an economic disagreement can in principle be resolved by a mutually beneficial bargain, while a legal disagreement can be resolved by a rational application of laws and legal procedures. In contrast, politics is defined as the sphere in which disagreements are irresolvable, and so by the persistence of conflict or (if “conflict” might mislead by suggesting exclusively violent confrontation) contestation. From irresolvable contestation follows one of the other defining features of politics, contingency. For all the post-Marxists, what happens in politics is not necessary, that is, it is not determined by a philosophical rationality or a historical process, or anything else which would make the outcome of political action certain or inescapable. The reason for insisting on contingency is that contingency is held to ensure the possibility of contestation; if it were necessarily the case that a conflict had one certain, predictable outcome, we would have to view this predetermined outcome as the *right* outcome, and so the conflict would in principle be resolved in favor of that outcome. If politics were entirely constrained by necessity, then, there

⁵Some recent authors, including some of those to be discussed in this dissertation, make a sharp distinction between “politics” and “the political.” However, there is no agreement between authors on what this distinction actually is, and the distinction is quite hard to maintain in practice, depending as it does on the subtle distinction between a noun (politics) and the substantialization of its adjectival form (the political), leaving the status of the adjective itself unclear: does “political emancipation,” for example, pertain to politics or the political? In any case, one of my main purposes in this dissertation is to question the idea that there is an autonomous sphere of politics or the political; terminological fussiness about “politics” versus “the political” seems to be an attempt to maintain this distinction by linguistic fiat. Because of this, I will generally use “politics” and “political” interchangeably, except when I am discussing the specific authors who make a sharp distinction themselves.

⁶Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 20.

⁷Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 29.

would be no room for the fundamental and irresolvable oppositions that are supposed to be the defining feature of politics; thus politics must contain at least one moment of contingency.

The combination of fundamental contestation and contingency underwrites a third feature of politics, as it is understood by post-Marxists, which is that it involves the exercise of power. The argument here is that, if there is a dispute with no rational resolution which all sides should accept, and no necessary resolution which all sides *will* eventually accept, the only way in which the dispute could be ended would be through one side imposing a resolution on others. Politics therefore involves paying attention to the ways in which participants can exercise this kind of power over others, and considering fundamental disagreements as taking place within, or perhaps even being constituted by, networks of power relationships. As a corollary to this emphasis on the exercise of power over, post-Marxist construals of politics also focus on power to, that is, on the fact that politics involves acts performed by agents, rather than being the result solely of social forces or structures. The precise way in which agency is understood varies between the different post-Marxists, and none embrace a purely voluntarist model of an autonomous subject unconstrained by social structures; nonetheless, they all agree that some form of agency which is not determined by social structure is a necessary part of politics.

There are, then, four key features which are attributed to politics by Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière: fundamental antagonism, contingency, power relations, and the exercise of agency. Furthermore, although the details differ for each author, they all present some kind of account of what unites these four features. Naming the underlying unity of the essential characteristics of politics is one of the reasons sometimes given for differentiating the term “the political” from “politics”; the political is held to be the ontological or theoretical category that makes possible the specific qualities which are visible in more everyday manifestations of politics. The post-Marxist authors I will discuss do not all use this particular terminology, but they do all attempt to relate the features they find to be specific to politics to some wider theoretical account, and it is this derivation of politics which I will concentrate on when discussing the various post-Marxist turns to the political.

1.2 Althusser and politics

The four authors I intend to discuss in detail, Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, are not simply post-Marxist, but more specifically post-Althusserian, that is, they all developed their account of politics in order to rectify what they saw as problems with the version of Marxism developed by Althusser. Althusser’s philosophy in the 1960s arose from two contexts: the theoretical influence of structuralism within the humanities and social sciences, and the political influence of the French Communist Party, of which Althusser was one of the leading theorists. Because of this combined theoretical and political significance, Althusser’s philosophy was an important reference point for theorists attempting to understand the possible role for Marxism after the events of 1968; the four post-Althusserians I will discuss all concluded, for varied reasons, that Marxism as demonstrated by Althusser’s philosophy was lacking, and that politics, encompassing the four features discussed above, was what Marxism was lacking in particular.

There are two features of Althusser’s Marxism (at the point when it was most fully developed

as a distinct school, that is, during the period of the construction of *Reading Capital*, published in 1965) which form the basis for the critiques of the four post-Althusserians, and so also the basis for their turns to the political. The first of these is Althusser's anti-historicism and the resulting synchronic character of his theory. Althusser does not directly or explicitly argue for a synchronic approach, indeed, he believes the very distinction between synchronic and diachronic to be ideological (that is, part of the empiricist ideology of "historical time"⁸). Althusser's objection is not to history as such, but to *historicism*, the attempt to subordinate philosophy to history, to explain theoretical positions in terms of historical development.⁹ Althusser insists, against this historicism, that theoretical practice always works on a specifically theoretical object (the object of knowledge), which is quite distinct from the real object, and is produced *by* a theoretical practice in its constitution as a science.¹⁰ Thus the theoretical object is determined solely by theory, and not at all by history.¹¹ It is in this, as Althusser admits, that his theory retains a certain emphasis on synchrony. Althusser's theory privileges the synchronic because *change* of concepts is not a fundamental part of the theory; rather, Althusser begins by attempting to understand concepts in terms of a wider structure, understood without explicit reference to time. Theoretical knowledge pertains to the relationship of the theoretical object to the structure within which it is articulated, a relationship which is necessarily ahistorical.¹²

The emphasis on synchrony in Althusser's critique of historicism derives from a more general feature of his theory, which is the second feature that is important to post-Marxist responses. Historicism, according to Althusser, assumes "a continuous and homogeneous time," which applies in the same way in all spheres of existence and cognition.¹³ It is in opposition to historicism's homogenizing process that Althusser lays out his theory of relatively autonomous "levels," distinct structures of the economic base, political superstructure, cultural and scientific production, etc., which may be linked together in a total structure, a total structure which only determines these separate levels in a perpetually deferred "last instance."¹⁴ This relative autonomy of the separate levels comes to name a certain oscillation in Althusser's work. While in principle, and in the overall theoretical architecture of the system, these levels are mutually interdependent, with their relative levels of dependence and independence itself itself dependent on the articulation of the levels themselves within the whole,¹⁵ the *investigation* of each level takes place independently, with the articulation of each level within the whole deferred until the independent investigation is completed.¹⁶

Responses to Althusser have frequently expressed suspicion that this relative autonomy (autonomy which is in some way not quite really autonomous) is not a rigorously defined concept. Poulantzas focuses (as do most responses to Althusser) on the distinction between the economic

⁸Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 96.

⁹Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 132.

¹⁰Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 158.

¹¹Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 133.

¹²Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 107.

¹³Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 99.

¹⁴Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 99.

¹⁵Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 100.

¹⁶Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 102.

and the political levels, and it is here that he locates his critique of Althusser. Poulantzas rejects the view that the totality of each mode of production is composed of varying combinations of static levels, each of which exist in a relation of exteriority to one another. The varied elements of the mode of production, particularly the economic level and the political level do not have a determinate structure that is conceptually prior to their integration in a mode of production; rather, they are “*from the very beginning* constituted by their mutual relation and articulation.”¹⁷ Poulantzas sees the appearance of the independence of the political from the economic as a particular form taken by the mutual constitution of the economic and political, a form specific to capitalism. Poulantzas uses the mutual relation of the economic and the political as the basis of his theory of the role of the political in capitalist society.

Poulantzas’s critique of the static character of the structures that form the object of Althusser’s theory echoes a more widely made criticism, that the synchronic emphasis of Althusser’s theory is incapable of conceptualizing change, especially change between modes of production, which is especially felt as a weakness for a *Marxist* theory intended to change the world as well as to interpret it. Balibar addresses the difficulty of conceptualizing change in *Reading Capital*, which was also one of the issues Althusser continued to grapple with in his later work. How a theory can understand change is also the main concern of the four post-Althusserians discussed here. In trying to account for the possibility of radical change, these authors all, in slightly different ways, modify and narrow the concept until it can fit under the name “politics.” The explanation of the importance and possibility of maintaining the distinction of politics is thus a way of dealing with the apparent difficulty of conceptualizing radical change in the context of then prevailing Marxist theories. Althusser, however, did not take the route of emphasizing the distinctiveness of the political, developing instead the theme of the “materialism of the encounter,” which focuses on the history of the Epicurean theory of the *clinamen*, the microscopic swerve which disrupts the mechanical parallel motion of atoms in Epicurus’s universe, thereby founding the world on contingency and radically non-teleological change.¹⁸ Althusser finds the idea of the encounter in an “underground current” in Western philosophy stretching from Epicurus to Machiavelli, Rousseau, Heidegger, Derrida, and others.¹⁹ By turning to the “underground current” of the encounter, rather than the more visible tradition of Western philosophy which influenced the dominant interpretations of Marx, Althusser’s later work is part of a more general theoretical turn which constructed “incredulity” towards, or “disenchantment” with, Marxism, and so, Sim argues, prepared the ground for post-Marxism.²⁰ What distinguishes Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe and

¹⁷Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, 17. Poulantzas’s precise target here is Balibar’s contribution to *Reading Capital*, which develops the theory of the mode of production as a combination of discrete “elements” (Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 225). Althusser’s own account of these different levels at first seems closer to Poulantzas, as Althusser derives the particular independence of each level from the structure of the whole (Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 100). However, Althusser still places the levels in a relation of exteriority to one another, relating to each other, if they do, only through the mediation of the whole. It is from this theory that Balibar derives his account of the combination of elements. Thus, Poulantzas’s critique of Balibar in particular is also a critique of Althusser in general.

¹⁸Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 167.

¹⁹Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 167.

²⁰Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 104,2.

Rancière is that they are specifically incredulous about Marxism's apparent failure to develop a theory of politics, and hence their attempts to move beyond Marxism center on developing such a theory.

1.3 Politics and Antagonism

I will first consider Laclau, as his work demonstrates the general continuity between its Althusserian and post-Althusserian stages.²¹ We can begin with the essays in his *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, in which Laclau locates himself firmly within the Althusserian tradition, although as a critical interlocutor, rather than simply accepting the parameters of this tradition wholesale. Particularly interesting is the essay on the Poulantzas-Miliband debate on the state. Here Laclau defends the broadly structuralist approach of Poulantzas against Miliband's accusation of "structuralist abstractionism,"²² while agreeing with Miliband's criticism that Poulantzas's theory is overly abstract. Laclau criticizes Miliband by endorsing Althusser's epistemology (and with it the emphasis on the importance of theory and the critique of empiricism²³). The main consequence of this, for Laclau's criticism of Miliband, is that Laclau endorses Althusser's theory of mutually independent "levels" described above, against Miliband's more orthodox Marxist position in which what occurs on the political level reflects the organization of the economic level. However, Laclau argues that Poulantzas' use of the idea of autonomous levels is unsatisfactory, because Poulantzas fails to develop a fully theorized account of what differentiates these levels, especially the economic and political levels, and also fails to theorize how these levels are articulated within a mode of production which is held to be determinant in the last instance.²⁴

Along with Mouffe, Laclau developed a critique of Marxism, including Althusserian Marxism, in the mid-1980s. I will turn to consider Mouffe in a moment, but first I want to consider Laclau's slightly later presentation in *New Reflection on the Revolution of Our Times*. Here, Laclau is continuing what he once took to be the central project of the "Althusserian endeavour," the "abandonment of the Platonic cave of class reductionism."²⁵ In his later work, Laclau argues that Althusser's work fails to rid itself of class reductionism, because Althusser eventually falls back to a theory of "determination in the last instance" by the economy. Laclau identifies class reductionism with those moments in Marx and Marxism which seek to derive class struggle from the objective economic logic of capitalism. The problem, for Laclau, is that attempting to derive class struggle from economics requires that we establish (or, in most cases, simply assumes as already established) a connection between two quite separate and incommensurable things: on the one hand, capitalism as an economic system which exhibits certain *contradictions*, and on the other, a political relation between classes constituted by an *antagonism*. Laclau's central argument is that this contradiction does not imply antagonism, nor is the antagonism predicated on contradic-

²¹Rancière was initially the closest of these authors to Althusser, contributing a section to Althusser et al., *Lire le Capital*, but his subsequent break with Althusser was much starker, for which see section 1.5 below.

²²Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, 57.

²³Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, 53.

²⁴Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, 76-7, 79.

²⁵Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, 12.

tion.²⁶ Laclau canvasses various attempts to resolve this difficulty by deriving antagonism from contradiction, but in his judgment all such attempts have failed, as in fact they necessarily must, because contradiction and antagonism are on a theoretical level quite distinct.

In Marxist theory, contradiction is an objective matter, something that exists within the material constitution of the means of production. It is the objectivity of economic contradictions that, for Laclau, renders contradiction incompatible with any antagonism. Contradiction exists within a particular sphere (for Marxism, the economic), and is comprehensible by relating the contradictory elements of this sphere to the sphere considered as a totality; thus, for Laclau, contradiction is only ever a moment of negativity subordinate to an ultimate positivity.²⁷ That is to say, the two sides of a contradiction are only ever opposed when considered locally, and thus are not genuinely opposed at all. In order for the genuine opposition which Laclau considers constitutive of antagonism to exist, there can be no whole within which the antagonistic elements can be comprehended.²⁸ Antagonism occurs when the attempt to refer elements to a totality is blocked by the dependence of this attempted totality on something outside itself.²⁹ It is because antagonism arises from a failed attempt to understand elements in terms of a totality that Laclau describes antagonism as “the limit of all objectivity”:³⁰ antagonism is that which disrupts the existence of a fully closed, rationally comprehensible, totality.

Laclau insists on the impossibility of a completed totality, and this shows the similarity of his post-structuralist work to his earlier critical engagement with Althusser. We could see Laclau’s later position as being, in a sense, an answer to the challenge he earlier posed to Poulantzas and Balibar, the call to provide a more rigorous account of the articulation of the different levels (political, economic, etc.) of the whole social structure. However, the answer Laclau gives in his later work is a purely negative one, as he now maintains that no account of the articulation of different levels or structures is possible: the only relation that exists is one of radical contingency. He now refers to Althusser’s theory of separate structures as a “combinatorial game”³¹ based on the failure of Althusserians to understand the incompleteness of each level and the nonexistence of a social totality that would stabilize each level. Instead “we find...a field of relational semi-identities in which ‘political,’ ‘economic’ and ‘ideological’ elements will enter into unstable relations of imbrication without ever managing to constitute themselves as separate objects.”³²

There are two points worth emphasizing about Laclau’s theory of constitutive antagonism. The first is its indebtedness to Althusser. While Laclau criticizes one of Althusser’s fundamental principles, society as a set of levels determined by their articulation within a whole, this is an immanent critique. Laclau maintains the general structuralist orientation within which meaning is given by location within a structure; he accepts that *if* it were possible to explain the elements of a social totality within the whole then we would be able to produce a fully objective theory purged of contingency. It is only against the backdrop of this epistemology that Laclau’s rejection of so-

²⁶Laclau, *New Reflections*, 7.

²⁷Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

²⁸Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

²⁹Laclau, *New Reflections*, 17.

³⁰Laclau, *New Reflections*, 17.

³¹Laclau, *New Reflections*, 24.

³²Laclau, *New Reflections*, 24.

cial totality requires the embrace of radical contingency. Furthermore, in accepting Althusser's epistemology, Laclau accepts a number of Althusser's presuppositions, most notably the refusal to subordinate theory to history that arises from the critique of historicism. For Laclau, as for Althusser, epistemology is ahistorical: the constitutive nature of antagonism is not itself historically contingent, but provides the synchronic ground *for* contingency.³³

The continuity of Laclau's approach to historicism with that of Althusser is significant for his account of temporality, from which derives the second point I want to make about his theory, which concerns its relation to the "turn to the political." It might seem that Laclau's rejection of the Althusserian theory of discrete levels would entail a rejection of any claim about the specificity of the political. However, what Laclau objects to is the idea of the political as a discrete levels within a total structure made up of these levels. Laclau's new definition of the political discards this reference to structuralist totality; instead, Laclau now defines "political" as a quality which applies to some circumstances and not others. For Althusser, the political was one level among others which formed a structured totality; for Laclau, in contrast, the political is the antagonism that derives from the impossibility of a totality. In Laclau's theory, the political cannot be isolated as one particular structure among others; rather, the political arises when it becomes apparent that different structures cannot exist harmoniously within one total structure. Thus, for Laclau, "the political" becomes the name of the antagonism that results from the absence of a total social structure which could determine all the different elements which make it up, and so the political also exhibits the contingency that results from the lack of an overall determining structure. The idea of a structural totality is what gave coherence to the Althusserian idea of discrete and relatively autonomous political and economic levels. In the process of undermining this theory of relative autonomy of the political and economic, Laclau introduces a new way of understanding the political and its autonomy; for Laclau, the political is by definition operative whenever determinism fails and underlying, inescapable contingency becomes visible.

1.4 Politics and Truth

An attempt to find a location for politics which would escape economic or social determination also animates Badiou's work. Initially a student of Althusser, Badiou broke with Althusser in 1968 due to Badiou's belief that Althusser's philosophy was unable to comprehend the radical eruption that occurred during the May events.³⁴ Badiou's early work³⁵ focuses on on a highly non-Althusserian topic, the subject of history, named the proletariat.³⁶ Badiou does, however, retain Althusser's rejection of one particular (orthodox Marxist) conception of the subject of history as a

³³Laclau does argue that capitalism has brought about "the growing centrality of the category of 'dislocation'" (Laclau, *New Reflections*, 39). This does not mean that dislocation, antagonism, and contingency themselves are historically produced, however. Laclau argues that capitalism leads to "a clearer *awareness* of the constitutive contingency of...discourses" (Laclau, *New Reflections*, 39, my emphasis). Contingency has always been there, capitalism simply makes it more visible. Here Laclau seems to be endorsing Marx's belief in the progressive ability of capitalism to strip off illusions.

³⁴Hallward, *Badiou*, 33.

³⁵Hallward periodizes this "early" phase as dating from 1968 to 1982 (Hallward, *Badiou*, 29).

³⁶Hallward, *Badiou*, 35.

reason within history cognizable by historicism. Badiou's subject is, on the contrary, defined by its (violent, disruptive) liberation from any objectively determined or rationally knowable historical process.³⁷ However, for the early Badiou this liberation is understood as a tendency: the subject is not either a reason within history or something which is autonomous from history; rather, the subject is something which tends to liberate itself from history.³⁸ For the early Badiou, expressing this theory in Maoist terms, this moment of liberation is dialectical: the subject is liberated as it "overcomes and destroys its objective basis."³⁹

Hallward argues that by tying the fortunes of the subject to a historical dialectic in this way Badiou found himself disoriented in the decline of revolutionary activity that followed 1968.⁴⁰ A theory premised on the objective tendency of proletarian victory is cast into doubt by the objective evidence of the contingency of that victory. In the 1970s, then, Badiou began to rethink the relationship between the subject and its "objective basis" in a non-dialectical way, thereby expunging the lingering teleology that remained in his Maoist period.⁴¹ The disconnection of subjective and objective is accomplished through Badiou's distinction between *being* and *event*, which provides an ontological foundation for the radical discontinuity of subjective and objective without making the relationship between the two either arbitrary or mystical (that is, without making the relationship between subjective and objective completely irrational or outside of rationality). For the mature Badiou, the subject is still something which exists as a tendency, and so which needs to be constructed, but this tendency is no longer immanent in history; rather, it is subtracted from it. In the 1980s, Badiou undertook an extensive study of ontology, in order to explain what it means for a subject to "subtract" itself from history; the ontology he developed underlies his understanding of the political, and so I will now sketch it in brief.

For Badiou, the subject is not determined by history, that is to say, it exhibits a fundamental contingency; Badiou is like Laclau in deriving this contingency from an ontological thesis. However, unlike Laclau, Badiou does not construe contingency as an antagonism between the social and its outside. For Badiou, there is no outside, or at least, no determinate outside. The only "outside" to a situation is what Badiou calls "the void," an "inconsistent multiplicity" which has no structure capable of rational comprehension, and so no determinate elements which could come into conflict with the elements internal to the situation.⁴² Rather than elements *outside* the situation, Badiou argues that any situation contains elements "on the edge of the void," that is, elements which are not fully determined by other elements of the situation; Badiou calls this kind of element an "evental site."⁴³ Because an evental site is not completely determined by other elements of the situation, the existence of evental sites allows for the possibility (and it is always only a possibility, not an inevitability) of an unpredictable, chance, event. Badiou has a particular, formal, definition of this kind of chance event; he defines an event as an occurrence which, from the point of view of the situation in which it occurs, cannot be identified either as an element of

³⁷Hallward, *Badiou*, 34.

³⁸Hallward, *Badiou*, 34.

³⁹Hallward, *Badiou*, 35.

⁴⁰Hallward, *Badiou*, 39.

⁴¹Hallward, *Badiou*, 39.

⁴²Badiou, *Being and Event*, 58.

⁴³Badiou, *Being and Event*, 175.

the situation, or as *not* an element of the situation.⁴⁴ Note that this does not mean that the event is an irruption of something outside of the situation. On the contrary, if an event were outside of the situation, it would simply be void, nothing. Rather, the place of the event within or outside of the situation is undecidable.⁴⁵ Badiou argues that, because the existence of this event is undecidable, its status can only be determined by an act of subjective choice. Once this choice has been made, the elements of the situation must be re-examined in order to discover a new organization within which the existence of the event can be affirmed. Because the existence of the event is, by definition, undecidable within the current situation, this new organization must be one that is incomprehensible within the current situation, and so the event, and the process of reorganization it provokes, creates something radically new through the exercise of subjectivity. Badiou uses the term “knowledge” to refer to the organization of a situation prior to an event, and the radically new organization which is created is what Badiou calls a “truth”; the process or reorganization is called a “truth procedure.”⁴⁶

The relevance to politics arises from the fact that politics is one of the domains, in which events and truth procedures can occur. Badiou conceives political activity as the construction of a truth, and the process of the construction of a truth always introduces something new and radically incompatible with our knowledge of the prevailing situation. The opposition between truth, as it is constructed through politics, and knowledge, is the basis of Badiou’s objection to “political philosophy.” For Badiou, political philosophy is a knowledge about politics, that is, the attempt to derive, outside of any engagement with a particular political practice, the set of standards by which any political practice can be judged.⁴⁷ But because the truth of any political procedure cannot be grasped in the terms of the situation in which it takes place (that is, there can be no knowledge about politics), any such attempt to pass external judgment on a political procedure must, for Badiou, be illegitimate. Indeed, any attempt to decide in advance of the practice of a political sequence the limits of that sequence represents, to Badiou, a denial of the relationship to truth that produces something specifically political in the first place. For Badiou, as for Laclau, politics names a site of wholly contingent rupture with the fixed coordinates of the contemporary.

1.5 Politics Without Foundations

The critique of knowledge is also an integral part of Rancière’s turn to the political, although in a more direct way than Badiou, as Rancière does not depend on a specialized sense of “knowledge” or an ontological account of truth. No, Rancière’s attack on knowledge, which forms the center of his polemical break with Althusser, is simpler, and perhaps more thoroughgoing, than Badiou’s. Rancière objects to the way in which a knowledge held by some and not others comes, whether

⁴⁴Badiou, *Being and Event*, 181.

⁴⁵Badiou uses the term “undecidable” in a mathematical sense. Undecidability is not either vagueness or an effect of imperfect knowledge, but an absolute limit to any consistent principle of decision. One of the key reasons why Badiou considers mathematics essential for ontology is that modern mathematics gives us a way of reasoning rigorously about this undecidability.

⁴⁶Badiou, *Being and Event*, 333.

⁴⁷Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 10.

consciously or not, to legitimize a certain power on behalf of those who have knowledge. In a sense, Rancière's critique of knowledge is an extended commentary on Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach, quoted in *La Leçon d'Althusser*:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.⁴⁸

Rancière's claim against Althusser is that Althusserian philosophy arrogates a certain type of knowledge—theoretical knowledge—to itself, and so purports to direct “the masses” in their political activity on the basis of this knowledge. Althusserian philosophy is a theoretical justification of this division of labor, which also develops an intimidating linguistic and institutional edifice that in practice excludes the masses from theory, that is, “verifying” in practice what the theory justifies.⁴⁹ In contrast, Rancière believes in an intelligence that exists within the masses, rather than being confined to academics.⁵⁰ Far from adding anything to this thought of the masses, all philosophy can do (and here Rancière broadens his attack from Althusser to philosophy *tout court*) is “transform the expression of a practice of the masses into a philosophical thesis,” and thereby appropriate it.⁵¹

While the Maoist terminology of faith in the people is less strident in Rancière's later works, the theme of the universal capacity for thought and the authoritarian effects of the appropriation of this thought as a “knowledge” to which only a few have access, is a constant. The early concern with the relationship between knowledge and the masses as those who make history, furthermore, helps explain a duality in the critique of knowledge that becomes more pronounced in the later work. The primary target of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is the schoolmaster who controls access to knowledge to produce a pedagogy which is both premised on and reproduces the student's inferiority. The construction of the student as a potential (but never yet actual) receptacle for knowledge also constructs the student as someone who does not possess knowledge. Another target of Rancière's criticism, the knowledge of the sociologist, meanwhile, excludes the student from knowledge by constructing the student as an *object* of knowledge. The sociologist (Bourdieu is the specific example) has knowledge of the systems and stratifications in which the student is unwittingly enmeshed. The dialectical relationship between these two exclusions from knowledge becomes clearer if we connect this to the revolutionary situation, which concerns the situation in which the knowledge the master keeps from the student is identical with the knowledge within which the sociologist locates the student; thus, the two processes reinforce one another, as, according to Rancière, happened in the case of the attempt by Althusser and the PCF to disarm the

⁴⁸Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, 144. Quoted in Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, 23

⁴⁹Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, 33–4.

⁵⁰“*L'Intelligence de la guerre des classes, comme de la production, n'appartient pas aux spécialistes*” (Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, 41).

⁵¹“*La parole d'Althusser est ici plus classiques: transformer l'expression d'une pratique de masse en thèse philosophique*” (Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, 43).

radicals of 1968, with the party supposedly the repository of the understanding about the proletariat which the intellectuals, Althusser in particular, were to dispense to them. In the more general case of student and master, the sociological knowledge about the students may not immediately coincide with the knowledge kept from the students by the master, but they nonetheless support one another, as knowledge about the students is fundamentally knowledge about how they relate to the knowledge held by the master (and the pace and manner in which this knowledge can be dispensed to the students), which justifies the restrictions on the students' access to knowledge.

In contrast, Rancière rejects an external knowledge that would render the mass of people objects, instead insisting on a fundamental equality in thought which rules out any natural distinction between leaders and followers. While in *La Leçon d'Althusser*, this fundamental equality is expressed as an equality of *knowledge*, in Rancière's later political work this is reconfigured as an equality in understanding, a fundamental equality of linguistic capacity shared by all "speaking beings."⁵² Rancière's argument is that the commonality required for one to rule and another to obey is a commonality of language, an equal capacity to understand the content required both to give and to obey orders.⁵³ He defines politics as the assertion of this equality; the institutions and practices usually referred to as "political" (parliaments, elections, public opinion), Rancière calls "police," as they make up only a generalization of the disciplinary and ordering function carried out by the uniformed police (what Rancière calls the "petty police"⁵⁴). Politics is (and here we meet a familiar theme) what *disrupts* this police logic through the assertion of the logic of equality.⁵⁵

Because politics disrupts any kind of disciplinary categorization, and does so moreover through the assertion of equality that rejects any kind of hierarchy, Rancière opposes any attempt to provide intellectual foundations to support (and also thereby to restrict) politics. Indeed, this lack of foundation is itself a distinguishing feature of politics.⁵⁶ Rancière shares Badiou's hostility to political philosophy, out of a broadly similar objection to the attempt to subordinate politics to philosophy. Rancière perhaps goes further than Badiou in arguing that philosophy is necessarily hostile to politics, and so "what is called 'political philosophy' might well be the set of reflective operations whereby philosophy tries to rid itself, to suppress a scandal in thinking proper to the exercise of politics."⁵⁷ This scandal is the equal understanding which upsets philosophy's assertion of intellectual mastery by asserting "the rationality of disagreement."⁵⁸ Political philosophy, for Rancière, is the history of different attempts to explain away and so mask this disruptive political rationality.⁵⁹ Rancière identifies three modes by which philosophy masks politics, which he calls archepolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics. Archepolitics, represented by Plato, involves substituting a social order in which everyone has their place for the disagreement which is proper

⁵²Rancière, *Disagreement*, 49.

⁵³Rancière, *Disagreement*, 49.

⁵⁴Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28.

⁵⁵Rancière, *Disagreement*, 30.

⁵⁶Rancière, *Disagreement*, 62.

⁵⁷Rancière, *Disagreement*, xii.

⁵⁸Rancière, *Disagreement*, xii.

⁵⁹Rancière, *Disagreement*, xiii.

to politics;⁶⁰ parapolitics, represented by Aristotle, instead recognizes disagreements but claims to be able to develop, through philosophy, the proper form for the expression and resolution of this disagreement.⁶¹ It is the third form of political philosophy, metapolitics, which is particularly relevant here, because it is metapolitics of which Marx is the representative. Metapolitics proposes the falsity of politics, that the equality characteristic of politics is simple a veil covering something more fundamental; for Marxism, this reality behind politics would be civil society or economics.⁶² We can see how this understanding of Marxism comports with what Rancière criticized in Althusser: the supposed science of Marxism, in contrast to ideology, demonstrates that politics is determined in the last instance by economics, and hence that the Marxist scientists know better than the people what must be done with politics.⁶³ In *Disagreement*, “political philosophy” becomes the name of the mastery which is Rancière’s inveterate target, and so politics, rescued from its disavowal by the philosophers, including especially Marxists and Althusserians, becomes the name of what eludes mastery.

Rancière thus shares something with Laclau and Badiou: they all argue that Marxism, and especially Althusser, close down the possibility of subjective action, and the retrieval of the specifically political is the way to resist this determinism. Where Laclau and Badiou attempt to find a philosophical basis for this politics (antagonism for Laclau, the event for Badiou) however, for Rancière what is distinctive about politics is precisely its lack of philosophical guarantees: Rancière does not attempt to find a philosophical refutation of philosophy’s rejection of politics, he rather rejects philosophy in favor of politics.⁶⁴ Rancière’s position is thus paradoxical: there is something specific about politics, but what is specific about it is that it cannot be specified; Rancière attempts to find “what is proper to politics,” and concludes that what is proper is impropriety.⁶⁵ It may turn out that this rejection of anything which would ground the specificity of politics is not merely paradoxical, but untenable.

1.6 Politics and the Political

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe (with Laclau) criticized Marxists up to and including Althusser for holding a totalizing and unitary account of political agency, in which any apparent diversity in the determination of the political process is reconciled through a single underlying economic logic (in the case of Althusser specifically, this appears as the displacement of the plural logic of overdetermination by the unitary logic of determination in the last instance⁶⁶). Against this, they propose a democratic movement that is radical and plural. The pluralism here refers to the number of different struggles and subjectivities engaged in this movement, contrasted to

⁶⁰Rancière, *Disagreement*, 65-70.

⁶¹Rancière, *Disagreement*, 71-80.

⁶²Rancière, *Disagreement*, 93.

⁶³Rancière, *Disagreement*, 87.

⁶⁴He develops an “anti-ontology,” rather than an ontology of politics (Deranty, “Contemporary Political Ontology”).

⁶⁵Rancière, *Disagreement*, *xiii*.

⁶⁶Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 98.

the single primary agent, the working class, countenanced by traditional Marxism.⁶⁷ Mouffe and Laclau's position retains something of Marxism's radicality, however, as it sees these varied struggles as potentially counter-hegemonic, radically opposed to and thus requiring a restructuring of the existing social and political order.⁶⁸ That is, while the radical democratic movement is internally heterogeneous, it can develop a certain degree of unity through its radical opposition to the equally heterogeneous forces that impede the democratic movement.

While Laclau, as we have seen, emphasizes the place of the radical break in his subsequent work, in Mouffe's later work, this element of pluralism tends to be emphasized in a way that makes the position less radical. Mouffe develops the importance of pluralism through a somewhat surprising parallel movement towards Schmitt and towards liberalism, or, perhaps less paradoxically, towards a liberalism modified by a confrontation with Schmitt. While in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pluralism was a characterization of a movement that was antagonistic to the existing social and political hegemony, in Mouffe's later work, pluralism becomes an inescapable feature of modern society in general, not just of antihegemonic movements within it.⁶⁹ The move from seeing pluralism as antihegemonic to seeing it as an inescapable feature of society (arguably a logical development of the critique of the positivity of the social in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*⁷⁰) underwrites an assertion that radical and plural democracy is also (a form of) liberal democracy. Mouffe connects radical democracy and liberalism in part as a result of a reconsideration of liberalism, a *rapprochement* with liberal claims that liberalism is not necessarily totalizing, but contains a defense of value pluralism and institutional structures, such as the rule of law and rights, which defend this pluralism.⁷¹ However, Mouffe's endorsement of liberalism also involves a modification of liberalism in the face of the challenge of antagonism, a challenge that Mouffe locates in Schmitt.

Mouffe accepts the general terms of Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy, which sees a contradiction between these two terms, between the universalism of liberalism and the "we" of the *demos* constructed by democracy.⁷² However, unlike Schmitt, who sees this as a fatal contradiction, Mouffe sees the tension between liberalism and democracy as potentially productive, as these two logics produce "temporary, pragmatic, unstable and precarious resolutions" of this "democratic paradox."⁷³ What allows this Schmittian paradox to be a productive tension rather than a destructive contradiction is the distinctively pluralist twist Mouffe gives to Schmitt's theory. Mouffe begins with Schmitt's argument that the political is defined by drawing the distinction between friend and enemy, or between "us" and "them," but attempts to understand this "us" in a way which is "compatible with certain forms of pluralism."⁷⁴ Mouffe accomplishes this by displacing

⁶⁷Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 140.

⁶⁸Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xv. Sim points out the conceptual difficulty of maintaining this radical opposition given Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of essentialism: if the radical democratic project only gains its unity through articulation or Wittgensteinian "family resemblance," what ensures that it remains radical, or indeed that it has the left-wing or progressive content assumed by Laclau and Mouffe (Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 27-30)?

⁶⁹Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 122.

⁷⁰Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, ch. 3.

⁷¹Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 13.

⁷²Mouffe, "Carl Schmitt", 43.

⁷³Mouffe, "Carl Schmitt", 44.

⁷⁴Mouffe, "Carl Schmitt", 50.

the defining feature of the political, the “determination of a frontier,” from the outside of the political community to its inside.⁷⁵ Instead of the antagonism of a political community with its enemy, we have an agonism between different groups *within* a political community; instead of a political community facing an external threat, we have the struggle of groups within a community over their common community.

Mouffe tends to present this agonistic pluralism as a possibility dormant in Schmitt, made visible by her more patient tacking between Schmittian politics and liberalism, but it is worth noting just how large a modification she makes to Schmitt’s account of the political, in order to see precisely what it is she *does* retain from Schmitt. Žižek draws on Rancière to illustrate the importance of the difference between the Schmittian external enemy and the Mouffian internal adversary.⁷⁶ While the external friend/enemy distinction constructs the unity of “us” negatively, in response to the threatening enemy, internal agonism takes place between those who already consider themselves to have some kind of commonality, at least in embryonic form. For Schmitt, that is, politics is what takes place between those committed to *the same side* of an antagonism: the citizen’s relationship to the state is political only when the state is an object of loyalty for the citizen, a loyalty predicated on the rejection of the enemy. For Mouffe, the opposite is the case: politics is what happens between those *on different sides* of agonism, and the citizens relate to the state politically when their relation to the state is a matter of dispute, not of loyalty. The difference here is profound: for Rancière, indeed, this difference is essential to the definition of politics, as politics necessarily involves, not separate communities at war, but one community which is internally divided.⁷⁷

What, then, *does*, Mouffe share with Schmitt? It is perhaps helpful to look here again at Žižek’s characterization of Schmitt in relation to Rancière’s characterization of political philosophy. Žižek suggests that Schmitt represents an alternative to Rancière’s three forms of philosophical disavowal of politics (archepolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics), which Žižek calls “ultra-politics.” Ultrapolitics is “the attempt to depoliticize...conflict by bringing it to its extreme.”⁷⁸ For Schmitt, according to Žižek, this extreme is war, and ultrapolitics is the displacement of political contestation onto military conflict. Now, Mouffe does not radicalize politics by militarizing it, indeed, it is just here that she differs from Schmitt. However, it seems to me that we could employ Žižek’s concept of “ultrapolitics” slightly differently, interpreting the radicalization of politics involved not as an increased intensity of conflict,⁷⁹ but as a radicalization of the philosophical status of politics. Mouffe displaces the everyday conflicts of ontic politics on to what she considers a more fundamental, ontological conflict. Schmitt also radicalizes politics by referring it to ontology, as it is in a search for ground or condition of politics which leads Schmitt to turn to the friend/enemy distinction and thus draw the connection between war and politics in the first place. Furthermore, Mouffe shares with Schmitt this concern for the ontological character of the political (indeed, she

⁷⁵Mouffe, “Carl Schmitt”, 51.

⁷⁶Zizek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-politics”, 27.

⁷⁷Rancière, *Disagreement*, 13.

⁷⁸Zizek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-politics”, 29.

⁷⁹Indeed, it is not clear to me that militarization necessarily does intensify the level of conflict beyond that which is properly political, at least if one shares Žižek’s Leninist sympathy for the role of terror in politics.

argues that the political “is inherent to every human society and...determines our very ontological condition”⁸⁰).

Žižek argues that the militarization of politics in Schmitt is in fact a disavowal of politics; can the same be said of an ontologization of politics? We can follow Žižek and Rancière here too, I think, in their argument that the way in which political philosophy avoids politics is by setting up a “truth” of politics in contrast to which the phenomenal manifestations of politics can be disregarded.⁸¹ Ontologizing the political functions in just this way; in Mouffe’s case, the ontology of the political is held to require a particular kind of agonistic contestation, which functions to delimit a particular range of appropriate political actions. It is on the basis of her political ontology (in particular, the pluralism she draws from post-structuralism) that Mouffe asserts the necessity of distinguishing between the enemy, who is a matter of external threat, and the adversary, who must be disagreed with but not destroyed.⁸² By limiting the political to agonistic rather than antagonistic conflicts, however, Mouffe is presenting something very like the limits on political disagreement expressed in ethical terms by Rawls, although in Mouffe this ethical limitation is displaced and recast into ontological terms. Nonetheless, the logical structure of this kind of limitation of politics is the same, and so in Mouffe in fact we have an ontological version of the kind of “rational reconstruction” of politics that Rancière calls “parapolitics.”⁸³

1.7 The Dissolution of Politics

Rancière’s rejection of the project of delimiting the political by providing it with ontological foundations is a clear critique of the approaches of Badiou, Laclau, and Mouffe. However, like the three other authors, Rancière’s position issues from a critique of Althusser. Furthermore, Rancière’s critique targets many of the same aspects of Althusser’s thought as the critiques of Badiou, Laclau, and Mouffe: Althusser’s attempt to encompass politics within philosophical knowledge, his insistence (even if only in the last instance) on the determining role of the economic, and the related belief in a single site—the proletariat—of revolutionary potential. Indeed, we could see Laclau, Badiou, Mouffe, and Rancière as tracing a particular trajectory of post-Althusserian thought, of which Rancière marks the most extreme point. For Laclau and Badiou, the ontology of antagonism is employed to locate a point, named politics, at which the closure of this ontology is seen to be impossible. For Mouffe, the Schmittian ontological schism between friend and enemy is used against both Schmitt and liberalism to show that the completion of a political community—whether ethical or rational—is impossible, and that it is this impossibility which makes the community *political* in the first place. Finally, Rancière asserts the lack of closure and completion—the lack of foundation—as an axiom which defines politics. What all three positions share is a desire to theorize politics in a way that would not leave politics bound to, or limited by, this

⁸⁰Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 3.

⁸¹Zizek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-politics”, 29; Rancière, *Disagreement*, 63.

⁸²Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 4.

⁸³Rancière associates parapolitics with Aristotle and Hobbes (Rancière, *Disagreement*, 70-80). Žižek points out that, in this respect, Rawlsians and Habermasians are our contemporary Hobbesians (Zizek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-politics”, 28).

theorization, and in the end, it seems to me, Rancière is right to insist that the only way in which this theoretical capture of politics can be avoided is by refusing to give politics any theoretical foundation at all.

By taking this tendency in response to Althusser to its logical conclusion, Rancière reveals a problem which all four of these post-Althusserians share. They all in different ways turn to the autonomy of the political in order to ensure that the political remains free of the imperialism of Althusserian science, which would claim to be able to determine politics theoretically, thus abolishing its creative and subjective dimensions. However, any attempt to establish the autonomy of the political *theoretically* reinscribes politics within theory; the theory which establishes the autonomy of the political must also include an account of the nature of the political, and the nature of autonomy, and in doing so will set certain limits on what politics is and can be, and the ultimate authority for these limits is theoretical. Even Rancière circumscribes politics theoretically, as his assertion of the lack of theoretical foundation for politics becomes the occasion for a very specific account of what politics is and what it is not; any understanding of politics which falls outside of these (theoretically established) boundaries is condemned for making politics dependent on theory.⁸⁴ In the end, then, the attempt to escape from Althusserian structuralist determinism by theorizing the autonomy of the political is unsuccessful: the logical conclusion of the attempt to establish the autonomy of the political is to attempt to liberate politics even from theory, but no theoretical account of politics can accomplish this type of liberation.

Perhaps, then, we need to rethink the whole approach to politics taken by the post-Althusserians. If we cannot theoretically establish the autonomy of the political, perhaps we should (in fact, we may have to) consider what happens when we think of politics as non-autonomous. This is the approach I will take in this dissertation, and, in particular, I will attempt to understand the imbrication of the political with the economic and the social. It turns out that we can find some useful material for this way of understanding politics in aspects of Marx's work which were largely ignored by the Marxist tradition to which the post-Althusserians were responding.

1.8 How (not) to return to Marx

Early in his career, Marx undertook a critique of politics, that is, a critique of political emancipation, the emancipation of politics from material concerns which he saw as one of the central mystifying self-justifications of the modern state.⁸⁵ In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to show how this critique of the autonomy of the political is something we can trace through Marx's work up to and including his mature work in political economy. Focusing on this aspect of Marx's work gives us a different understanding of the relationship between economics and politics than the one which was taken up by the Marxist tradition which the post-Althusserians eventually came to criticize. My purpose in returning to Marx, however, is not simply to repeat Marx, to revocalize his words as if this were a sufficient argument against post-Marxism; I will not use Marxism as a fixed body of knowledge which may be applied orthopedically to correct the errors

⁸⁴Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 137-8.

⁸⁵See chapter 2.

of post-Marxism.⁸⁶ Rather, my reading of Marx here will of necessity be a partial one, concentrating on those points where his approach appears to derive from the critique of politics, and with little to say about parts of his work which follow different logics. Because I am not attempting to produce a complete reading of Marx, I am also largely uninterested in arguing that the post-Marxists have read Marx incorrectly; they may have simply read different parts of Marx or read different things in them.⁸⁷

A particularly clear example of the type of return to (or reassertion of) Marxism which I wish to avoid is provided by Wood's *The Retreat from Class*. Wood discusses a number of post-Marxist theorists, including Laclau, Mouffe, Hindess, Hirst, and Stedman Jones (all one-time Althusserians) who she calls "new 'true' socialists,"⁸⁸ arguing that these authors, like the "true" socialists criticized by Marx, have produced a "socialism" which rejects class division and class struggle in favor of an appeal to "universal human values."⁸⁹ Wood criticizes Laclau and Mouffe for arguing that there are no unified class interests that arise directly from economic relations of production.⁹⁰ Against this, Wood endorses a traditional understanding of class, in which class is an objective and unified economic reality, which provides the conditions for, and constrains the possibility of, a "translation" of economic interests into political action.⁹¹ Politics, that is, is a process of first identifying objective class interests, and then constructing a political organization that corresponds to these interests (I will argue in chapter 4 that we can find an alternative understanding of class, particularly in the *Communist Manifesto*, in which class is spectral rather than objective).

The problem with Wood's analysis here is that, for all its rhetorical invocation of objective interests and material class realities, it remains resolutely idealist, treating post-Marxism as a philosophical error in the interpretation of Marx, rather than considering it as an attempt to grapple with changes in historical circumstances.⁹² All four of the post-Marxists discussed in this chapter are motivated by their sense that Althusserian Marxism is in some way inadequate to understand particular political circumstances. For Badiou and Rancière the event that prompts this reflection is May 1968, although in Badiou's case the impetus is the Maoist influence on the events (and its eventual failure), while for Rancière the specific impetus is what he takes to be the PCF and Althusser's betrayal of the activists of '68. Laclau's experience of Latin American Trotskyism and the influence of dependency theory is an important influence on his own relationship to Althusser's work as is the apparent failure of working-class militancy and the rise of New Social Movements in the 1980s, the latter of which are also important influences on Mouffe.

⁸⁶The tendency of Marxists to respond to post-Marxism with a simple reassertion of what Marx (supposedly) "really said" is discussed in Sim, *Post-Marxism*, 37-41.

⁸⁷This is not to say that I *always* believe post-Marxists have read Marx correctly; there are parts in what follows in which I read the same part of Marx as some post-Marxist authors and come to different conclusions about them; the main occasions on which I think post-Marxists have misread Marx are Rancière on the young Marx's critique of the state (see p. 30), and Laclau on determinism in the *Communist Manifesto* (see p. 68).

⁸⁸Wood, *Retreat From Class*, 1.

⁸⁹Wood, *Retreat From Class*, 2.

⁹⁰Wood, *Retreat From Class*, 59-60.

⁹¹Wood, *Retreat From Class*, 95.

⁹²Wood disclaims any attempt to analyze the "specific historical causes" of post-Marxism, which she says are only "a question for speculation," focusing instead on their "theoretical provenance" (Wood, *Retreat From Class*, 11).

All of these could be broadly brought under the rubric of “post-Fordism,” involving as they do various changes in local and global organizations of production that arose in the second half of the twentieth century: the attack on the Fordist welfare compromise and a move away from the hegemony of factory work in the west, and new forms of economic dependency between the global north and south. While, as I have explained in this chapter, I have some scepticism about the way in which these post-Marxists attempt to understand these new circumstances, I agree with them that these political and economic changes present a challenge to prevailing interpretations of Marxism. However, rather than respond by emphasizing the autonomy of the political, I believe a better response is to reinterpret the interrelationship of the economic and the political. In the rest of this dissertation, I hope to demonstrate that through a re-reading of Marx it is possible to develop such a reinterpretation of the categories of “economic” and “political,” one which would be adequate to understanding today’s politics.

Chapter 2

“The Illusion of the State”: The Young Marx’s Critique of Politics

The young Marx certainly wrote critically on politics, but to say this is not the same as saying that he put forward a critique *of* politics, still less a critique of politics that would trouble post-Marxist advocates of the political. It is my intention in this chapter to argue that Marx’s early criticism of Hegel and the young Hegelians does indeed involve a critique of politics as such. Through his critical use of Hegelian and Feuerbachian themes in *On the Jewish Question* and the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, Marx develops a theory of “the illusion of the state,” which is, however, not merely a critique of the Hegelian conception of the state. Hegel is a privileged target for Marx because Hegel theorizes the modern state in a way which is particularly symptomatic of modern politics. Marx argues that Hegel achieves a particularly acute understanding of modern politics that is also a revealing *mis*understanding, because Hegel’s method reflects modern politics in crucial ways. The Hegelian understanding of politics is, in a sense, the self-understanding (and so also the self-delusion) of modern politics, and so the critical interpretation of Hegel’s politics is also a critical interpretation of modern politics in its historically specific form, independent of Hegel. Thus, I will argue, the illusory character of the state is, for Marx, the objective form of a more general mystification produced by modern politics and embodied in the idea of political autonomy. Reading Marx’s critique of politics as a critique of the illusion embedded in political autonomy, however, depends on a category of “practical illusion” that Marx does not fully flesh out in his works of 1843-5, and which, given the Feuerbachian framework within which he was working, he may not have been able to flesh out in this period.

2.1 The object of critique

Marx’s early critique of politics was composed at a point when he was very much in the orbit of Hegelian philosophy. The major work here, the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, puts forward a critique of politics as a critique of *Hegel’s* politics, while the other texts which develop this early critique, such as the articles for the *Deutsch-Französischer Jahrbucher*, engage critically with Marx’s Young Hegelian contemporaries. To understand Marx’s critique of politics, then,

it is important to get a clear idea of Hegel's own political philosophy, particularly the basis of Hegel's understanding of the nature and role of the state. Further, as will become clear, because the concepts and categories that Marx uses in his critique of Hegel and Hegelians are themselves developments of the philosophical tools of Hegel's logic, it is also important to lay out those aspects of Hegelian philosophy, particularly logic and metaphysics, upon which Marx will seize.

To treat Hegel's political philosophy in the context of his wider logical and metaphysical system is to treat Hegel as Marx treated him, and indeed as Hegel believes his own work should be treated, as he is adamant that his political philosophy be seen as an integral part of that system.¹ The "science of right," as Hegel calls his political philosophy is, he writes, "a section of philosophy."² In Hegel's understanding of philosophy, this means that a philosophy of politics must "develop the Idea,"³ that is, illustrate how politics is "the world of mind [*Geist*] brought forth out of itself."⁴ Thus, political philosophy forms a department of the overall system laid out in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, specifically the section on "objective spirit [*Geist*]."⁵ The *Philosophy of Right* approaches this same subject matter from a slightly altered viewpoint. Rather than seeing ethical life as the arena in which spirit develops itself, political philosophy looks to this process of development of spirit to illuminate the immanent logic of political phenomena. Philosophy allows politics "to be grasped in thought.... The content which is already rational in principle must win the *form* of rationality and so appear well-founded to untrammelled thinking."⁶ This relationship between the metaphysics of the development of mind, and the study of politics, will form one of the focuses of Marx's critique of Hegel.

The logic underlying this approach is summarized by Hegel in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* in the phrase "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational."⁷ He expands on this remark in his shorter *Logic*, in which he differentiates his philosophy from "the popular fancy that Ideas and ideals are nothing but chimeras," while at the same time opposing "the very different fancy that Ideas and ideals are something far too excellent to have actuality, or something too impotent to procure it for themselves."⁸ The fundamental attachment underlying this "distance

¹The extent to which the *Philosophy of Right* needs to be interpreted as a part of an entire metaphysical system is a matter of some debate. "All agree that the *Philosophy of Right* is *intended* by Hegel to be understood within the context of his larger philosophical system," but "they disagree on how correct Hegel was to have this self-understanding of his own work" (Brooks, *Hegel's Political Philosophy*, 4). The two positions on this question are sometimes called the "metaphysical" and "non-metaphysical" readings, as they disagree about whether understanding *The Philosophy of Right* requires reference to the specific details of the metaphysical system Hegel develops elsewhere (for an overview of the debate see Beiser, "Hegel, A Non-Metaphysician?"; Pinkard, "Non-Metaphysical Reading"; Beiser, "Response"). In recent years this debate seems to have become less polarized, with Pinkard now rejecting, not the relevance of the Hegelian system as such but rather the idea that Hegel had an "a priori method" which he thought could apply to any content (Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*, 36n22), while Beiser takes the similar position that Hegel "stresses that its [his social and political philosophy] specific doctrines derive entirely from the immanent logic of its subject matter" Beiser, *Hegel*, 196.

²Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 14.

³Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 14.

⁴Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 20.

⁵Wood, "Hegel's Political Philosophy", 298.

⁶Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 3.

⁷Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 10.

⁸Hegel, *Logic*, 9.

between idea and reality” is “the imperative ‘ought,’”⁹ that is, the idea of something that should be the case but is not. In contrast to this separation of the *ought* from the *is*, for Hegel, philosophy focuses on the development by which the *ought* manifests itself in what *is*, or what *is* adapts itself to what *ought* to be. It is in this sense that Hegel’s philosophy focuses on the idea, not as something separate *from* reality, but rather as something the manifestation of which is continuously visible within reality. As Hegel puts it, “the object of philosophy is the Idea: and the idea is not so impotent as merely to have a right or an obligation to exist without actually existing.”¹⁰

The way in which this process makes itself felt in political philosophy is in the central role Hegel gives to *universality*. For Hegel, the development of politics is the development of concrete universality, because it is in the institutions of politics (primarily the state) that the universality of mind takes a concrete form.¹¹ This idea of concrete universality is of particular importance in understanding Hegel (and Marx’s critique of Hegel) because it both explains what is *specific* about the state, and presents this specificity as something particularly valuable. Politics is an instance of one of the fundamental processes of Hegel’s logic, the movement from the abstract to the concrete.

That Hegel should begin with abstraction is surprising, as he himself admits. We’re used to thinking of abstraction as a mental process in which the specific details of a thing are removed, with the abstract being the result, the end-point of this process. Hegel argues, however, that abstraction is a starting point, because it is immediate, given to us simply as something which exists, without any of the determinate qualities which are only acquired through *determination*, that is, through a process of mediation.¹² This is why Hegel begins the *Philosophy of Right* with abstract right, the sphere of a will which is free only in an abstract sense.¹³ This abstract will is free because it is capable of willing anything, that is, it is free of specific determination; for precisely this reason, it is also abstract, it is a “completely abstract ego in which every concrete restriction and value is negated and without value.”¹⁴ The conceptual development that is traced through the *Philosophy of Right* is the concretization of this freedom, the way in which freedom can acquire specific determinations while remaining free (in fact, Hegel would argue, more free, as freedom of the abstract will is only implicit, a freedom implied by absence of restriction, while concrete freedom is explicit, a freedom the action of which is fully specified). The form in which freedom becomes concrete is the state, which is “the actuality of concrete freedom,”¹⁵ and the largest portion of the *Philosophy of Right* is dedicated to studying this form, in order to demonstrate how it allows freedom to become concrete. It is here also that Marx focuses his criticism.

This process of concretization, in which what is only implicitly present, or present in a limited, abstract, manner, becomes fully and concretely actual, is explained by Hegel through a number of central concepts of his logic. Particularly important for understanding Marx’s critique are the conceptual pairs essence-appearance and form-content. Essence arises through the mediation, that is to say, determination and hence concretization, of being. Being is immediate, and so inde-

⁹Hegel, *Logic*, 9.

¹⁰Hegel, *Logic*, 10.

¹¹Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 160.

¹²Hegel, *Logic*, 135.

¹³Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 37.

¹⁴Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 35.

¹⁵Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 160.

terminate and abstract. However, once this limited, immediate, character of being is understood, immediate being comes to be seen as “mere seeming”;¹⁶ if the immediacy of being renders it limited and partial, then its existence implies the existence of something else, it “must be shown to be mediated by or based upon something else,”¹⁷ there must be an essence of which immediate being is the appearance. From this arises the intimate connection between appearance and essence. Hegel does not oppose appearance to essence, by positing appearance as a mere appearance, a falsification that prevents us from apprehending the truth of essence. Rather, appearance is the way in which essence shows itself: “to show or shine is the characteristic by which essence is distinguished from being—by which it is essence; and it is this show which, when it is developed, shows itself, and is appearance.”¹⁸ If essence were solely something hidden by appearances, it would be wholly self-contained, something separate from existence. But, because essence does in fact come to exist, it must manifest itself in the world, and this manifestation is appearance.¹⁹ This combination of essence and appearance, in which appearance is the necessary mode of manifestation of essence, is what Hegel calls actuality.²⁰ Because of this, to understand the actuality of political phenomena, we must understand how these phenomena appear in the particular way that they do because of the specific features of the essence of which they are the appearance.

The method Hegel proposes we use to study these appearances is the dialectic of form and content. When the essence manifests itself as a certain appearance, it takes on a certain form, and so the appearance is grounded on this form. This means, however, that form is itself the content of appearance. Because form is the content of appearance, appearance “goes on to an endless mediation of subsistence by means of form.”²¹ Because appearance is an ongoing mediation of form and content, the study of appearance is a study of this relation between form and content, with the goal of divining what underlies this mediation, “the absolute correlation of content and form.”²² We see this method employed throughout the *Philosophy of Right*, in which particular institutional and ethical forms of politics are interpreted on the basis of their incomplete correlation with their proper contents. This is also an important element of Marx’s critique, as he maintains that Hegel does not in fact demonstrate this adequacy of form to content, and thus that the political forms advocated by Hegel have a very different content from the one Hegel believes them to have.

2.2 The Transformative Method

The most common interpretation of Marx’s early writings on Hegel and the young Hegelians is to see them as strongly influenced by Feuerbach, with Marx adopting the method used by Feuerbach to criticize Hegel, called “transformative criticism,” and applying this more broadly

¹⁶Hegel, *Logic*, 163.

¹⁷Hegel, *Logic*, 113.

¹⁸Hegel, *Logic*, 186.

¹⁹Hegel, *Logic*, 187.

²⁰Hegel, *Logic*, 187.

²¹Hegel, *Logic*, 188.

²²Hegel, *Logic*, 189.

to the philosophical and political work of the young Hegelians.²³ Feuerbach's method is typically glossed as an inversion, in which Hegel's ideas are inverted in order to correct a mistake on Hegel's part, in which "speculative philosophy misplaces the concrete for the abstract and vice-versa. For Hegel, ideas cause material things to happen, whereas for Marx material things cause ideas to be held."²⁴ In this reading, Hegel mistakenly identified the idea as the real, concrete subject, and the material as an abstract predicate, and the correct position can thus be found by inverting this inversion, establishing the material and particular as subject and the ideal or universal as predicate.

In the interpretation of the young Marx as a Feuerbachian, then, he is held to have applied this method to the relationship between state and civil society. In Hegel, the state is the universal ideal and civil society the material particular, so the Feuerbachian inversion would understand civil society as the real subject and the state as the predicate. As one critic of Marx's supposed Feuerbachianism puts it, because "actuality, in Marx's view, lies on the side of particularity and difference, the concept of the state which Hegel develops over and against family and civil society will thus be a kind of universal mysticism."²⁵ In this view of the young Marx as essentially a Feuerbachian critic of Hegel and the young Hegelians, Marx's critique proceeds by identifying the state as unreal and, in contrast, civil society as real. From this follows a reading of Marx as economic, as simply *rejecting* politics as an unreal illusion, and endorsing, as against this, the reality of private property and exchange, that is, civil society considered as the sphere of the economic. It is this reading of the young Marx's critique of Hegel as a mechanical inversion of Hegel and a concomitant rejection of politics, that I want to question in this chapter.

It is, to say the least, a matter of debate whether Feuerbach in fact practiced the formal inversion attributed to him as the "transformative method."²⁶ It is a further matter of debate whether, or to what extent or in what way, Marx practiced this method, and it is this question that I want to address, in order to open up some questions about the way in which Marx employs Hegelian categories. Defenses of Hegel against Marx's criticism frequently turn on the inadequacies of the Feuerbachian method. McCarney, for instance, laments the way in which Marx followed "the seductive example of Ludwig Feuerbach and his transformative logic."²⁷ In particular, McCarney argues that both Marx and Feuerbach adopted a (particular and contestible) reading of Hegel in which the idea, or spirit, is "an autonomous center of subjectivity and action, a non-human, super-person who intervenes in, and shapes, our history," rather than seeing spirit as "distributed over and embodied in the totality of human selves and as wholly constituted by that distribution and

²³Jackson, for instance, considers "Marx's reliance on Ludwig Feuerbach for transformative criticism" to be "too well known to detail" in an article taking issue with Marx's critique of Hegel (Jackson, "Marx's 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'", 801). Althusser and Avineri, to name two, agree on the importance of Feuerbach's method to Marx's early work, though they disagree on whether this makes the young Marx's work more or less valuable (Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 33; Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 12). Notable denials of the significance of Feuerbach's influence include Lucio Colletti, "Introduction," in Marx, *Early Writings*, 22-4 and Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 289.

²⁴Jackson, "Marx's 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'", 801.

²⁵Peddle, "Hegel's Political Ideal: Civil Society, History and Sittlichkeit", 115.

²⁶Power, "Which Equality? Badiou and Rancière in Light of Ludwig Feuerbach", 72.

²⁷McCarney, "Hegel's Legacy", 120.

embodiment.”²⁸ The transformative method rejects Hegel by rejecting this “transcendence” of spirit beyond human life and experience.

I am unpersuaded by this interpretation of Marx, in part because it depends on a dichotomy between “immanent” and “transcendent” readings of Hegel. McCarney’s defense of Hegel turns on accusing Marx and Feuerbach of misinterpreting Hegel as seeing spirit as transcendent whereas, according to McCarney, Hegel rejected the idea of transcendent spirit and understood spirit to be something immanent in human lives, but it is too simple to say that locating moments of transcendence in Hegel is a misreading. Hegel in fact employs moments of transcendence and moments of immanence; indeed, the dialectic of abstract and concrete turns on the way in which what appears at first as transcendent is later shown to be immanent. As I will try to show, Marx recognized both these moments of immanence and transcendence in Hegel, and, where he criticizes the transcendence of spirit in Hegel, he is criticizing Hegel for failing to live up to what Marx believes are Hegel’s own standards. The complexity of the relationship between immanence and transcendence, and the resulting instability in the way in which Marx criticizes Hegel’s use of these concepts, underlies some of the difficulties and instabilities in Marx’s early writings.

To emphasize the difficulty inherent in situating Marx’s critique of Hegel in relation to this dichotomy of immanence or transcendence of the idea, it is interesting to note that Marx’s interpretation of Hegel has also been criticized for not recognizing the ideal element in Hegel’s political theory. Here, Marx is taken to have understood Hegel’s political philosophy to be a “celebration of the existing state,”²⁹ and so to have failed to realize that the concepts that Hegel describes in the *Philosophy of Right* are rational ideals that are at best partially actualized in the institutions that exist at any historical moment. This attempt to defend Hegel, however, risks making the idea too distinct from reality, an “empty ideal,” thus making Hegel’s philosophy the very thing he opposed, “the erection of a beyond supposed to exist, God knows where.”³⁰ As Kouvelakis points out, the young Hegelian writers Marx was in dialogue with were well aware of the complexity of the relationship between the promotion of ideals and the endorsement of reality in Hegel’s political philosophy.³¹ Marx takes a particular position on this, recognizing that Hegel *intends* to demonstrate the mutual interconnection of the idea and its material appearance. However, Marx argues, Hegel fails to establish this connection, a failure which Hegel masks by asserting both that the idea is separate from reality, and that reality directly instantiates the idea. Marx argues that, because these two contradictory claims are never given a genuinely dialectical resolution, Hegel vacillates between “uncritical idealism” and “uncritical positivism.”³² This is why Marx so frequently describes Hegel’s appeals to logic and the movement of the concept as *mystifications*. The problem is not just that Hegel is wrong; rather, Hegel is systematically wrong in a way that conceals the true nature both of his philosophy and of the political reality it seeks to comprehend.

²⁸McCarney, “Hegel’s Legacy”, 117-8.

²⁹Jackson, “Marx’s ‘Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’”, 803.

³⁰Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 10.

³¹Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 238.

³²Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, 385.

2.3 Is *On the Jewish Question* a Critique of the State?

While Marx does not adopt *in toto* the Feuerbachian method of inversion, Feuerbach is a constant reference point throughout Marx's early writings, even while Marx's conclusions differ from Feuerbach's. Kouvelakis argues that, in Marx's use, Feuerbach's concepts are "transformed as a result of their integration into a conceptual apparatus that seeks to push the internal limits of the Hegelian system beyond themselves."³³ While Kouvelakis is correct that Marx transforms Feuerbachian concepts, it seems to me that he overemphasizes the extent to which Marx was in fact able to integrate Feuerbachian concepts into his argument. I will argue that Marx turns to Feuerbach to provide metaphysical support for a criticism of Hegel and of modern politics that cannot in fact be understood on Feuerbachian premises. This appears in a particularly sharp form in *On the Jewish Question*, perhaps because of its short and polemical nature, and also because it employs what appears to be a transformative argument against Bauer before drawing distinctly non-Feuerbachian conclusions; much of *On the Jewish Question* presents what appears to be an argument for the ideality, and hence unreality, of the state, along broadly Feuerbachian lines, but the conclusion Marx eventually draws involves a critique of politics much more broadly conceived, as not itself unreal, but rather something which exists as a system of mystifications. Marx attempts to develop a theory of the mystificatory character of politics on the basis of a Feuerbachian metaphysics which is ultimately unable to support it. Hence the persistent temptation to read *On the Jewish Question* as a Feuerbachian rejection of the state as mere illusion.

That the state is the subject matter of *On the Jewish Question* is determined in the first instance by the fact that it was written as a response to Bauer's writing on the Jewish Question. The Jewish Question is the question of the political emancipation of the Jews, which Bauer interprets in a way specific to the German case, as being the question of how Jews relate to a specifically Christian state. This formulation of the question allows Bauer to respond with a criticism of religion: for Bauer, Jewish emancipation is impossible, and the blame for that falls equally on the religiosity of the Jewish inhabitants of Germany, and of the Christian state: in Marx's paraphrase of Bauer, "the most rigid form of opposition between Jew and Christian is the *religious* opposition.... How does one make a religious opposition impossible? By *abolishing religion*."³⁴ Marx criticizes this attempt to shift focus from politics to religion by insisting on keeping our attention on the state; Bauer already assumes the religious nature of the question when he "subjects only the Christian state to criticism, and not the 'state as such.'"³⁵ Marx's response to Bauer is thus to radicalize Bauer's "theological" critique by turning it into a critique of the state, to "humanize the contradiction between the state and *religion in general* by resolving it into the contradiction between the state and its own general presuppositions."³⁶

Marx thus generalizes and secularizes the conflict that concerns Bauer, between a Christian state and non-Christians, turning it into the opposition between the state as such and its other: "the conflict in which the individual believer in a *particular* religion finds himself with his own

³³Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 289.

³⁴Marx, "On the Jewish Question", 213.

³⁵Marx, "On the Jewish Question", 216.

³⁶Marx, "On the Jewish Question", 216.

citizenship and with other men as members of the community is reduced to the *secular* division between the *political* state and civil society.”³⁷ This division between political state and civil society is specifically a feature of the modern state, of the type of state that developed in breaking with feudalism. In feudalism, civil society was itself political, in that “the elements of civil life had a *directly political* character, i.e., the elements of civil life such as property, the family, and the mode and manner of work were elevated in the form of seignory, estate and guild to the level of the elements of political life.”³⁸ Thus, in feudal society, an individual’s life in civil society was their mode of political participation, a participation which was “political in the feudal sense,” that is, a form of politics that excluded everyone but the monarch from direct political involvement.³⁹

The transformation from feudalism to the modern state, on the other hand, replaces this exclusion with the inclusion of everyone in the the state. The bourgeois revolutions “constituted the political state as a concern of the whole people.”⁴⁰ This inclusion of every individual in the state is accomplished by abolishing the previous system of mediating exclusions from the political, the estates, guilds, etc. that gave civil society its political character, that is, by excluding civil society from politics. However, because civil society is made up of the “civil life”⁴¹ of individuals, the exclusion of civil society from politics is also the exclusion of this individual civil life from politics. The modern state, therefore, does not accomplish the complete inclusion of “the whole people” in politics. Rather, it replaces the exclusion of the greater part of the population from politics, with the exclusion of the greater part of each individual’s life from politics. The division between state and civil society is a division within each individual, who becomes simultaneously man and citizen, and leads a “double life,” considering themselves as simultaneously a “communal being” and a “private individual.”⁴²

This theory of a duality between bourgeois and citizen does not yet entail the difference of *kind* characteristic of the transformative method, in which one pole of the duality is considered ideal and the other real.⁴³ Marx’s interpretation of this division in terms of “a life in heaven and a life on earth”⁴⁴ derives from the particular structure of the critique of Hegel that underpins *On the Jewish Question*. Marx criticizes this division between man and citizen for its lack of universality, the way it consigns human beings to two partial and incomplete spheres of existence. In making this argument, however, Marx must deal with a Hegelian objection, because, for Hegel, political life, because of its participation in the state, necessarily partakes of the state’s universality. Marx thus needs an understanding of what the state *is*, if it is not universal; the metaphysics for which he reaches is that of Feuerbach.

Marx follows Hegel in considering universality as the characteristic that makes the modern

³⁷Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

³⁸Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 232.

³⁹Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 232.

⁴⁰Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 232.

⁴¹Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 232.

⁴²Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

⁴³As Colletti points out, Marx owes this idea of the division between man and citizen to Rousseau, who does not consider either side of the division to be unreal (Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, 179)

⁴⁴Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

state the “true state.”⁴⁵ However, his evaluation of the actual universality of the modern state differs significantly from Hegel’s. The universality of the political state is, for Marx, abstract, that is to say merely partial and contingent, because the state does not merely exist in contrast to civil society, but depends *on* civil society. The limits of the state’s universality can be seen “at those times when it is particularly self-confident,” when it attempts to “constitute itself as the real species-life of man” by asserting its universality through the destruction of civil society.⁴⁶ This will inevitably fail, because the attempt to destroy civil society puts the state “in violent contradiction to the conditions of its own existence.”⁴⁷ This attempt at self-assertion by the state is a “political drama,” and only a drama, in that it inevitably leaves the division between the state and society unchanged.

When the state is acting within its proper limits, “in its own way,” it does not seek the abolition of civil society, but rather its “political annulment” which, as with the political annulment of private property, “does not mean the abolition of private property; on the contrary, it even presupposes it.”⁴⁸ The state presupposes private property, along with the other categories of civil society (religion, occupation, etc.) because they provide the particular determinations in opposition to which the state appears universal: “it only experiences itself as a *political state* and asserts its *universality* in opposition to these elements.”⁴⁹ The state presupposes civil society because its universality is only defined negatively, through a contrast with the particularity of civil society.

The relevance of Marx’s starting-point in the essay, the critique of religion, to the critique of the state, lies here, in the modern state’s separation of itself from civil society. Marx rejects Bauer’s position because Bauer criticizes religion from the standpoint of politics without recognizing that politics has the same structure as religion, and so the state cannot abolish religion, but rather preserves religion “in a political form.”⁵⁰ This political form is based on the contrast between state and civil society, and so the state establishes political freedom by contrasting it with non-political unfreedom, which unfreedom it thus needs to preserve. Political emancipation is therefore emancipation “in a *devious* way, through a medium” which restricts this emancipation and, as in religion, it is the medium which acquires freedom, rather than the human being. “The state is the indeterminacy between man and man’s freedom. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man attributes all his divinity, all his *religious constraints*, so the state is the intermediary to which man transfers all his non-divinity, all his human non-constraint.”⁵¹ What politics and religion share is that they both involve the alienation of human powers onto something else; God, for religion, and the state, for politics.

This brings us to what would, if Marx were simply Feuerbachian, be the last step in the argument: the identification of the alien state as an illusion. The religious structure of the state is again important here. Marx repeatedly analogizes the division between state and civil society to that between heaven and earth, and calls “the relationship of the political state to civil society...just as

⁴⁵Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 112.

⁴⁶Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 222.

⁴⁷Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 222.

⁴⁸Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 219.

⁴⁹Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 219.

⁵⁰Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 223.

⁵¹Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 218-9.

spiritual” as this relationship.⁵² The state is spiritual because it is the spiritual or ideal form of civil society.⁵³ In a Feuerbachian account, this idealism of the state would be taken to be a Hegelian inversion of subject and predicate, in which the ideal is mistaken for the real and vice versa. In such a reading, the alien character of the state would be an index of its falsehood, as the alienation of human powers onto God is the index of God’s artificial character and the falsehood of religion. We can see a suggestion of this form of argument in Marx’s claim that “the sovereignty of man,” which is the basis of the state, is “the fantasy, the dream, the postulate of Christianity.”⁵⁴

After describing the state in terms that strongly recall Feuerbach’s critique of religion, Marx takes the unexpected step of describing the state, “an alien being distinct from man,” not as an illusion but as “a present and material reality, a secular maxim.”⁵⁵ Marx is here practising a very different sort of critique from that of Feuerbach; Marx is not interested in simply uncovering illusions, because these illusions themselves have material reality:

Man in his *immediate* reality, in civil society...where he regards himself and is regarded by others as a real individual...is an illusory phenomenon. In the state, on the other hand...he is the imaginary member of a fictitious sovereignty, he is divested of his real individual life and filled with an unreal universality.⁵⁶

Marx here is attempting something more complex than the mere dispelling of illusions, the identification of the material processes that make illusions real; as Kouvelakis puts it, Marx “seeks to explain the specific mechanisms that lead to the autonomization of political power.”⁵⁷ But on what grounds can he make this identification? The Feuerbachian metaphysics he has had recourse to throughout *On the Jewish Question* provides no space for the idea of a material fiction, and Marx does not elaborate on the nature of this paradoxical-seeming category.

Marx does, however, identify the source of the particular material fiction of the state in a problem with the Feuerbachian method itself. The identification of civil society as the real material foundation of the ideal state is in fact the standpoint of political emancipation, and it is the critique of this Feuerbachian inversion of Hegel that underpins Marx’s critique of political emancipation.⁵⁸

The political revolution regards civil society, the world of needs, of labor, of private interests and of civil law, as the foundation of its existence.... Man as he is member of civil society is taken to be the *real* man, *man* as distinct from *citizen*... whereas political man is simply abstract, artificial man.... Actual man is acknowledged only in the form of the *egoistic* individual and *true* man only in the form of the abstract citizen.⁵⁹

⁵²Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

⁵³Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 225.

⁵⁴Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 226.

⁵⁵Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

⁵⁶Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

⁵⁷Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 289.

⁵⁸Note that the idea that man of civil society is real and political man unreal, which Marx rejects, is the position which Rancière calls “metapolitics” and which he claims Marx provided “the canonical formula for” (Rancière, *Disagreement*, 82). Nealon points to Rancière as “the best current example” of what he sees as a tendency to accuse Marxism of positions which it in fact critiques: “Again, notice that it is Marxist theory, not capitalism, that oppresses” (Nealon, *Matter of Capital*, 169n4).

⁵⁹Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 234.

On the Jewish Question, then, does not adopt the Feuerbachian method of transformative critique in which the truth is the materialist inversion of Hegel's idealism, and so is not merely a critique of the state as unreal. To understand Marx's critique in *On the Jewish Question*, we must consider further his method, which allows him to understand both the state and civil society as both material and illusory. A fuller account of this method can be found by turning to Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*.

2.4 Marx's Method

A reading of *On the Jewish Question* shows that the inversion of Hegel characteristic of the Feuerbachian transformative method cannot fully explain Marx's critique of the young Hegelian approach to politics, but leaves the specifics of Marx's method unclear, and so also the specific terms of his critique. It is to these two questions I will now turn, first by laying out in general terms what I take to differentiate Marx's method from that of Feuerbach, and then turning to a more detailed investigation of how this method operates in Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*. This latter part will both allow me to provide more substantial textual support for my interpretation of Marx's method, and assess Marx's critique of politics in light of this method.

The Feuerbachian reading of Marx is exemplified by Avineri, who writes that, by applying the transformative method to Hegel, "Marx transcends the limitations of other Young Hegelians imprisoned by the Hegelian system."⁶⁰ The transformative method works by identifying ways in which its object inverts reality, and so acts as "the cipher which would enable [Marx] to decode the hidden truth in Hegel's thought."⁶¹ This idea that Hegel's thought contains a hidden truth leads Avineri to identify the inversion that Marx applied to Hegel's thought as an inversion of appearance and reality: for Hegel, "the phenomenal would always appear as a cloak for the idea behind it."⁶² The view Avineri is advancing here is one in which phenomena and idea are opposed to one another as truth and falsity, and the question is how these oppositions are to be aligned; whether, as in Hegel's "inverted" view, the phenomena are held to be a false mask for the true idea or, as in Marx according to Avineri, the phenomenal world is true and the idea a false hypostasization. However, for Hegel, and also for Marx, the relation between appearance and that which it is an appearance of is more complicated than a direct opposition, because appearance is always the appearance of something, to which it is intimately related. This complexity appears in unwanted ways in Avineri's own presentation, as in his claim that "actuality always appears different from its phenomenal manifestation," in which three terms (actuality, its appearance, and its phenomenal manifestation) exist in an uneasy and unclear relationship to one another.⁶³ The Feuerbachian reading of Marx as simply inverting Hegel's misidentification of appearance and reality fails to deal with the complexity of the relationship between appearance and reality which, as I will attempt to show, is in fact an integral part of Marx's critique of Hegel.

⁶⁰ Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 14.

⁶¹ Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 14.

⁶² Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 14.

⁶³ Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 14.

The dialectical, rather than straight-forwardly oppositional, relationship between appearance and reality is central to Marx's approach to Hegel, as Kouvelakis emphasizes. Marx rejects Young Hegelian attempts to find a "core" to Hegel's system in terms of which they could attempt to criticize Hegel's lapses from his own system, that is to say, "the illusion that there exists a relationship of externality between the system's essential principles and their phenomenal manifestation."⁶⁴ In contrast, Marx emphasizes the continuity between essential principles and phenomenal manifestations as a central principle of a criticism that does not try to spare the essential principles, an immanent criticism that has as its first task to "challenge the very notion that the system has a core hidden away somewhere beyond the reach of exoteric consciousness."⁶⁵ From the point of view of a philosophical system, the phenomenal manifestations of the system appear as its necessary consequences; the attempt to draw a sharp line between a system and its manifestations, that is, requires a position of transcendence abstracted from any engagement either in the philosophical system or in the world in which its manifestation takes place. It is this transcendent or abstract criticism which Marx opposes.

In this, Marx is a Hegelian critic of the Young Hegelians, and indeed a Hegelian critic of Hegel himself. The limitation that Hegel and the Young Hegelians share, and that Marx believes himself to have overcome, is that they ultimately base their criticisms on an abstract rationality. The development of phenomena in Hegel is always dictated by the concept, which is always about to become immanent in the phenomena, but never quite does (Marx illustrates this specifically in the political case, as I will show below). Hegel fails to achieve his own goal, "to apprehend in the show of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present," because he fails to demonstrate the immanence and presence of the eternal which instead remains something separate from the actual, and so Hegel's philosophy "looks beyond [the present] with the eyes of superior wisdom," and "is itself mere vacuity."⁶⁶ Hegel is in the end unable to move beyond an evaluation of the world in terms of an ideal abstracted from the world, while criticisms which simply invert Hegel preserve this abstract ideality in negative form, rejecting the rational rather than attempting to identify the rationality immanent in the material.

Marx's method thus does not just invert the content of Hegel's philosophy, swapping the subject with the predicate, but inverts the *form* of Hegel's philosophy. Where Hegel identifies the notion as something missing from the phenomena which slowly (but never completely) actualizes itself through these phenomena, for Marx, rationality is the retrospectively posited result of the contingent development of phenomena.⁶⁷ This is a critique of Hegel in a Hegelian spirit, in that Marx inverts Hegel in order to move both with and beyond him (that is, to perform the annulment and preservation denoted by the German *Aufheben*). As Kouvelakis puts it, Marx adopts a method that "enables the dialectical process to continue after breaking free of the bad abstractions that

⁶⁴Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 238.

⁶⁵Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 238.

⁶⁶Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 10.

⁶⁷My interpretation of Marx's method here is very close to what Žižek identifies as Hegel's method (Žižek, *For They Know Not*, 179–82). However, Žižek's Hegel is very different from the Hegel of Marxism, that is, the interpretation of Hegel that has conditioned Marxist attempts to understand Marx's relationship to Hegel, and because I am concerned with questioning certain Marxist interpretations of Marx, it is the Hegel of the Marxists I am interested in here.

block its development in Hegel.”⁶⁸ Marx intends to achieve what Hegel set out, but failed, to do. Where Hegel achieved only an abstract synthesis, Marx hopes to lay the groundwork for a concrete synthesis, and it is the specifically political instantiation of these competing attempts at synthesis that form the terms of Marx’s critique of Hegel’s understanding of politics.

2.5 Marx’s Critique of Politics

Marx’s most extended criticism of Hegel’s method occurs in the context of a critique of Hegel’s political philosophy.⁶⁹ This suggests the importance of Marx’s methodological differences with Hegel to Marx’s understanding of politics and indeed, I will claim, it is through a correct understanding of Marx’s critical method that we can see how Marx’s early critique of Hegel’s philosophy of the state is in fact something much broader, a critique of politics as such.

Marx’s critique of Hegel begins with Hegel’s starting point, in that the way in which Hegel begins his account of politics predisposes him to the errors his account will make. Avineri describes this as Hegel beginning his analysis with the state, so that “the individual appears in Hegelian philosophy only after the construction of the state has already been accomplished and perfected,” but this is not quite right; indeed, as a literal description of the *Philosophy of Right* it is false.⁷⁰ In that work, Hegel does not begin with the state but begins with the individual: the first part of the *Philosophy of Right* opens with a discussion of “abstract right,” the point-of-view from which “the subject is a person.”⁷¹ Marx’s objection is not that Hegel starts out by positing the state, but rather that the way in which Hegel understands the individuals from which he begins predisposes him to “discover” the state as the truth of these individuals. Hegel does not begin “by positing real subjects,” because he starts by positing *unreal* subjects, that is, he posits subjects that are incomplete or abstract, which will require something else to complete them.⁷² Hegel sees in the person only the abstract predicate, personality, and because he “starts not with an actual existent...but with predicates of universal determination, and because a vehicle for these determinations must exist, the mystical Idea becomes that vehicle.”⁷³ Hegel does derive the state from the individual, but he is only able to do so because of his initial understanding of the individual as abstract, an understanding in which the idea of the state is already implicit. Marx charges that Hegel’s philosophy in fact amounts to empty tautology.

Marx identifies this tautology as the fundamental weakness of Hegel’s understanding of the

⁶⁸Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 289.

⁶⁹The other work in which Marx undertakes a substantial—although significantly shorter—engagement with Hegel is in the section of the 1844 Manuscripts entitled “Critique of Hegel’s Dialectic and General Philosophy.” Here Marx addresses “[Hegel’s] *Phenomenology* which is the true birthplace and secret of the Hegelian philosophy” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, 383). As in the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, Marx criticizes what he takes to be Hegel’s abstraction, that is, Hegel’s reduction of history to “the *history of the production* of abstract, i.e., absolute, thought” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, 384). However, Marx adds to this a discussion of alienation, the concept developed throughout much of the rest of the *Manuscripts*.

⁷⁰Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 17.

⁷¹Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 37.

⁷²Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 80.

⁷³Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 80.

state. Hegel's stated aim is to proceed from the abstract particularity of the individual will to the concrete universality of the state. However, Marx argues, because Hegel can only derive the state on the basis of his posited abstractions, this abstract character remains throughout his entire presentation, and when he gets to the description of the supposedly concrete state "no progress has taken place.... The *abstract personality* was the subject of abstract law and it has not changed: the *abstract personality* reappears in the *personality of the state*."⁷⁴ Because he starts with the abstract, isolated, individual, Hegel inevitably makes the state into simply another abstract, isolated individual; this is the "secret" of Hegel's endorsement of constitutional monarchy, which Hegel presents as a profound deduction from the Idea but which, Marx argues, in reality "means only that the essence of the state is the abstract *private person*."⁷⁵

Hegel's theory of the state is supposed to present us with the state as the most fully developed form of universality, but according to Marx it at best presents the state as abstract universality, because Hegel rules out the basis of concrete universality by starting with individuals abstracted from the species, abstracted, that is, from "the social reality of man."⁷⁶ Because Hegel begins with the abstraction of the individual will, the result of his dialectic maintains this individuality, personifying the state, both literally, in that the state is personified in the monarch, and metaphysically, in that the state is universality understood as unity. Marx ridicules this focus on unity: "Hegel might argue with no less justification that because the individual man is one, the human species is only a single human being."⁷⁷ What Hegel misses is the inherently plural character of universality: to move from the particular to the universal is necessarily also to move from the one to the many. Because an individual is an individual, she cannot exemplify humanity in general; the concrete existence of humanity in general is simply the generality of humanity, that is to say, all people. "The predicate, the essence, can never exhaust the spheres of its existence in a *single one* but only in *many ones*."⁷⁸

Because Hegel constructs the state by abstraction from individuals, its universality remains merely formal. The "universal as form" arises when the individual is considered in the light of characteristics they share with other individuals, with a "universal concern."⁷⁹ Marx gives the example of an isolated individual scientist, whose activity is formally universal in that she attempts to discover truths that are universally valid. However, when this is carried out in isolation, this is still fundamentally an individual affair, and "science becomes truly universal only when it is no longer an individual affair but becomes a social one. This changes its content as well as its form."⁸⁰ For universality to be embodied in content, the content must be inherently plural, that is, depend on the interaction of multiple individuals, or, to put it a third way, universal content must be social. It is the lack of this social aspect that prevents Hegel from moving beyond formal universality; Hegel's political theory contains nothing that could serve as the universal content for the universal form of the state. All the potential candidates remain particular, whether that

⁷⁴Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 83.

⁷⁵Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 100.

⁷⁶Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 98.

⁷⁷Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 84.

⁷⁸Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 84.

⁷⁹Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 128.

⁸⁰Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 128.

is the monarch (a particular individual) or the bureaucracy (a particular class) or, and this is the most promising candidate, civil society, which is the sphere of particularity in general and, Hegel insists, particularity in general is still particular.

Marx does not limit his criticism of Hegel on this point to the claim that the state is a mere formal universality. Instead, he presses the attack, arguing that a form without content is no true form, and so the purely formal universality of the state ends up not even achieving mere universality of form, but is instead “a non-form, a self-deceiving, self-contradictory form, a *pseudo-form* whose illusory nature will show itself for what it is.”⁸¹ Here Marx is criticizing Hegel on eminently Hegelian grounds in insisting on the necessary adequacy of a form to its content. The “self-deceiving pseudo-form” of universality is, to be sure, not adequate to any universal content, but it will “show itself for what it is,” in that investigating the pseudo-form will allow us to discover the very particular type of non-universal content of which the state is the true and appropriate form. As Hegel provides us with no account of universal content, the content that corresponds to the form of the state must be particular. What renders this particular the appropriate pseudo-form of the state, however, is that the content is a kind of pseudo-content, a particular content that presents itself as universal. In the universal pseudo-form, the modern state has “discovered the form most appropriate to its content which is only the semblance of the real universal concern.”⁸² The modern state is a semblance of universal content that takes on a pseudo-form of universality.

What allows the state to portray this semblance of universality is the distinction between the particularities that make up civil society, on the one hand, and the particular (but, supposedly, universal) that is the state: “the state and the government are consistently placed on one side as identical and the people broken up into associations and individuals are placed on the other.”⁸³ The relationship between the two, however, is fundamentally antagonistic, because the state must simultaneously maintain its particularity by contrasting itself with other particulars, and maintain its apparent universality by contrasting itself to the totality of these particulars: “the ‘universal interest’ can only maintain itself as a ‘particular’ opposed to other particulars, as long as the particular maintains itself as a ‘universal’ opposed to universality.”⁸⁴ This process of “imaginery” universality is materialized in the institution of the state.⁸⁵ The bureaucracy, which Hegel conceives of as the universal class, is in fact the institution that appropriates universality as its particular domain, where “the universal interest of the state begins to develop into a ‘separate,’ and therefore a ‘real’ interest.”⁸⁶ That the bureaucracy has a real interest in its appropriation of the universal is important, because Marx maintains that Hegel’s error is not simply that he believes in illusions or reifies ideas (the inversion of subject and predicate), but rather that Hegel’s illusions are an accurate description of the way in which ideas are in fact reified in the modern state. The state’s claim to universality, personified by the bureaucracy, is “a network of *practical* illusion, or the ‘illusion of the state.’”⁸⁷

⁸¹Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 128.

⁸²Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 129.

⁸³Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 131.

⁸⁴Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 107.

⁸⁵Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 107.

⁸⁶Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 106.

⁸⁷Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 107.

This idea of the institutional objectification of illusions is central to Marx's critique of politics. Avineri and Kouvelakis both emphasize this element of Marx's critique of Hegel, and relate it to Marx's method in his later economic works, but I don't think either of them describes the full complexity of Marx's employment of this theme.⁸⁸ From Marx's description of the illusion of separation of universal interest from the totality of the population, he moves on to consider the Estates as an objectification of this division between the particularities of civil society and the pseudo-universality of the state. This is a kind of second-order objectification in which not only elements of the political system are objectified, but relationships *between* these elements are also objectified. First particularity is objectified in civil society and pseudo-universality is objectified in the state; then this division between the two is itself objectified in a further institution, the Estates, where "transaction between the state and civil society becomes manifest as a *particular* sphere."⁸⁹ Just as with the presentation of the universal as a particular in the bureaucracy, however, the presentation of the conflict between state and society in the Estates is an objectified illusion, in this case, the illusion that one institution (the Estates) could contain "the *synthesis* of the state and civil society."⁹⁰ Such a synthesis "ought properly to constitute the state," that is, on Hegelian logic, the synthesis of the particular and universal ought to constitute the highest synthesis in politics. But Hegel, for reasons already discussed, is incapable of envisaging such a synthesis, and "there is no indication of how the Estates should go about reconciling the two opposed tempers," and so Hegel "merely achieves symbollic representation" of such a synthesis.⁹¹

Hegel's failure to realize the illusory character of the synthesis he proposes is at the center of Marx's critique of Hegel's doctrine of the state, and his critique of modern politics which is the objectification of this illusion. Marx's criticism is not that Hegel misunderstands modern politics, but rather that he takes the illusions objectified in modern politics at face value rather than subjecting them to critique: "Hegel should not be blamed for describing the essence of the modern state as it is, but for identifying what is with the *essence of the state*."⁹² Because Hegel does not understand the illusory character of modern politics, he is drawn into contradiction, arguing both that the separation of state and civil society is necessary, and that it is non-existent; he "knows of the separation of political society and the political state, but he wishes to see their unity expressed within the state."⁹³ Hegel "regards contradiction in the phenomenal world as unity in its essence, in the Idea," that is, he understands the division between state and civil society as an abstract moment in an ideal synthesis, and so is not able to grasp this division as both objective and illusory.⁹⁴ Marx, on the other hand, considers this division to be "an *essential contradiction*," which "is in itself only the self-contradiction of the political state, and hence of civil society."⁹⁵

In seeing the contradiction between state and civil society as the self-contradiction of each,

⁸⁸ Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 49; Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 25-6.

⁸⁹ Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 131.

⁹⁰ Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 131.

⁹¹ Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 131.

⁹² Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 127.

⁹³ Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 139.

⁹⁴ Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 158.

⁹⁵ Marx, "Hegel's Doctrine", 158.

Marx is practicing what he calls “a truly philosophical criticism.”⁹⁶ Comprehending the necessity and particular significance of contradictions allows Marx to avoid doing what he criticizes Hegel for, that is, viewing the contradiction between state and civil society as abstract moments of an equally abstract universality. Understanding how the self-contradictory division between state and civil society took on objective reality also allows Marx to see in this self-contradictory objectification the roots of its replacement by a concrete universality, a universality based on human sociality rather than abstract individuality. This explains how Marx differs from his Feuerbachian readers: for Marx, it is not the state that is illusory and civil society which is real, but, rather, it is the very distinction between the two which is, in modern politics, an objective illusion.

To criticize the distinction between politics and civil society is very different from criticizing politics as unreal in contrast to the reality of civil society. Kouvelakis makes this very clear by drawing a distinction between the young Marx and the young Engels. Kouvelakis identifies Engels as a “social-ist,” who “seeks in the ‘social’ a new, radically anti-political principle of cohesion and harmony.”⁹⁷ Marx’s critique of politics is not an anti-politics in this sense, because Marx does not endorse this opposition between the political and the social, or seek to abolish the political in favor of the social. Rather, Marx identifies politics and civil society as a pair of complementary and mutually reinforcing illusions. As he writes in *On the Jewish Question*, “the constitution of the political state and the dissolution of civil society into independent individuals . . . are achieved in one and the same act.”⁹⁸ This act is political emancipation, “the reduction of man on the one hand to the member of civil society, the *egoistic, independent* individual, and on the other to the *citizen*, the moral person.”⁹⁹ The target of Marx’s critique in *On the Jewish Question* is political emancipation; that is, it is not a critique of politics which rejects politics in favor of something else, something non-political, but instead critiques this separation of political and non-political. The separation of political and non-political is also, in a more philosophical register, the target of Marx’s critique of Hegel, which attacks the state’s pretense to universality not in the name of a real universality existing in civil society, but rather in terms of a universality that would come from transcending the division between politics and society. Marx’s criticism is not that the *state* is an illusion, but rather that the category of the political, understood as denoting something separate or autonomous, is an illusion.

Marx is thus keenly aware that “oppositions are not resolved by abolishing one side but by destroying the basis of the opposition.”¹⁰⁰ Marx thus rejects economic determination, the belief in the primacy of the economic. Economic determinism is only coherent if the economic can be understood as something historically prior to, and so causally responsible for, the non-economic. Marx, however, shows that this very distinction between economics and politics is historically specific.¹⁰¹ For the Marx of 1843–4, economic determinism is not merely wrong, but an instance

⁹⁶ Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 158.

⁹⁷ Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 271.

⁹⁸ Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 233.

⁹⁹ Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 234.

¹⁰⁰ Sitton, *Marx’s Theory of the Transcendence of the State*, 43.

¹⁰¹ Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 232–4. Sitton makes this point, and goes on to argue that this historical division of politics from economics demonstrates the existence of “a previous unity of some kind” (Sitton, *Marx’s Theory of the Transcendence of the State*, 54). This doesn’t quite follow; the separation of politics and economics was preceded, not

of the very misunderstanding of society which needs to be overcome. But the response to the falseness of economism cannot be its inverse, a political determinism that privileges politics over economics, for precisely the same reason. This political determinism is the target of Marx's criticism in *Critical Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian"*, in which Marx criticizes what he calls "political understanding" which "is just *political* understanding because its thought does not transcend politics. The sharper and livelier it is, the more incapable it [political understanding] is of comprehending social problems."¹⁰² What political understanding misses is the need to understand political phenomena and political events as part of a unity that also includes the non-political. Unless this is done, political understanding becomes "one-sided" because it "completely puts its faith in the omnipotence of the will."¹⁰³ Marx's Hegelian critique of Hegel's political philosophy is thus a critique of both economism and politicism; we find both politics and economics revealed as a result of the illusory division of politics and society. But what remains unclear at this point is what practice follows from the recognition of this illusion.

2.6 The Limits of the Critique of Politics

While Marx's early critique of politics raises a challenge that still resonates against our contemporary post-Marxists, his position as of 1845 was by no means without weaknesses. These limitations in Marx's critique of politics, and the theoretical and practical problems his early positions caused him, were an important reason for the development of Marx's later positions, and indeed laid down some of the parameters for later debates within the Marxist tradition. These subsequent developments within Marx's thought will take up the bulk of the remainder of this dissertation, and so I want to lay out now the major difficulties in Marx's early critique of politics.

The first difficulty in Marx's critique of politics is the ambiguity in the stakes of the critique. As I hope I have sufficiently established at this point, Marx's critique of politics is not a *rejection* of politics in favor of something else, some non-politics or anti-politics. However, it is unclear exactly what changes about our relationship to politics once we recognize the illusory nature of the autonomy of the political. Kouvelakis argues that the result anticipated by Marx's critique is a "displacement of the political."¹⁰⁴ Marx's critique of politics, according to Kouvelakis, advocates a disappearance of politics only in the sense of its fulfillment and transformation into something larger than politics. "The moment in which the political state attains its truth," Kouvelakis writes, "is simultaneously the moment of its loss or disappearance as a distinct entity, the source or mainstay of the political illusion. But this disappearance is synonymous with a displacement of the political, which, redirecting its expansive capacity, emerges as the ongoing democratic refounda-

by a unity, but by a *different* division, as I discuss above.

¹⁰²Marx, "King of Prussia", 413.

¹⁰³Marx, "King of Prussia", 413. This stinging critique of a politics of the will, which Marx relates to the French Revolution, the "*classical* period of political understanding" casts grave doubts on Gilbert's claim that the early Marx is largely seeking to understand and repeat the French revolution (Gilbert, *Marx's Politics*). Similarly damning to Gilbert's thesis is the criticism of the French Revolution in *On the Jewish Question*, as Sitton points out (Sitton, *Marx's Theory of the Transcendence of the State*, 50).

¹⁰⁴Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 303.

tion of all the material conditions of the political.”¹⁰⁵ The strangely circular construction here, in which the political is displaced into a refoundation of its own conditions, emphasizes that the critique of politics describes an ongoing process; as Kouvelakis puts it, “a constant redefining of boundaries.”¹⁰⁶ Thus the critique of politics does not abolish politics once and for all, but rather constantly undercuts the pretensions of politics to autonomy: “confronted with its presuppositions, politics is ‘reduced’ or resituated within its limits, and stripped of its pretensions to the absolute...but only in order immediately to emerge in an (always-already) extended and concretely radicalized mode.”¹⁰⁷

While Kouvelakis’s description of an ongoing, even self-perpetuating, displacement of politics is a compelling account of what is taking place in Marx’s early critique of politics, it does not appear that Marx was (at this point in his career) *aware* that this is what he was proposing. Rather, framing his critique of politics as a critique of Hegel and the young Hegelians, Marx proceeds in a manner that suggests that the demonstration of the illusory character of politics is a conclusion, a position which would give rise to a changed relation to politics. However, the upshot of this conclusion is unclear, because the key term here, real illusion, lacks development. What does Marx mean by saying that the separation of politics and civil society is both real and an illusion? None of the works of 1843-4 directly address this question, although we can see some hints as to what an answer would be in the criticism of Bauer for treating the Jewish question “theologically,” that is to say, focussing on illusion as incorrect ideas to be combatted with true ideas, rather than as a “practical illusion” to be combatted by changing practice. This theme is of course developed at greater length in the *German Ideology* of 1845-6, in which the criticism of the young Hegelians (now extended to include Feuerbach) for “only opposing other phrases and...in no way combatting the real world when they are merely combatting the phrases of this world”¹⁰⁸ is directly connected to the question of practical illusion, now renamed “ideology.” What Marx describes as an inversion characteristic of Hegel, in which, despite Hegel’s claim that the Idea is the active subject, “development always takes place on the side of the [material] predicate,”¹⁰⁹ is now redeveloped into an explicitly materialist theory in which “morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness thus no longer retain the semblance of independence.”¹¹⁰ Marx adds, furthermore, the claim that the production of “phantasms” or illusion, rather than true and accurate representation, is a necessary feature of material life-processes, in his celebrated image of ideology as a *camera obscura*, in which “men and their circumstances appear upside-down,” a phenomenon which “arises just as much from their historical life-processes as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”¹¹¹

What particularly concerns me about this account, as well as the use made of the category of practical illusion in the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, is that the practical effect of ideology is unclear. This may be a case in which, underdeveloped though it is, the terminology of practical

¹⁰⁵Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 303.

¹⁰⁶Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 394.

¹⁰⁷Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 349-50.

¹⁰⁸Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology”, 149.

¹⁰⁹Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 65.

¹¹⁰Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology”, 154.

¹¹¹Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology”, 154.

illusion is superior to the terminology of ideology, as it suggests an illusion that exists in practice and has practical effects, whereas ideology, if it is the mere image in the *camera obscura* (rather than the whole mechanism that produces the image) might be thought to be an epiphenomenon.¹¹² In either case, the method by which illusion acts on reality is unclear, and in this the young Marx seems not to have moved beyond Feuerbach, who likewise presents an illusion (God) that has real effects through a mechanism that remains opaque. Because the young Marx is unclear about the effects of the political illusion, he is also unclear about the status and value of specifically political activity. That Marx thought political activity *had* a value is clear from his attack on Proudhonian political quietism (in *The Poverty of Philosophy*) and his break with Ruge, in which he argues for “a *political revolution* with a *social soul*.”¹¹³ Even here, however, Marx’s position is ambiguous, because this revolution is political only inasmuch as it wears a “political mask,” a mask which socialism will have to set aside.¹¹⁴ In 1845, that is, Marx had begun to develop a more complicated critique of politics than one which saw it as simply false, and empty illusion, but was still unclear on what this meant we should *do* with this strangely real illusion of politics, other than set it aside. The connection between politics and masquerade, however, would soon become important to Marx in a new way, in the aftermath of the revolution of 1848, because the rise to power of Napoleon III demonstrated to Marx just how real the illusions of politics could be. The young Marx’s critique of the state, or critique of the illusory separation of politics and civil society, implies a theory of the relationship between politics and appearance which Marx at that stage had not worked out. The experience of 1848 and the reaction which followed gave Marx the opportunity to develop this theory.

¹¹²Marx returns to this analogy in *Capital*, but in the mature work it is clear that he is considering the whole apparatus and not simply the “illusion” produced by it, as can be seen by his substitution of the *camera obscura*, which might be thought to produce illusory images, with the human eye, which does not. See p. 82 below.

¹¹³Marx, “King of Prussia”, 420.

¹¹⁴Marx, “King of Prussia”, 420.

Chapter 3

Politics as Appearance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte has a somewhat anomalous status among Marx's work. While some have followed Engels in seeing the text as an application of Marx's scientific method to a specific case,¹ the text seems to involve at least a complication of this analysis, discussing as it does a much more graduated set of classes and a more apparently autonomous political realm than appears in the supposedly defining statement of the science of historical materialism, the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.² The question then arises as to why Marx's practice here differs so much from his theory. In this chapter, I develop an alternative account of what Marx is doing in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, seeing it not as a work of science, but as a work of aesthetics, by which I mean that Marx is concerned with analyzing appearances as a necessary part of his analysis of politics. In this, I agree with approaches that focus on the way in which the political is constructed, not simply reported or scientifically discovered, in Marx's text.³ However, unlike approaches that see the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as emphasizing the role of discourse in politics, where discourse is construed either directly or analogically in terms of language,⁴ I argue that the constructivist account of politics in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is a development of Marx's interest in appearance, discussed in the previous chapter. Through this discussion of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, then, I intend to show how Marx provides an alternative *both* to economic determinist rejections of politics, and to post-structuralist positions which emphasize the autonomy of politics in the form of discourse.

¹Engels, "Preface to the Eighteenth Brumaire".

²See Carver, "Imagery/Writing, Imagination/Politics", 115-8, and, for a wider discussion of the varied interpretations offered of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, see Cowling and Martin, "Introduction", 7-10.

³A number of authors who take this approach are considered in Cowling and Martin, "Introduction", 9.

⁴This would be an approach that sees the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as a forerunner of the approaches of Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, see Martin, "Performing Politics", 140.

3.1 Politics as Performative

The *Eighteenth Brumaire* describes the events in France from 1848 to 1851, beginning with the convocation of the Constituent Assembly in May 1848 and ending with Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* in December 1851, and discusses the maneuverings of the various factions of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie, predominantly in the assembly and to a lesser extent in the streets (the proletariat leaves the scene almost immediately, following the violent repression of the republican, and predominantly proletarian, uprising of June 1848; I will return to this point below). Marx identifies four factions: the petit-bourgeois democrats, the bourgeois republicans, the party of order, and the army, and narrates a story in which each faction in turn, largely due to its own political missteps, loses its hold on power, until Louis Bonaparte's coup brings the most reactionary part of society to power. What is clear even from this brief summary is that the text is primarily concerned with political maneuvering among groups identified by organizational alliance; while material interests and material force are part of Marx's analysis they do not dominate it. The political action that Marx countenances here is centrally concerned with signification, with the way in which certain actions and individuals can come to signify certain political tendencies and aspirations.⁵ Furthermore, it is this fund of symbols and significations that makes up the "tradition of all living generations" which, nightmarish though it is is also, as Carver points out, "politically productive."⁶ It is in relation to this past that political action is possible; indeed, Marx suggests that it is the appropriation of these past symbols that makes political action possible.⁷ An account of politics in terms of linguistic performatives would understand the role of symbols in terms of their meaning: political acts are effective or not because of what they mean, and what they mean depends on a historically given symbolic context. As I will argue, however, Marx's discussion of politics is much more concerned with appearance than signification or meaning, and so is aesthetic rather than linguistic. By "appearance" here I mean a development of the idea of "practical illusion" which Marx emphasizes in his analysis of the state.⁸ Appearance is the way in which reality presents itself, and so has a rather paradoxical quality of being both like and unlike the reality it is an appearance of. It is in this space of likeness and unlikeness that political performances take place.

Martin connects this performative dimension in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to recent political theory that conceptualizes politics in terms of performativity and discourse, specifically the works of Butler, Žižek, Laclau, and Mouffe. He argues that the distinctive contribution of these authors is the idea that "political struggle must, at some level, be read in terms of its symbols and imaginary construction because these are effective elements in making history,"⁹ and that such an analysis

⁵Watkins criticizes Marx for failing to pay attention to Bonaparte's cultivation of symbolism to gain political support, Watkins, "Appeal of Bonapartism", 172. While it is true that Marx does not give specific examples of Bonaparte's manipulation of symbols, he does recognize the importance of this ability to Bonaparte's success (for more on which see below). Thus it seems to me that Watkins's extensive discussion of the practices and artifacts in which this manipulation of symbols was instantiated is a useful supplement to Marx's analysis, rather than an alternative.

⁶Carver, "Imagery/Writing, Imagination/Politics", 121.

⁷Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire", 147.

⁸See ch. 2 above.

⁹Martin, "Performing Politics", 141.

is compatible with, indeed illuminates, our reading of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. This is a good characterization of what these authors share with each other and with Marx, but Martin ignores another commonality among the contemporary authors which they may not share with Marx. Butler's performative utterances and Laclau and Mouffe's notion of discourse differ in a number of ways, but are both fundamentally linguistic. I don't mean by this that they advocate a kind of linguistic idealism, in which all that exists is language; it's clear from even a cursory reading of their work that "performative utterances" and "discourse" do not refer solely to language.¹⁰ However, language remains central to their analysis, because even those things which cannot be reduced to language cannot be separated from it either, because they are either constructed by their relation to language, or through a discursive process which is not itself linguistic, but is modeled *on* language. The significance of this is perhaps obscured by the "linguistic turn," the broad turn towards language as object or mode of philosophical investigation which, as Martin points out, is a significant influence on these conceptualizations of political as performativity or discourse.¹¹ The omnipresence of this kind of linguistic analogy in contemporary philosophy tends to make it invisible, but in fact there is no *necessary* reason why the kind of discussion of politics as symbolic action which we see in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, and which Marx here shares with a number of contemporary theorists, needs to be developed in linguistic terms.

Interpretations of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* have long been dominated by Engels' description of it as a work which displays the use of scientific method in history, explaining political effects by reference to economic causes and evaluating these events "to prove the particular political parties to be the more or less adequate political expression" of economically defined classes.¹² The passages in the text which most support this interpretation have been "a major locus of critical interest" and have tended to underwrite positive assessments of the work by Marxists.¹³ They have also made the work a target of criticism by those who reject Marxism's scientific rhetoric and the economic determinism which seems to accompany it. Parker sees the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as a particularly revealing case of Marx's productivism, revealing because this is not expressed directly, but through an attack on "mere *parodies* of production,"¹⁴ that is, on the kind of theatrical performance which would be a parasitic "other" to serious history.¹⁵ Other authors, more sympathetic to Marx, have agreed with this opposition between productivism and performativity, but argued that the *Eighteenth Brumaire* embraces this performative dimension of politics, construed in specifically literary terms, in which politics is symbolic action of the same order as writing (including Marx's own writing) about politics.¹⁶ Stallybrass, in a move which I will follow, connects the theatricality of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to its interest in representation, which is not

¹⁰See e.g. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, ch. 1; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 108.

¹¹Martin, "Performing Politics", 129. The breadth of the "linguistic turn" can be seen by the fact that the linguistic turn is represented by quite different figures in Butler (where Austin and Foucault are the primary figures) and that of Laclau and Mouffe (for whom Althusser is the main source).

¹²Engels, "Preface to the Eighteenth Brumaire", quoted in Carver, "Eliding 150 Years", 6.

¹³Carver, "Eliding 150 Years", 9.

¹⁴Parker, "Unthinking Sex", 25.

¹⁵Parker, "Unthinking Sex", 27.

¹⁶Riquelme, "Symbolic Action", 58; see also Martin, "Performing Politics".

an endorsement of real representation against parodic misrepresentation (as Parker claims¹⁷), but an exploration of the way in which, in politics, all representation is unstable.¹⁸ Carver makes a similar point about the importance of theatricality for Marx:

The overall norm in the narrative of the Eighteenth Brumaire is that of self-deception, delusion, hysteria and hallucination. This actually fits with what Marx says about the “superstructure” in the Eighteenth Brumaire anyway, namely, that it represents a realm distinct from, but related to, the activities of the competitive system of commodity production and exchange. In terms of political significance, though, knowledge of this spectral realm is crucial, and those acting in defiance of their (crude) material interests may well be potent and successful.¹⁹

This continuous stress on the effectiveness of appearance and performance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* surely renders Parker’s claim that the text simply rejects performativity as parasitic untenable.²⁰ In what follows, then, I intend to open up an alternative reading to those which oppose economic determinism to linguistically-mediated post-structuralism (whether to criticize Marx in the name of performativity, as Parker and Laclau and Mouffe do, or to assimilate Marx to this post-structuralist position, as Martin does).

My contention in this chapter is that we can understand the performative aspect of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in terms of the concept of “appearance,” rather than discourse or language, and indeed such a reading better explains the understanding of politics that Marx develops in the text. I will attempt to show this primarily through a close reading of the *Brumaire* which draws out the variety of places in the text where ideas of appearance play a crucial role, and an attempt to excavate the underlying logic that guides Marx’s use of these ideas. Before turning to that reading, though, I want to lay out some general considerations on the use of appearance as a philosophical category in the analysis of politics. Referring back to the general account of performativity as acts which take place through the assumption of historically given symbols, this general sense of performativity is equally capable of an aesthetic interpretation (in terms of appearances) as it is a linguistic one. Indeed, one of the examples used by Martin to illustrate the concept of performativity is particularly amenable to analysis in terms of appearance, namely, Marx’s use of a number of metaphors of theatrical performance.²¹ Despite the attractive linguistic similarity however, we need to think carefully about the relationship between performative acts and theatrical performance. A performative utterance in Austin’s sense is so called because it performs a

¹⁷Parker, “Unthinking Sex”, 25.

¹⁸Stallybrass, “(Un)fixing Representation”, 5.

¹⁹Carver, “Eliding 150 Years”, 10.

²⁰Parker does recognize the importance that the theater, especially Hamlet, had for Marx in his personal life (Parker, “Unthinking Sex”, 24, 37-8), but declines to draw any conclusions from this. Parker does identify a number of parts in the text where Marx criticizes certain types of performance using gendered, or more generally heteronormative, language, which might suggest that Marx’s opposition is to particularly “declass e” forms of theater such as the cross-dressing burlesque of the time (Parker, “Unthinking Sex”, 26), but that claim is complicated by the fact that Marx professed to love Shakespeare *because* of his incorporation of the “base” forms of theater (Stallybrass, “(Un)fixing Representation”, 7).

²¹Martin, “Performing Politics”, 131.

certain function, causes something to be done “with words”; it does not carry the sense of fictive role-playing we associate with theatrical performance, indeed, theatrical performance is identified by Austin as one of the circumstances which can cause a performative to *fail* (when two actors perform a wedding ceremony on stage, it is precisely because this is a “performance” that it does not bring about the genuine act of marriage).²² That performance and performativity are not in the end so easy to disentangle reveals a complexity and openness to the category of performativity explored by Butler and Derrida in particular,²³ and in fact is something that Marx is very much alive to in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, but Marx’s interest in performance is less in the speeches (language) than in the costumes (image, appearance).

A further reason to discuss the theme of appearance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is that the use Marx makes of the theme here is not an isolated one, but appears throughout his writings.²⁴ In these works, the category of appearance “cuts across any strict distinction between the ‘real’ or material and the mental or ‘imagined,’” as Martin argues the performative does in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.²⁵ It is the Hegelian understanding of appearance as a dialectical relation of form and content²⁶ which, for Marx, allows the mental and material, or the symbolic and the practical, to be understood as continuous. In *On the Jewish Question*, this takes the form of a critique of the Hegelian belief that the modern liberal state represents a perfect match of form and content. Marx argues that this arises from a failure to understand the role of appearances in the modern state: although the state appears to be universal, this appearance is generated by a social system which is anything but universal. The point is not that the state dissembles, projecting an appearance that is opposed to its reality; rather, a certain type of appearance is a necessary part of the state’s material reality.²⁷ The problem is not the failure to distinguish appearance and reality, but the failure to understand the functioning of appearance *in* reality. As Marx writes, “Hegel should not be blamed for describing the essence of the modern state, but for identifying what is with the *essence of the state*.”²⁸ Appearance plays a similar role in the account of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, although in this later work the philosophical account of appearance is integrated much more tightly with a detailed account of the workings of the economy. Appearances have corporeal forms, commodities, which, by congealing the labor-power of the workers who created them are the material and visible reality of capitalism’s fundamental deception, the “fetishistic” idea that value is a property of objects rather than a relation between people.²⁹ The point, again, is that appearance must be understood as material, as dialectically related to reality rather than merely

²²Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 22. The relationship between (theatrical) performance and performativity has been explored in detail by Jackson. See in particular her discussion of the way in which attempts to distinguish “genuine” performatives from theatrical performances may oversimplify what is happening in a theatrical performance, Jackson, *Professing Performance*, 189.

²³Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 134-41; Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, 103.

²⁴I would point here to the discussion of “practical illusion” in the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* in the previous chapter of this dissertation, and the discussion of commodity fetishism in *Capital* in chapter 5.

²⁵Martin, “Performing Politics”, 129.

²⁶Hegel, *Logic*, 188-9.

²⁷Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 220.

²⁸Marx, “Hegel’s Doctrine”, 127.

²⁹Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 164-5.

opposed to it. As Martin puts the central point of performative politics, “to understand politics it is not enough simply to ‘reveal’ the true forces at play ‘beneath the surface.’”³⁰

3.2 The Openness of Appearance

Martin focuses on the way in which, in a performative conception of politics, political facts are constituted by political discourses, rather than depending on some external and objective (pre-political) substrate, and this form of performative politics is certainly in evidence in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Along with this argument, however, comes another, which is most developed in Butler, about the way in which the idea of performativity imbues a greater degree of openness or flexibility into politics. If discourse were fixed, independent of its employment by those who inhabit it, politics would be as static as if it were determined by objective non-political conditions. However, the account of discourse offered by post-structuralism emphasizes that discourses are not fixed, but instead that each occasion on which a discourse is employed is also an opportunity to contest and modify the discourse. Among the advocates of performative politics considered here, Butler’s account of this subversive use of discourse is probably the most developed and the most radical, because it suggests that, in a sense, *all* employment of discourse is subversive. For Butler, a performance *is* a performance inasmuch as it presents itself, or is seen as, a repetition of a previously established form. But in fact, there is no such originary form, and no way of establishing whether a given performance is an accurate or distorted repetition of its source.³¹ Butler’s account of performance is thus deconstructive in the Derridean sense because it shows that any particular performance demonstrates its own impossibility right at the moment it reproduces itself: performing a role on one hand seems to reinforce that role by conforming to and thus reproducing it, while at the same time the performance demonstrates the distance of an original against which it could be compared and its authenticity assured.

Marx’s account of appearances in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* shows this deconstructive character. This might seem odd, and “appearance” a concept quite at odds with deconstruction because its meaning is tied so tightly to its binary opposition to essence or reality. What connects the two, however, is the notion of repetition. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, to repeat something is always to adopt its forms of appearance, and the act of adopting a certain appearance condemns one to a repetition of the fate of the original. These repetitions as and through appearance function, as in the repetitions considered by Derrida, to unmoor the appearance from any proposed original, thus giving Marx’s account of appearance the instability noted in post-structuralist accounts of discourse.

Derrida develops his account of repetition throughout his work, but the presentation in “Signature, Event, Context” is both particularly clear and particularly relevant to the question of performative politics, because it addresses repetition in relation to Austin’s account of performatives. Austin excludes certain events from consideration as genuine speech acts because, as “citations” of speech acts, they are “parasitic” on these genuine speech acts. Derrida responds by questioning whether

³⁰Martin, “Performing Politics”, 130.

³¹Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 109.

citation can in fact be distinguished from genuine use (whether performance can be distinguished from performative, to use the distinction I introduced above). Derrida detects a contradiction in the way in which Austin recognizes “that the possibility of the negative (in this case, of infelicities) is in fact a structural possibility” at the same time as he “excludes that risk as accidental, exterior.”³² The reason that citational (or infelicitous, failed) performatives are possible, Derrida argues, is because citation is itself a necessary part of any performative; the condition of failure for performatives is at the same time their condition of success: “Isn’t it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, ‘non-serious’ *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or, rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative?”³³ That is, any performative functions by invoking a certain form, iterating or repeating a prescribed snippet of language (think of the set formula of the marriage ceremony): “could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, in other words, if the formula I pronounce to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not identifiable in some way with a ‘citation’?”³⁴

The key point, both for Derrida’s analysis of Austin and for Marx’s account of politics in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, is that the necessity of repetition undermines the uniqueness and self-identity of the event: “would a performative utterance be possible if a citational doubling did not come to split and dissociate from itself the pure singularity of the event.”³⁵ In Derrida’s text, this event is an Austinian speech act; in Marx’s the event in question is revolution—the supposed occasion for the text is the revolution of 1848, but precisely because of this iterability, other revolutions of the past and future are immediately invoked. Derrida argues that repetition is a necessary possibility of all performatives, and thus there is never any “pure” speech act, a singular, subsistent event that creates its own conditions of possibility. Likewise, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx shows us revolution as an endless chain of repetitions, in which no revolution is ever fully itself, but is always a complicated re-staging or reflection of some other event.

Because Derrida’s argument in “Signature, Event, Context” is made in relation to language and in particular the citationality of speech acts, it might seem that this similarity between “Signature, Event, Context” and the *Eighteenth Brumaire* undermines, rather than supports, my claim that we should understand the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in aesthetic rather than linguistic terms. However, another text by Derrida shows how this general structure of iterability does not just apply to language, but can be seen as a key feature of *mimesis*; it is this account of mimetic repetition that, I will argue, is helpful in understanding Marx’s use of appearance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

In “The Double Session,” Derrida argues that there is a close connection between language and appearance, and that it is the deconstructive character of appearance which explains the instability Derrida finds in linguistic performatives.³⁶ He proceeds via a discussion of the role of *mimesis*

³²Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, 15.

³³Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, 17.

³⁴Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, 18.

³⁵Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, 17.

³⁶Derrida, “Double Session”. As this text is primarily a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and literature conducted via a reading of a text by Mallarmé, one might question my contention that Derrida escapes the discussion of language here. However, it is significant that Derrida chooses to write about Mallarmé here, because

(representation) in Plato's *Philebus*. In this dialog, Socrates draws an analogy between the soul and a book, which at first appears to characterize the soul linguistically, as a kind of internal dialog, but which turns out not to be solely linguistic, or rather, to be linguistic because it is based on images.

If Socrates is able to compare the silent relation between the soul and itself... to a book, it is because the book imitates the soul or the soul imitates the book, because each in turn is the image or *likeness* of the other.... *Logos* must indeed be shaped according to the model of the *eidos*; the book then reproduces the *logos* and the whole is organized by this relation of repetitive resemblance (*homoiosis*), doubling, duplication, this set of specular processes and play of reflections where things (*onta*), speech, and writing come to repeat and mirror each other."³⁷

The image, that is, has the same relation of repetition that Derrida identifies in language, but here that repetition is characterized in terms of resemblance, of doubling or reflection. This repetition has a fundamentally excessive character; first because it creates a double or image of a thing, a thing which is supposed to already exist perfectly well on its own. Second, while the image is supposed to be less than the thing, a mere image or copy, it is also more, because it supplements the thing with a certain decorative excess. Plato, according to Derrida, describes the image as "degenerate and somewhat superfluous," a "supplementary frill" or "ornament."³⁸ So, Derrida writes, between language and image "there exists a very strange relation: one is always the supplement of the other."³⁹ This idea of the image as a reflection which is also an ornamentation and supplement is important to Marx's analysis in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, as we will see below.

Derrida goes on to analyze this relationship of supplementation within *mimesis* as "the paradoxes of the supplementary double: the paradoxes of something that, added to the simple and the single replaces and mimes them, both like and unlike, unlike because it is—in that it is—like, the same as and different from what it duplicates."⁴⁰ The paradox of appearance, that is, is that to be the appearance of something, an appearance must resemble the thing; yet, to be an appearance rather than the thing itself, it must also be different from the thing. Once this movement of displaced repetition is identified, it is difficult to contain, because anything that can be repeated once can be repeated again; it is "a self-duplication of repetition itself; *ad infinitum*, since this movement feeds on its own proliferation."⁴¹ While Platonism and, for Derrida, the whole history of ontology, attempts to maintain that appearances are always derivative and unreal, the logic of appearance tends to undermine this division. "That which is, the being-present... is distinguished from the appearance, the image, the phenomenon, etc., that is, from anything that presents it *as* being

Mallarmé's text are themselves not solely linguistic, but depend on the treatment of words as materially and spatially arranged glyphs, and this is an aspect to which Derrida pays significant attention; in any case, the discussion of *mimesis* on which I draw is, I think, to some degree separable from the concern with literature which informs the article as a whole.

³⁷Derrida, "Double Session", 187-8.

³⁸Derrida, "Double Session", 189.

³⁹Derrida, "Double Session", 189.

⁴⁰Derrida, "Double Session", 191.

⁴¹Derrida, "Double Session", 191.

present, doubles it, re-presents it, and can therefore replace and de-present it.”⁴² That is, because an appearance represents a thing, is like it while at the same time not it, it can replace the thing, stand in for it when it is not present; the same process whereby the appearance makes manifest the presence of the thing also draws attention to the possibility of its non-presence, undermining the certainty of the thing’s presence. Because appearance involves a repetition *ad infinitum*, the distance of the appearance from the thing it replaces becomes indefinite. Through its doubling (and re-doubling), appearance undermines the relationship between presentation and presence; to present something as being present is no guarantee of a thing’s presence.

Derrida emphasizes that this logic is not merely contingent, a feature only of some deficient or misleading representation, but is inherent in the logic of essence and appearance, of any theory that attempts to ground the security of essence on a distinction between essence and appearance. As Derrida writes, this paradox of an appearance which replaces or undermines essence is “the order of all appearance, the very process of appearing in general. It is the order of truth.”⁴³ Derrida emphasizes the ambiguity of this relationship between truth and appearance, which ambiguity derives from the necessity of appearance to truth, and the necessity of distinguishing appearance *from* truth:

Truth is *on the one hand* the unveiling of what lies concealed in oblivion (*aletheia*), the veil lifted or raised from the thing itself, from that which is insofar as it presents itself, produces, and can even exist in the form of a determinate hole in Being; *on the other hand* (but this other process is prescribed in the first, in the ambiguity or duplicity of the presence of the present, of its *appearance*—that which appears *and* its appearing—in the *fold* of the present participle), truth is agreement (*homoiosis* or *adequatio*), a relation of resemblance or equality between a re-presentation and a thing (unveiled, present), even in the eventuality of a statement of judgment.⁴⁴

That is, an analysis in terms of appearance does not necessarily require a reference to a simple understanding of fixed, essences. Rather, an interpretation of politics in terms of appearance can be an analysis of politics as performative, because appearance has the same iterative quality that is important to post-structuralist accounts of performative politics. Construing this performativity in terms of appearance rather than discourse, however, may have a number of advantages over the linguistic understanding, some of which I have indicated already, and more of which will become apparent in the following discussion of Marx’s analysis of appearance as performative politics in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

3.3 Appearance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*

Benjamin quotes a description from 1861 of the French Second Empire as an “imperialism which spreads out and puffs up” like the crinoline skirts of the period, which provide the image of “the last

⁴²Derrida, “Double Session”, 191.

⁴³Derrida, “Double Session”, 192.

⁴⁴Derrida, “Double Session”, 192-3.

and strongest expression of the reflux of all the tendencies of the year 1848.”⁴⁵ Such a description might also apply to Marx’s account of the reaction to 1848 in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, which seems to consist of infinite layers of fabric, in which a veil of appearances is removed to reveal merely a further level of appearance. “Appearance” appears in a bewildering variety of roles in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*; sometimes as a precondition of action, sometimes as a blockage to or substitute for it; sometimes in contrast to reality, sometimes totally independent of it. “Who or what represents whom or what is no longer in any way clear,” as Paul Thomas puts it,⁴⁶ making the argument of the text difficult to discern. There seems to be “no principle of organization, just a ‘confused groping about.’”⁴⁷ But perhaps it might be better to say that this confused groping about is itself the text’s principle of organization, that the profusion of appearances in Marx’s text serves to represent a logic of appearance that was shown by the events of 1848-52 to be the logic of politics.

Thomas argues that this focus on the category of appearance marks a change in Marx’s work. Thomas emphasizes Marx’s belief in 1848 that, with the arrival of capitalism, “we were ‘compelled to face with sober senses’ overwhelming objective developments taking place or unfolding before our very eyes.”⁴⁸ By 1852, however, “this world is replaced...by a world inaccessible to our sober senses, a world where illusions exert real force and are in fact the condition on which action is based.”⁴⁹ Because of this real power of illusions, it is not enough to combat them simply by revealing that they *are* illusions: “mere revelation...will no longer fit the bill.”⁵⁰ Balibar argues along similar lines that the failure of the revolutions of 1848 led Marx to abandon the idea that the proletariat was external to ideology and therefore “without illusions.”⁵¹ The *Eighteenth Brumaire*, according to Balibar, is the text in which Marx begins to grapple with the consequences of this shift away from the concept of ideology; Balibar argues that Marx only fully deals with these consequences with the development of the theory of fetishism in *Capital*.⁵² I have argued in previous chapters that Marx’s earlier writings are less invested in this sharp distinction between truth and appearance than either Thomas or Balibar suggest. Nonetheless, I agree that the *Eighteenth Brumaire* marks an increased interest in appearance and the potential effects of the autonomy of appearance on political possibilities.

Marx identifies the defeat of the 1848 revolution in France as itself an appearance with an ambiguous relationship to reality. According to Marx, bourgeois revolutions succeed in appearance before they succeed in reality; at the outset of the revolution “men and things seem set in sparkling diamonds,” but after this period of revolutionary intoxication “society has to undergo a long hangover [*Katzenjammer*] until it has learned to assimilate soberly the achievements of its period of storm and stress.”⁵³ Proletarian revolutions follow the opposite course, with their successes occurring in secret, as a series of apparent defeats that prepare the condition for eventual

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 68.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 101.

⁴⁷ Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 101.

⁴⁸ Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 101.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 101.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 101.

⁵¹ Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 54.

⁵² Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 42.

⁵³ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 150, translation modified.

victory. “[Proletarian revolutions] seem to throw their opponent to the ground only to see him draw new strength from the earth and rise again before them, more colossal than ever; they shrink back again and again before the indeterminate immensity of their own goals, until the situation is created in which any retreat is impossible.”⁵⁴ It is this account of appearance in which Marx places the disappearance of the proletariat after June 1848, with which the *Brumaire* begins, and to which I will return below, after developing in more detail the connection between politics and appearance laid out in the *Brumaire*.

This focus on appearance is both a return to and modification of themes in Marx’s work prior to 1845. Thomas contrasts the murky appearances of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to the conviction expressed in the *Manifesto* that capitalism abolishes illusions,⁵⁵ and in part Marx here is returning to the position of *On the Jewish Question*, in which modern society creates an illusory distinction between society and the state. But the argument of the *Brumaire* is not just a return to this analysis; “if we resort to the categories Marx had used in *On the Jewish Question*... we will find that the Second Empire is in one important sense simply off the scale.”⁵⁶ In *On the Jewish Question* there is, at bottom, one illusion, that of the separateness of civil society and the political state. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, on the other hand, civil society and the state are shot through with multiple illusions. Everything is the appearance of something else, to such an extent that it becomes unclear what “reality” would be opposed to these appearances:

the Constitution, the National Assembly, the dynastic parties, the blue and the red republicans, the heroes of Africa, the thunder from the platform, the sheet lightning of the daily press, all the other publications, the political names and intellectual reputations, the civil law and the penal code, *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and the second Sunday in May—all have vanished like a series of optical illusions before the spell [*Bannformel*] of a man whom even his enemies do not claim to be a magician.⁵⁷

Optical illusions here are not dispelled, but rather are replaced by another form of enchantment (*Bannformel*); except this is not even genuine magic, but rather the ersatz magic of “the sleight of hand of a cardsharp.”⁵⁸

There are thus a range of different kinds of relationship among appearances; appearances can undermine other appearances, can be a source of strength or a source of weakness. It is this latter that marks the distinction between the two acts of “world-historical necromancy,”⁵⁹ the revolutions of 1789 and 1848, between the “tragedy” and the “farce,”⁶⁰ that is to say, two different types of performance. Just as tragedy differs from farce, the assumption of historical costumes in each case has a different character and different effects. In 1789 “the resurrection of the dead served to exalt the new struggles, rather than to parody the old, to exaggerate the given task in the imagination, rather than to flee from solving it in reality, and to recover the spirit of the revolution,

⁵⁴Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 150.

⁵⁵Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 101.

⁵⁶Thomas, *Alien Politics*, 103.

⁵⁷Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 151.

⁵⁸Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 149.

⁵⁹Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 147.

⁶⁰Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 146.

rather than to set its ghost walking [*umgehen*] again.”⁶¹ 1789 showed the power of self-deception; by adopting the dress of the Roman republic, the French republic also acquired its spirit, and was able to accomplish things it would not have been able to do in the name of its “limited bourgeois content.”⁶² Appearances, then, enable certain sorts of action, and so can have effects of real power. In 1848, on the other hand, the costumes of the past—this time “yellow gloves”⁶³ rather than Roman robes—produced only a powerless ghost to haunt (*umgehen*) the revolution, robbing it of power, rather than lending it the power of the past.

The clearest example of the way in which these ghostly appearances can involve a loss of power is what Marx calls “parliamentary cretinism.”⁶⁴ The revolution of 1789 haunts the bourgeoisie of 1848 in the sense that they mistake their repetition of the parliamentary forms of 1789 for real power. The self-deception of the bourgeoisie of 1789 enabled them to take action quite separate from this deception. The self-deception of the parliamentarians of 1848, on the other hand lay in thinking that adopting the parliamentary costumes of 1789 was in itself an act of radical power. Their “cretinism” lay in the fact that they were deluded by the appearances that they themselves created, and this cretinism “holds its victims spellbound in an imaginary world and robs them of all sense, all memory, and all understanding of the rough external world.”⁶⁵ Marx applies this description to the party of order in 1851, but the same logic is at work in his description of the defeat of the petit-bourgeois “*montagne*” in 1849. They participated in a “game of constitutional powers,” a radicalism based on a constitution in which “as long as the *name* of freedom was respected and only its actual implementation was prevented...its constitutional existence remained intact and untouched however fatal the blows dealt to its actual physical existence.”⁶⁶ In tying their political activity to this nominal constitution, the petit-bourgeois republicans exhibit a belief in “the trumpets whose blasts made the walls of Jericho collapse,” that is, a belief not only that appearances can enable activity, but that sounds and symbols themselves have the power to produce a “miracle.”⁶⁷ These symbols were intentionally adopted by the petit-bourgeois democrats in order to present an appearance of strength through “revolutionary threats” that are “merely attempts to intimidate the opponent.”⁶⁸ The petit-bourgeois democrats’ weakness came from believing these threats in preference to acting on them: “no party exaggerated the means at its disposal more than the democratic party; no party deludes itself more frivolously about the situation.”⁶⁹ This frivolous delusion leaves the petit bourgeois democrats trapped (spellbound) in appearances, as their imagined revolutionary victories allow them to avoid facing their actual defeats. This situation is exacerbated by the similarity between the pose adopted by the petit-bourgeois democrats and the slanders cast against them by their opponents: “if their powerlessness in parliament could no longer be doubted, they were now justified in confining their activities to outbursts of moral

⁶¹ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 148.

⁶² Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 148.

⁶³ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 48.

⁶⁴ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 210.

⁶⁵ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 211.

⁶⁶ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 160.

⁶⁷ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 178.

⁶⁸ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 179.

⁶⁹ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 179.

indignation and blustering declamation. The party of Order pretended to see all the horrors of anarchy embodied in them; they could therefore be all the more insipid and modest in reality.”⁷⁰ The democrats exchange an appearance they had adopted to frighten their opponents for one generated *by* their opponents, and take this exchange to be a compensation for their powerlessness.

The interesting point here is not simply that the appearances presented by these groups did not match up to their reality; rather the process by which they were rendered powerless was one that involved the substitution of one set of images for another. This comes out particularly clearly in the contrast between Bonaparte and the political forces he defeats in turn. The contrast here is not one of appearance as against reality, in which the politicians waste their time on appearance while Bonaparte concentrates on material force. Indeed, the opposite would be closer to the truth: Bonaparte is successful because he is so at home with appearance, he is nothing but a mask, and is well aware of it; he “had to win, because he treated the comedy simply as a comedy,” unlike the bourgeoisie which “itself was playing the most complete comedy, but in the most serious manner in the world...and was itself half duped and half convinced of the serious character of its own proceedings.”⁷¹ Bonaparte’s strength lay in his ability to control and manipulate appearances, to move among appearances without being trapped within them. This is in a sense the “historical necromancy” of 1789 consciously appropriated and pushed to its extreme; instead of heroic costumes adding grandeur to the banality of bourgeois revolution, Bonaparte understands politics as “a masquerade in which the grand costumes, words and postures merely serve as a cover for the most petty trickery.”⁷² Marx compares the guises taken on by Bonaparte and his coterie to “the way that Snug the joiner represented the lion,”⁷³ and the reference to the play-within-a-play from *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is appropriate in showing the multiple layers of removal from reality that are at work here.

The multiplication of these layers approaches, as I suggested earlier, infinity; Marx in the *Brumaire* suggests that in 1848-51 politics approached a complete liberation of appearances from reality. We can see this in a further stage metaphor employed by Marx to illustrate the importance of the “distinction between the phrases and fantasies of the parties and their real organization and real interests between their conception of themselves and what they really are.”⁷⁴ The particular case under discussion at this point is one of the cases of something appearing as its opposite with which the *Brumaire* abounds, the position of avowed royalists as ardent republicans, which Marx describes thus:

The members of the royalist coalition intrigued against each other outside parliament: in the press, at Ems, and at Claremont. Behind the scenes they dressed up again in their old Orleanist and Legitimist liveries and went back to their old tournaments. But on the public stage, in their grand national performances as a great parliamentary party, they put off their respective royal houses with mere bows and adjourned the restoration of the monarchy to an indefinite point in the future. They did their real

⁷⁰Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 180.

⁷¹Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 198.

⁷²Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 197.

⁷³Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 197.

⁷⁴Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 174.

business as the *party of Order*.⁷⁵

Here we have a situation where costumes are worn as much behind the scenes as on stage and in which, furthermore, the “grand performance” is “the real business,” the role is real and the actor the fantasy. What the events of 1848–52 reveal, according to the argument of the *Brumaire*, is that we cannot understand politics as a world of appearances as opposed to reality. What makes the Second Empire “off the scale” developed by Marx in his earlier writings is the way in which politics becomes a realm of appearances emancipated from what they are supposedly appearances of, appearances that are real solely *as* appearances.

Now, this idea of free-floating appearances might seem at odds with Marx’s materialism. This is indeed a question which Marx is grappling with throughout the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and which he would not have an answer to until he wrote *Capital*.⁷⁶ Marx is attempting to show how the whole phenomenon of political appearances that do not even purport to represent reality can be the consequence of a very particular set of material circumstances. However, Marx frequently writes in a way which suggests that appearance is generated by the material without clearly specifying how this process of generation proceeds: sometimes the relationship appears to be representative, sometimes it seems to be causal, and sometimes closer to Hegel’s dialectical account of appearance.⁷⁷

Carver suggests that these apparently determinist moments “are incidental to the performative politics of the pamphlet” and “are hardly climactic in context,”⁷⁸ but they are clearly sufficiently significant to have fostered the classical Marxist interpretation of the text. Parker locates the economic determinist impulse in Marx’s attempt to “salvage the paradigm of representation” (that is, “the priority of a productive ground to its secondary and derivative political expression”),⁷⁹ which Marx found difficult to maintain in the general political confusion of 1848–51, an attempt which underpins Marx’s suggestion that Bonaparte represents two pseudo-classes, the peasantry and the lumpenproletariat.⁸⁰ But if this is economic determinism, it is so only in a precarious and self-undermining form, because the distinctive feature of both peasants and the lumpenproletariat is that neither is a unified, economically defined class capable of being represented on this rationalist model, as Marx points out.⁸¹ The *Eighteenth Brumaire* thus sees Marx struggling to develop an account of performative politics while continuing to employ a form of materialist theory which lends itself to economic determinism.

The apparently paradoxical suggestion that the disconnection of appearances from reality is itself a result of material reality is laid out most clearly in Marx’s discussion of the role of classes in politics. This is of course prefigured in the discussion of the state in *On the Jewish Question*,

⁷⁵Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 174.

⁷⁶See chapter 5.

⁷⁷For more discussion of which, see p. 24.

⁷⁸Carver, “Eliding 150 Years”, 9.

⁷⁹Parker, “Unthinking Sex”, 25.

⁸⁰Parker, “Unthinking Sex”, 24–5.

⁸¹See Stallybrass, “Marx and Heterogeneity”, 80, which goes on to consider how Marx grappled with this heterogeneity in the case of the lumpenproletariat, arguing that the *Eighteenth Brumaire* presents politics as “at least one of the fields in which classes are fashioned,” as a “formative process [that] can fashion classes out of radically heterogeneous groups” (70).

in which the illusory independence of the state is produced by the diversity of isolated individual interests in civil society. By the time of writing the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, however, Marx is able to replace this general idea of civil society with a theory of specific classes determined by specific economic positions and interests. This changed theoretical basis leads to a change in the way in which politics is illusory. While in *On the Jewish Question* the unity of the state is illusory because it is a misrecognition and alienation of the unity of the community, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* concerns political alliances and divisions based on the different perceived interests of different factions, which perceptions are themselves a complicated result (rather than a representation) of their material position.

The first example Marx discusses is the perception of petit-bourgeois republicans that they are above class interests. This is a similar misrecognition to the one discussed in *On the Jewish Question*, in that something particular is misperceived as being universal; but here, this is understood not as a feature of modern society in general, but as arising specifically from the class position of the petit-bourgeoisie: “because the democrat represents the petty bourgeoisie, a *transitional class* in which the interests of two classes meet and become blurred, he imagines he is elevated above class antagonisms generally.”⁸² This is a non-reductive account of the relationship between economic class and political position. The petit-bourgeoisie do not simply recognize that their interests lie in the reconciliation of the bourgeoisie and proletariat; rather, their economic position provokes their imagination, producing a mental position that is not simply a representation of their economic position, but has a certain similarity of internal structure. Marx expands on this idea in his discussion of “the political and literary representatives of a class,”⁸³ whose relation to the class they represent is not a purely empirical one, where to be a representative of a class is to be a member of that class; indeed “they may well be poles apart from them in their education and their individual situation.”⁸⁴ Nor is the relationship one of expression, where the political representatives of a class “explicitly sets out to assert its egoistic class interests.”⁸⁵ Marx argues that “what makes them representatives...is the fact that their minds are restricted by the same barriers which the [class] fails to overcome in real life, and that they are therefore driven in theory to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social situation drive the latter in practice.”⁸⁶ The materialist point here is that material conditions produce a mental structure that exhibits, in mental form, the structural characteristics of the given material reality. This process of production of appearances therefore in no way guarantees that they accurately (or, indeed, inaccurately) represent anything at all. 1848 specifically, and modern politics more generally, involve these non-representational appearances in their most developed and rarefied form.

The other important example Marx gives of the relationship between political appearances and material circumstances concerns the relationship of the factions of the bourgeoisie to the republic, and here the role of material circumstances in generating autonomous appearances is

⁸²Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 179.

⁸³Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 177.

⁸⁴Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 176.

⁸⁵Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 176.

⁸⁶Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 176-7.

both starker and more consequential. Marx identifies the division between the two competing monarchist factions as the political form of the economic division between landed property and capital.⁸⁷ This does not, however, just take the form of a direct correspondence between economic interests and political factions. Rather, this political representation of economic interests generates a further political form that contradicts this direct political representation; this is how the phenomenon of royalists in republican costumes, discussed above, comes about. While the rule of either faction would have taken a royalist form, the existence of two competing royalisms lead to a bourgeois monarchy with the monarchy subtracted, the bourgeois republic; “the two great subdivisions of the French bourgeoisie could only unite under this form, thus placing on the agenda the rule of their class instead of the rule of a privileged faction of it.”⁸⁸ There are no individuals who consciously express the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole; nonetheless the relationship between these various competing bourgeois representatives produces an institution that enables the rule of the whole bourgeoisie.

While we might see this as an instance of the cunning of reason working in the interests of the bourgeoisie, this disconnect between bourgeois political representatives and the political form of bourgeois domination demonstrates, according to Marx, the inherently unstable nature of the state under capitalism. “Although the republic made [the bourgeoisie’s] political rule complete it simultaneously undermined its social foundations, since they had now to confront the subjugated classes and contend with them without mediation.”⁸⁹ This again has some similarity to the theory of *On the Jewish Question*, where the unity of the state is contradicted by the diversity of civil society. However, in *On the Jewish Question* the two poles of this contradiction exist in a stable, circular relationship, where the state produces social atomization which in turn produces the alienated unification of the state, and so on. By contrast, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the contradiction between the social basis of bourgeois power and its political form leads to a continual revolutionizing of that form. First, the bourgeois republic develops, in which political competition between factions of the bourgeoisie is sublated into rule by the bourgeoisie as such. Bonaparte’s coup is the result of the further development of this logic: the representatives of the bourgeoisie are thrown out of political power in order to ensure the continued social dominance of the bourgeoisie.

The borrowed revolutionary costumes worn by the bourgeoisie here come back to haunt them, as the revolutionary appearance of bourgeois political forms comes into contradiction with the conservative tendencies of the now established bourgeoisie. “Bourgeois liberalism was declared socialist.... The bourgeoisie correctly saw that all the weapons it had forged against feudalism were turning their points against the bourgeoisie itself.... All the gods it had created had abandoned it. It understood that all the so-called bourgeois liberties and organs of progress were threatening its *class rule*.”⁹⁰

At first, bourgeois social power produced a disconnection between the bourgeoisie and its political representatives; now it requires the abolition of that political representation altogether. “The bourgeoisie confesses that its own interest requires its deliverance from the peril of its

⁸⁷Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 174.

⁸⁸Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 175.

⁸⁹Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 175.

⁹⁰Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 189.

own self-government” and “that the individual bourgeois can only continue to exploit the other classes...on condition that his class is condemned to political insignificance along with the other classes.”⁹¹ This is a restatement of Marx’s earlier description of political emancipation as the emancipation of politics from its social basis. What the *Eighteenth Brumaire* adds is both a more robust account of the class nature of this emancipation of politics, and a much greater appreciation of the way in which political emancipation produces a whole world of appearances for political action to take place in.

Given both the immediate outcome of the failure of the revolution of 1848, after which “all classes fall on their knees, equally mute and equally impotent, before the rifle butt,”⁹² and the theoretical disillusionment attendant on the delivery of a seemingly impenetrable realm of appearances, Marx would have had reasons to be pessimistic while writing the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. In fact, however, he closes the book on an optimistic note, seeing these defeats as merely the revolution’s “journey through purgatory.”⁹³ Marx argues that the development of the state that occurred from 1848 to 1852 was the perfection the state form required as a precondition of its overcoming. As the state becomes more separated, alienated, and abstract, it becomes more susceptible to attack. The disappearance of the proletariat announced at the beginning of the book thus takes on a different character, the proletariat having disappeared because the revolution needed to do its work underground, as an “old mole.”⁹⁴

3.4 The (Dis)appearance of the Proletariat

Some are fooled by appearances, and this is the secret of their success; others are fooled by appearances and this is their downfall. Some are fooled by the appearances they themselves create, others are masterful manipulators of appearance. This is the confusing political scene presented by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*; but this complicated masquerade of appearances is preceded by, and made possible by, a *disappearance*. After the defeat of the proletarian uprising of June 1848, Marx writes, “the proletariat passed into the *background* of the revolutionary stage.”⁹⁵ The disappearance of the proletariat might seem to align Marx’s theory in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* with Rancière’s discussion of the distribution of the sensible. This term is central to Rancière’s discussion of the relationship between aesthetics and politics because it denotes “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”⁹⁶ The distribution of the sensible thus controls what parts of society will be visible or invisible and, in particular, produces the “part of those who have no part,” a group in the community that the community’s ordered existence depends on not seeing;⁹⁷ “proletariat” is one name of this part of no part.

⁹¹Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 190.

⁹²Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 236.

⁹³Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 236.

⁹⁴Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 237.

⁹⁵Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 154.

⁹⁶Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

⁹⁷Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 11.

This is important to politics because politics (for Rancière) is fundamentally about this visibility, the struggle to establish a different distribution of the sensible, that is, “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for emancipation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience.”⁹⁸ Rancière gives as an illustration of this the move by militant French workers to adopt the name “proletarian,” which entered into direct confrontation with the “police” logic of the state when Blanqui insisted in being identified by the courts as a proletarian.⁹⁹ Proletarian politics, then, is the struggle to make the proletariat visible or, more precisely, the struggle to make the proletariat, through making visible the exclusion of those who now identify as proletarians.¹⁰⁰

Is the politics of appearance in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* a politics of visibility of this sort? Was Marx suggesting that the political task facing the proletariat in 1851 was the task of becoming visible? Both Martin and Carver suggest the answer to this question is “yes,” that Marx proposed an alethic politics in which the proletariat would triumph by becoming visible in its true form, overcoming the mystifying appearances of its opponents. Martin argues that Marx believes that “the symbolic dimension, or its need, will be surpassed by a more honest ‘facing the facts’ by a genuinely radical political subject.”¹⁰¹ Carver similarly suggests that Marx’s discussion of a proletarian revolution that succeeds through repeated failure shows that the proletariat would be “victorious only when stripped of illusion and superstition.”¹⁰² Martin and Carver, that is, both argue that Marx’s recognition of the effectivity of appearance is somewhat provisional, to be replaced by the even more effective transparency of the proletarian revolution. But, unlike in the *Communist Manifesto*, this is not actually an argument that appears in the *Brumaire*.¹⁰³ Rather than a replacement of appearance or illusion with transparency, Marx suggests that what is required is a substitution of appearances, with the proletariat replacing “their superstitious regard for the past”¹⁰⁴ with “the indeterminate immensity of their own goals.”¹⁰⁵ This is not a rejection of appearance, but a change in the temporality of appearance: “the social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, while the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is in part a response to conditions Marx could not foresee when writing the *Communist Manifesto*, that earlier work does contain the lineaments of this argument about the temporality of appearance, and it is the paradoxes of the appearance of the future in the present which I turn to in the next chapter.

⁹⁸Rancière, *Disagreement*, 35.

⁹⁹Rancière, *Disagreement*, 37–8.

¹⁰⁰That is to say, Rancière’s politics does not just involve making visible a definite group, but rather producing a group by gathering together in a visible form those who were individuated and isolated by their invisibility (Rancière, *Disagreement*, 40).

¹⁰¹Martin, “Performing Politics”, 140.

¹⁰²Carver, “Imagery/Writing, Imagination/Politics”, 124–5. Carver appears to have altered his position in the later work discussed above.

¹⁰³Although the extent to which the *Manifesto* casts the proletarian revolution as transparent is complicated, see p. 68.

¹⁰⁴Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 149.

¹⁰⁵Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 150.

¹⁰⁶Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire”, 149.

Chapter 4

The Spectral Proletariat

“Everything begins by the apparition of a specter,” Derrida writes, describing both the *Communist Manifesto* and *Hamlet*.¹ But while in *Hamlet* the arrival of the ghost sets in motion a train of events in which the ghost does not participate, the *Communist Manifesto*, I will argue, begins *and ends* with the apparition of a specter. I will argue that the proletariat that Marx discusses in the *Manifesto* remains spectral throughout the text, and this spectrality is important in understanding the way in which Marx construes politics in the text.² Previous chapters have shown why appearance is important to Marx for understanding politics, both philosophically (in the early critical writings on the Young Hegelians) and historically (in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*). This chapter attempts to explain how appearance influences Marx’s understanding of how politics is or could be practiced. I will argue that the category of appearance is central to the way Marx conceives of futurity, to the way in which political action depends on a future that does not currently exist, but may come to exist. In particular, looking at Marx’s understanding of politics in terms of appearance provides us with reasons to reject views that see Marx as determinist and so subordinating politics to historical necessity (I specifically criticize Laclau’s attempt to provide a post-Marxist alternative to Marx’s supposed determinism). Derrida’s concept of the specter links appearance and temporality in a way which helps to understand how Marx links these two in the *Manifesto*.

What is a specter? A specter is of course a ghost, something dead, and Derrida turns to the figure of the specter in order to address pronouncements of the death of Marxism. However, a specter is not just dead, and it is this “not just” that makes the specter useful for Derrida’s purposes and mine. Derrida makes this point by distinguishing specter and spirit.³ Where spirit is that immaterial quality which infuses the body in life and departs, perhaps to its eternal reward, in death, the specter has a more ambiguous relationship both to the body and to the idea of departure

¹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 4.

²Although, as I will argue, the *Manifesto* presents the proletariat as spectral, this does not mean that all of Marx’s work does so. Both earlier works, such as *The German Ideology*, and later works, such as the *Critique of Political Economy*, characterize the proletariat in much more fixed and objective ways (however Marx’s mature work, specifically *Capital*, returns to the spectral characterization of the proletariat, as I will argue in the next chapter). It is interesting, then, that the work from Marx’s early career which is most consistent in treating the proletariat as spectral, the *Manifesto*, is also the work in which Marx is most directly addressing the proletariat as a political force.

³Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

(and return). The specter is what remains or returns after death and it is thus, as Derrida writes, a “paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal incorporation of the spirit.”⁴ Unlike the immaterial spirit, the specter is concerned with the human world of “flesh and phenomena”⁵ without being made of flesh or, properly speaking, a phenomenon because, as Derrida writes, it is “nothing visible” (in the double sense of not being a visible thing, and being the way in which non-existence becomes visible).⁶ “There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed.”⁷ The specter, that is, combines an ambiguous relation to appearance with an ambiguous temporality, the appearance of something which is not present. It is the presence of these two forms of ambiguity in the *Manifesto* that I want to emphasize in this chapter. The politics of the *Manifesto* might be thought to be straightforward, in two different ways. One interpretation would see the *Manifesto* directly endorsing the politics of a particular, objectively identifiable social group, the proletariat, and seeking to encourage their political activity. Alternatively, the *Manifesto* has been interpreted as a determinist work, describing the economic inevitability of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, in which the proletariat will be compelled to take part.⁸ And indeed the *Manifesto* contains both of these elements, incompatible though they are, but I want to emphasize that they do not exhaust the content of the *Manifesto*. The proletariat is not as fixed, either politically or economically, as these two readings suggest, and this means that the way in which politics is construed in the text is not as straightforward either. This is why Derrida’s reading of the *Manifesto* in terms of spectrality is valuable to my project: the concept of spectrality joins together the role of appearance and the particular temporality which serves to delineate the concept of politics in the text.

4.1 Spectral Appearances

One of the aspects of the specter to which Derrida draws attention is its anachrony, the way in which the specter’s insubstantiality in the present is due to its arrival from, or presentation within the present of, *another* time.⁹ Derrida, in keeping with his focus on Marxism as an inheritance,

⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

⁵Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

⁶Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

⁷Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

⁸These two readings are, broadly, those of Gilbert, *Marx’s Politics* and Hunt, *Political Ideas*, respectively. For a useful overview of determinist themes in the *Manifesto*, see Cunliffe, “Tensions in the Communist Manifesto”.

⁹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 18. It is worth noting that Derrida has received some criticism for his reliance on these terms, notably from Carver, who argues that Derrida, in zeroing in on the reference to the specter and haunting in the first line of the *Manifesto*, is relying on a mistranslation (Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, 22n28). Carver himself translates “*Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa*” as “A spectre stalks the land of Europe,” on the grounds that *umgehen*, meaning literally to walk around, has nothing to do with ghosts or haunting (Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 1). Carver rather overstates his case here: *umgehen* is the characteristic activity of *ein Gespenst* in much the same way that haunting is the characteristic activity of a ghost, and in a general sense there is nothing particularly misleading about the translation. However, as Thomas points out, “*umgehen*” carries a range of connotations that “haunt” does not, including ideas of dissemination and infection, as well as hunting or pursuing (which presumably inspired Carver’s use of “stalk”), while “haunt” likewise carries connotations that “*umgehen*” does not, notably the idea on which Derrida seizes, that of a reappearance or remnant of the past (Thomas, “Seeing is Believing”, 207) Thus, for Derrida to put so much weight

tends to figure this anachrony as the presence of the past within the present, the haunting of the returning *revenant*.¹⁰ But anachrony, just because it draws attention to the “out of joint” character of time, cannot be limited just to the past and the present; as Jameson points out, “the future is also spectral...its blurred lineaments also swim dimly into view and announce or foretell themselves.”¹¹ It is this future-oriented, or prefigurative, quality of the *Manifesto*, which is particularly important in understanding it as a political intervention. Indeed, it will be my contention in this chapter that we can only understand the way in which the *Manifesto* functions as a political intervention if we pay attention to the role of spectrality in the work, particularly as it functions in this futural mode. Thomas, describing the *Manifesto* as “a tocsin, or a call to action,” draws attention to the way in which spectrality provokes political action, because the specter is “unsubstantiated, perhaps, but this is to say that it awaits its substantiation, a substantiation that only Marx and his readers can give it.”¹²

This suggestion, that Marx might be calling on himself or us to substantiate or perhaps better (for reasons I will discuss below) *embody* the specter should make us question whether Marx is in fact as hostile to specters as Derrida claims. “Marx does not like ghosts any more than his adversaries do,” Derrida writes, “But he thinks of nothing else.”¹³ The reason, according to Derrida, for this hostile obsession of Marx’s, is that Marx thinks of the ambiguous being of the specter as a deficiency: the apparition of the specter represents a “dividing line between the ghost and the actuality,”¹⁴ a dividing line that “ought to be crossed ... by a realization.”¹⁵ In opposing ghosts, then, Marx is setting up an opposition “like life to death, like vain appearances of the simulacrum to real presence.”¹⁶ Thus Marx recognizes the spectral character of communism, but only in order “to denounce, chase away, or exorcise its specters.”¹⁷ Derrida identifies a secret complicity between Marx and his adversaries in this act of exorcism which “repeats in the mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead.”¹⁸ Where Marx differs from his opponents, for Derrida, is that these opponents want to declare communism dead in order to have done with it, while Marx declares the specter of communism dead in order to *replace* it with a living communism.¹⁹ In both cases we have a specter that points towards the past, either as something dead and buried, or as a shade that has been replaced by the reality. A specter that is oriented towards the future, however, suggests a different relationship between the living and the dead, in which the specter is

as he does on the hauntological character of the specter is problematic. Nonetheless, I believe Derrida’s concept of spectrality is relevant to the *Manifesto* whether or not it derives directly from Marx’s terminology; the rest of the chapter attempts to argue this case.

¹⁰Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10.

¹¹Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter”, 59. Spivak connects the “revenant,” the returning specter, with Derrida’s discussion of the “arrivant,” the one who arrives, or “an ancestry that can appear as a future” (Spivak, “Ghostwriting”, 71).

¹²Thomas, “Seeing is Believing”, 209.

¹³Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 46.

¹⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 39.

¹⁵Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 39.

¹⁶Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 47.

¹⁷Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 47.

¹⁸Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 48.

¹⁹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 101-2.

the shadowy outline of a future which is not killed or displaced in its coming to be, but is instead inhabited or embodied.

The difference here is that Marx does not, in the *Manifesto*, propose that the specter should be replaced with something non-spectral. Rather, the specter continues to exist during the process of its embodiment. This is not to deny that Marx and Derrida have very different purposes, and Marx is happy to envision communism becoming, at some point, a fully present reality in a way which would be foreign to Derrida's insistence on a "democracy to come" which is *constitutively* "to come," and never present.²⁰ However, this fully self-present communism is not the subject of the *Manifesto*. Derrida reads the opening lines of the text, the declaration that "it is high time that communists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet this nursery tale of the specter of communism" as marking Marx's call for "the final incarnation, the real presence of the specter, thus the end of the spectral."²¹ But Marx writes this declaration at the beginning of the manifesto of a party which does not actually exist,²² and so the manifestation he is both calling for and attempting to enact is not the replacement of the specter with its reality, but rather the manifestation of the non-existent: that is, just what Derrida would call spectral. As my reading of the *Manifesto* in what follows will attempt to show, at the moment of class struggle which Marx is discussing in the text, communism remains a specter. The communist politics Marx describes and prescribes in the *Manifesto* is a politics of embodying this specter which depends on, or deals with, its continued existence as a specter. Were this specter to become fully embodied and thus no longer spectral, Marx might regard this as a victory (while Derrida would not), but this full embodiment is not Marx's concern in the *Manifesto*, and if such embodiment were to occur, the analysis in the *Manifesto* would become largely irrelevant.

The connection between manifestation and embodiment is crucial to the *Manifesto* and to the role of spectrality within it. A specter is an apparition, which is to say that it appears, that it is an appearance, but without the proper relation that any appearance ought to have to the real thing which it is an appearance of. Derrida calls this a "paradoxical incorporation," an appearance of a body which is not in fact a body and therefore not quite an appearance either: "it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition."²³ That is: with no body, the specter is not the appearance of the body; but, then, if it is not the appearance of anything in particular, in what sense exactly is it an appearance? This indefinite distance between appearance and embodiment is key to the rhetoric of the *Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* makes manifest a communist movement, the appearance of which has a highly indeterminate relationship to reality. We will see in more detail how far the empirical claims of the *Manifesto* actually describe reality in due course, but such a judgment of the *Manifesto*'s representational accuracy is not intended to criticize it as inaccurate, but rather to suggest ways in which appearance might function in the text without being constrained by the demands of accuracy.

²⁰Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 64–5. It may be worth mentioning that, when Derrida invokes the necessary futurity of the democracy to come, he is not directly criticizing Marx, but Fukuyama.

²¹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 103.

²²On the minimal existence of any kind of organized communist movement before 1848, see Stedman Jones's introduction to Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 39–49.

²³Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

The *Manifesto*, that is, employs the open, dialectical character of appearance explored in previous chapters, but marks a shift from the explanatory use previously made of the category (in which appearance is used to diagnose an underlying essence) to a rhetorical *employment* of appearance, in which an appearance which is not simply reflective of underlying reality is put forward to characterize a reality that is not yet adequate to this appearance in order to incite political interventions that would fill out this appearance.

4.2 The Communist Prosthesis

Here we might understand the relationship between the *Manifesto* and the communist party of which it is supposed to be the manifesto (and manifestation) in terms of the concept of prosthesis, which occurs in two somewhat different ways in Derrida's text. In his discussion of the apparition of the specter in *Hamlet*, Derrida gives a decisive role to the armor worn by the ghost ("which no stage production will ever be able to leave out"²⁴). It is, paradoxically, the corporeality of this armor which renders the specter spectral, because by wrapping and concealing the ghost, the armor allows it to appear without revealing itself. It is at the level of the armor that the crucial ambiguity of the specter resides, because "it prevents perception from deciding on the identity that it wraps so solidly in its carapace," such that "we do not know whether it is or is not part of the spectral apparition."²⁵ The specter has its hauntologically ambiguous being on the basis of this "technical prosthesis," an artifact "foreign to the spectral body that it dresses."²⁶

Derrida returns to the dependence of the specter on prosthesis later in the text in order to differentiate the specter from a Hegelian "spiritualization or even an autonomization of spirit, idea, or thought."²⁷ What distinguishes the specter is that this spiritualization does not remain distinct from the phenomenal and corporeal world, "for there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of the flesh."²⁸ The genesis of specters is not a spiritualization, but "a paradoxical *incorporation*" in which the spiritual or idea is incarnated "in *another artifactual body, a prosthetic body.*"²⁹ The prosthetic character of communism will be returned to below.

Spectrality, then, is not a type of idealism, because the specter is not an idea (as an illusion might be) that dominates matter. Rather, the specter is implicated in a deep if paradoxical way with materiality: it could not exist without the material of the prosthesis, but it cannot be reduced to that prosthesis.³⁰ It is this spectral materialism that Marx mobilizes in the *Manifesto* to show

²⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 8.

²⁵Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 8.

²⁶Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 8.

²⁷Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 126.

²⁸Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 126.

²⁹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 126.

³⁰Cheah argues that Derrida gives us an alternative form of materialism to Marxist dialectical materialism. Cheah points out that "dialectical materialism" is not a term Marx himself used, but finds the same dialectical rejection of spectrality in Marx's work, particularly in Marx's use of concepts of actuality and actualization, drawing on Derrida's interpretation of Marx as "oppos[ing] ghosts and specters such as those of ideology, the commodity, and the money form to the concrete actuality that is actualized by the material corporeal activity of labor." In presenting his non-dialectical materialism, "Derrida argues that as instances of presence and objective existence, concrete actuality and

how political activity has a definite material location, a location not just in time and space but within a particular body, which definite location makes possible the presentation of an indefinite future. We can see this in the way Marx rhetorically delineates the embodiment of the specter of communism in the communist movement as prosthesis in such a way that this embodiment is at the same time a transformation of the historical moment in which the body is formed. This takes place in what is perhaps the most sustained use of a single rhetorical device in the *Manifesto*, the imagined dialog with the “bourgeois objections to communism”³¹ that takes up most of its second part. Marx responds to the claim that communists intend to abolish property, culture, the family, and the nation, and in each case his response follows the same pattern. Marx begins by responding *tu quoque*:

Do you mean the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant, a form of property that preceded the bourgeois form? There is no need to abolish that; the development of industry has to a great extent already destroyed it, and is still destroying it daily.³²

That is, Marx accuses the bourgeoisie of having already done what they accuse the communists of wanting to do, inasmuch as the establishment of capitalism abolishes pre-capitalist forms of property. Marx goes on to push this point further, arguing that bourgeois property is itself a form of the abolition of property. Most obviously, this is because bourgeois property depends on depriving the proletariat of property: “Does wage labor create any property for the laborer? Not a bit.”³³ Perhaps more interestingly, however, Marx argues that bourgeois property itself is not the kind of property lauded by the bourgeoisie as “the fruit of a man’s own labor...the ground work of all personal freedom, activity, and independence.”³⁴ Bourgeois property is not an extension of man’s personality, but is capital, and “capital is a collective product and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the unified action of all members of society, can it be set in motion.”³⁵ In making capital into the prevailing form of property, then, the bourgeoisie has *already* made property social, has already abolished personal property; in the abolition of private property, “personal property is not thereby transformed into social property”;³⁶ rather, it is the private control of an already social property that is abolished.

It is on the basis of this analysis that Marx makes his final riposte to the imagined bourgeois critic, which is not to reject the criticism or (as the *tu quoque* argument might suggest) to accuse the critic of hypocrisy, but is, rather, to proudly accept the criticism, albeit with its terms now somewhat transformed by the critique. “The abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois,

the work that effects it or brings it about are only possible because of a certain spectrality” (Cheah, “Nondialectical Materialism”, 147). My intention in this chapter is to argue that Marx’s idea of embodying the specter is not the same as an actualization which would oppose the specter. Like Spivak, I think that Marx does show an awareness that “the ‘social’ is produced by average abstract ‘spectral’ labor,” and so does not set up an opposition between spectrality and material labor (Spivak, “Ghostwriting”, 74).

³¹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 243.

³²Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 235.

³³Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 235.

³⁴Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 235.

³⁵Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 236.

³⁶Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 236.

abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so,”³⁷ Marx writes, and slightly later adds, “You reproach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so, that is just what we intend.”³⁸ The same pattern occurs in Marx’s response to the other “bourgeois criticisms”: Marx argues that the bourgeoisie has abolished culture for the majority of the population, before going on to agree that communists will abolish bourgeois culture;³⁹ that the bourgeoisie has abolished the family for all but itself, and that communists will abolish the bourgeois family altogether;⁴⁰ that the bourgeoisie promotes in practice the community of women, and communism will abolish the bourgeois sexual ethics that treats “women as mere instruments of production”; and, finally, that the bourgeoisie is already abolishing national borders, and communists will complete this abolition.⁴¹

This pattern of responses has two key moments. Marx concludes in each case by *accepting* the description put forward as a criticism of communism (“precisely so”). Here Marx is responding to the “nursery tale of the Spectre of Communism” by taking on the mantle of this nursery tale, not rejecting or exorcising the specter, but inhabiting it.⁴² However, in order to make this response, Marx prepares a context in which the accusation leveled against communism is part of a general tendency in which the bourgeoisie is implicated. This establishes communism as already having a spectral existence within capitalism, a future-oriented spectrality in which communism in the present is the prosthetic body that renders visible the communism to come. In these responses to bourgeois critics, then, Marx ties the idea of the communist movement as embodiment of the communist specter to a theme developed elsewhere in the *Manifesto*, the location of communism’s possibility within a broader historical narrative. The role of this historical narrative within the *Manifesto* is fraught with difficulties, and perhaps inconsistencies, which we might subsume under the rubric of “determinism.”

Richard Hunt provides an example of a reading of the *Manifesto* in which an emphasis on the historical narrative leads to determinist conclusions. Hunt does not explicitly defend the thesis that Marx was a determinist; instead, this reading arises from Hunt’s attempt to defend Marx against the charge that he advocated “totalitarian democracy,” a concept Hunt never clearly defines, but which seems to involve the use of (putatively short-term) totalitarian means to produce an eventual democracy.⁴³ Where this leads Hunt to suggest what seems to be a determinist reading of Marx is in his equation of this “totalitarian democracy” with a revolution carried out by a minority, and then with any self-consciously revolutionary activity. Hunt writes that

³⁷Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 237.

³⁸Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 237.

³⁹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 238.

⁴⁰Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 239.

⁴¹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 241.

⁴²The condemnation of an imagined movement has often had the effect of calling into existence a real counterpart of that movement; as communism was condemned before there was much of an organized communist movement, anarchism was condemned before the existence of anarchists, and so on (see Thomas, “Seeing is Believing”, 210).

⁴³With this definition, Hunt rather flattens out the theory of Talmon, from whom he takes the concept of totalitarian democracy, Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 4. For Talmon, totalitarian democracy indicates a Rousseauist position in which democracy *itself* would be totalitarian (that is, bring all of social life under majoritarian political control). For Hunt, on the other hand, totalitarian democracy refers to a non-democratic totalitarianism justified in the name of some hoped-for future democracy.

“for Marx...real revolution is brought about by ‘circumstances,’ not by the plotting of some self-appointed vanguard.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, these “circumstances” are the result of a historical process that is knowable in advance: “Marx and Engels...insisted that the road to communism lay only through the purgatory of bourgeois rule and economic modernization. There simply was no emergency exit.”⁴⁵ Here we have the central point of a determinist reading of the *Manifesto*: the claim is that the work is a description of a historical process that will lead to communism with little or no need for political intervention.⁴⁶

Hunt proposes a determinist reading of Marx in the process of making his argument that Marx did not advocate totalitarian democracy. Hunt’s argument depends on distinguishing between “minority” and “majority” revolutions: for Hunt, a revolution carried out by a minority would be totalitarian, while that carried out by a majority would be democratic. He cites a 19th century “justification of democratic revolutions,” which gives three criteria for “moral revolution”: “a just cause, majority support, and no other means open,” and argues that Marx in 1848 accepted all three conditions.⁴⁷ Hunt thus concludes that Marx’s advocacy of proletarian revolution depended on a prediction of the incipient existence of a proletarian majority.⁴⁸ Hunt draws this conclusion from Marx and Engels’ frequent equation of proletarian with democratic revolution, and of “democracy” with “the rule of the proletariat.”⁴⁹ He further adduces as evidence Engels’ discussion of tactics to be adopted in the already democratic United States, to which Hunt gives the gloss, “Engels did not call for revolution against a democratic constitution, but only for utilization of the legal rights and freedoms it provided in the interests of the workers.”⁵⁰

Hunt finds further and, he believes, more striking evidence for Marx’s advocacy of “majority revolution” in his analysis of Marx and Engels’ strategies in 1848. According to Hunt, Marx and Engels recognized that the proletariat did not yet make up a majority in Germany in 1848 and thus rejected a (minority) proletarian revolution in favor of a revolution invoking a number of different classes that would make up a majority. The claim that Marx did not advocate proletarian revolution in 1848 requires ignoring a number of his explicit statements, something Hunt is happy to admit to, arguing that “Marx and Engels did not really mean what they appear to say.”⁵¹ To make such a claim requires an explanation of what Marx and Engels *were* doing when they wrote these things they supposedly did not mean, and Hunt does not really make this case. He argues that the *Communist Manifesto* “may be suspect”⁵² because it was “deliberately ambiguous” such that it “might be interpreted in different ways according to different predilections,”⁵³ but does

⁴⁴Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 252.

⁴⁵Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 152.

⁴⁶See the helpful typology of determinisms in Cunliffe, “Tensions in the Communist Manifesto”.

⁴⁷Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 143.

⁴⁸Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 142.

⁴⁹Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 142.

⁵⁰Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 145. Surely however, *contra* Hunt, Engels’ description of American as democratic undermines any attempt to take literally or too broadly Marx and Engels’ equation of democracy and proletarian rule, as while Engels may have thought the US democratic in some sense, he surely didn’t think that the US proletariat was the ruling class.

⁵¹Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 177.

⁵²Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 178.

⁵³Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 177.

not explain *why* the *Manifesto* was written ambiguously, nor why the other sources he relies on for Marx's views can be absolved of this ambiguity. His underlying thought seems to be, however, that those texts in which Marx advocates specific courses of action for the revolutionary movement are more accurate representations of Marx's views than the broader sweep, both theoretical and rhetorical, of works such as the *Manifesto*.

This approach seems plausible; when addressing specific concerns in a context where decisions needed to be made quickly and errors could have dramatic consequences, Marx would of necessity have expressed his views clearly and directly, making these sources the best to use to discover Marx's real position. The problem with this argument is that it renders it impossible to understand why Marx wrote the other, more theoretical, abstract, or ambiguous works. If Marx's theory can be seen directly in the way he addresses particular tactical concerns, then writing outside of these tactical interventions would at best repeat this already developed position, at worst (and this is what Hunt suggests) obfuscate it. However, Hunt here is assuming that there is a direct relationship between tactics and theory, that is, that the tactics to be pursued in a specific situation follow directly from some general theory. It is this equation of tactics and theory which leads Hunt to a determinist reading of Marx. Tactics would only follow directly from theory if the theory was able to predict in advance the correct course of action in any circumstance, that is, the unity of tactics and theory depends on the assumption that the theory is itself determinist. If, however, the theory does not determine in detail the correct action to take, Marx's tactical discussions cannot be seen as simple applications of theory, and must instead be understood as innovations or choices made in response to the uncertainty of the situation and the indeterminacy of the theory.

This failure to distinguish between tactics and theory thus leads Hunt to misinterpret both the specific claims and the general character of Marx's theory. One example of specific misinterpretation is the already discussed claim that Marx's advocacy of an alliance with bourgeois democrats in 1848 represents an underlying theoretical commitment to cross-class alliance (the so-called "majority revolution"); much of the evidence of Marx's texts, however, some of it quoted by Hunt, suggests instead that alliance with the bourgeoisie is a temporary tactic called for by particularities of the prevailing circumstances, that is, the particular and transient *forms* taken by an underlying commitment to single-class, proletarian, revolution. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for instance, at the very point at which Hunt describes Marx and Engels as "apparently endorsing minority revolution," they describe the tactical considerations underlying an alliance with the bourgeoisie: "In Germany they [the communists] fight with the bourgeoisie whenever it acts in a revolutionary way, against the absolute monarchy, the feudal squirearchy, and the petty bourgeoisie."⁵⁴ Another, I think revealing, misreading by Hunt concerns his use of a passage by Engels, which Hunt takes as evidence for Marx and Engels's acceptance of the need for an indeterminate period of bourgeois rule prior to proletarian revolution.⁵⁵ Engels does not

⁵⁴Quoted in Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 176. Hunt's description of the apparently "totalitarian democratic" implications of this passage follows on 177.

⁵⁵Quite why Hunt considers a revolution leading to rule by the bourgeoisie to be a "majority revolution," while a revolution leading to proletarian revolution would be a "minority revolution" leading to "educative dictatorship," when even in Germany in 1848 the proletariat massively outnumbered the bourgeoisie, is not terribly clear.

quite say this, ironically describing the bourgeoisie's "triumph," before promising them "at most several years...before they are overthrown."⁵⁶ A page later, Engels' "at most several years" is transformed by Hunt to "certainly... 'several years,'"⁵⁷ while a little later Hunt alters this further to "*at least* 'several years.'"⁵⁸ Hunt does not notice the misrepresentation introduced by this slip-page, I think, because it allows him to interpret Engels in line with his own position. Hunt's assimilation of Engels to his own position, however, illustrates a more general misunderstanding of Marx and Engels's method here. Hunt seems to view Marx and Engels's statements about the immediate future as predictions, statements which purport to know with a fair degree of confidence how the future will be. In this determinist reading, then, the *Manifesto* lays out a detailed history and a concrete description of the proletariat. In order to counsel against any activity on behalf of the proletariat. The determinist reading, that is, makes the *Communist Manifesto* into a manifesto which is not directed towards any agent; one might wonder what the point of issuing such a manifesto would be. This interpretation, however, depends on taking the discussion of the future in the *Manifesto* as *predictions*; other modes of relation to the future would also allow for different ways of understanding agency in the *Manifesto*.

This problem in interpreting the *Manifesto* can be compressed into one of its most famous phrases: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."⁵⁹ The last part of this phrase, the appeal to sober senses, might suggest the kind of dry, scientific analysis we would associate with determinism (in which revolution is a matter of unchangeable and knowable objective forces, rather than subjective activity or enthusiasm). However, the profanation of the holy suggests something a little less sober, in which mystifications are challenged in a perhaps quite shocking way. The melting of solid into air goes even further, suggesting that this process of demystification might also involve an unsettling *remystification*: if the solidity of objective forces has evaporated, how are our sober senses supposed to study them? The more one studies this phrase, indeed, the more perplexing it becomes. This complexity points towards the highly ambiguous status of the historical narrative Marx gives in the *Manifesto*, and reproduces some of the tensions and problems produced by this ambiguity, in which determinism is sometimes (or almost) avowed, while existing in text the theoretical framework and political purpose of which seem to resist determinism.

4.3 Myth or Specter?

But does this embedding of the proletariat within a framework of historical tendency not vitiate the spectrality I have been insisting Marx maintains? This idea that the proletariat has a specific role in the future which we can know in the present is central to one of the most widely criticized elements of Marx's thought, and of the *Manifesto* in particular, its purported determinism. This is visible in passages in the *Manifesto* which suggest that the end of capitalism, and its replacement by

⁵⁶Quoted in Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 180.

⁵⁷Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 181.

⁵⁸Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 213, my emphasis.

⁵⁹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 223.

a superior economic system are inevitable as the result of the internal economic logic of capitalism. Probably the most explicit endorsement of this position in the *Manifesto* is:

At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organizations of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.⁶⁰

Even here, however, Marx does not completely propose a determinist model: Marx does not write that the development of the productive forces *caused* a change in the feudal relations of property, merely that the two “became no longer compatible,” and the relationship between the need for the relations of production to be burst asunder, and their actual bursting asunder, so suggestive of determinism, is only expressed by a frustratingly unclear semi-colon. More importantly for my argument, however, is that this almost determinist paragraph occurs in a discussion of the change from feudalism to capitalism, not a discussion of the end of capitalism. To the extent that this passage indeed puts forward a determinist account of history, it does so retroactively, that is, it sees the inevitability of the end of feudalism from a temporal point of view from which it is a completed event. By contrast, the struggle against capitalism that Marx describes is an ongoing and incomplete event, and Marx is interested in both understanding and promoting this event in its incompleteness. The use of language that suggests determinism in the *Manifesto* is, I will argue, a rhetorical strategy adopted by Marx to incite action in the present, rather than a confident prediction of the future.⁶¹

To explain what I understand Marx to be doing with this rhetorical invocation of the proletariat, it is useful to contrast this idea of the proletariat as a future-oriented specter with Laclau’s critical account of the way in which, he believes, this category of the proletariat has supported a determinist and reductionist form of Marxism.⁶² Laclau presents the concept of determinism in a way that owes a great deal to structuralist forms of Marxism. The determinist moment in Marx, according to Laclau, arises when history is taken to be a unified and closed structure, in which every development can in the end be explained by elements of this structure.⁶³ Laclau’s critique of determinism, then, proceeds via a critique of structuralism, a formal critique of structuralist ontology intended to show the logical limits of this kind of closed totality. The reason for this limit is the impossibility of objectivity, that is, the impossibility, according to Laclau, of comprehending history from a viewpoint independent of any subject position.⁶⁴ Particularly, determinist

⁶⁰Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 225.

⁶¹Marx does close this section of the *Manifesto* with the declaration that “Its [the bourgeoisie’s] fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 234). However this, I will argue, should be taken as incitement rather than prediction.

⁶²I refer here to Laclau’s account in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, rather than his earlier presentation, with Mouffe, of related ideas, because this later representation focuses on the philosophical background of their critique of Marxism, rather than the historical deconstruction of the Marxist tradition which concerned *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but which, as it focuses primarily on work *after* Marx, is less relevant to my interests here.

⁶³Laclau, *New Reflections*, 8.

⁶⁴Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

forms of Marxism have held that the subject position from which the history of class struggle can be understood, the proletariat, is itself completely objectively identifiable⁶⁵ and, Laclau argues, if class struggle is itself objectively determined, it would cease to be antagonistic.⁶⁶ This is because antagonism is fundamentally the contradiction between an identity and something which, external to the identity, prevents its full realization, the “constitutive outside.”⁶⁷ Class struggle is not, then, for Laclau, something that can be understood as taking place “within” the economy, in the sense of a confrontation between two groups that could be identified fully by reference to economic factors. Rather, what makes class struggle antagonistic is that classes cannot be fully identified because they exist only in a relationship of mutual exteriority, that is, each class prevents the full realization of the other’s identity.⁶⁸ As a consequence of his understanding of the basis of class antagonisms, Laclau concludes that “class struggle” as such cannot be fundamental, because the antagonists engaged in it are only contingently economic classes, and could just as well be or become some other category.⁶⁹ Thus the rejection of determinism, for Laclau, comes to entail the rejection of what he takes to be the traditional Marxist conception of the proletariat, that is, the proletariat conceived as a positive identity, defined by economic factors, and thereby given a specific and knowable role in the revolution of the future.

Identifying some of the internal contradictions and complexities of Laclau’s theory here will, it turns out, help to explain what I believe to be Marx’s rhetorical deployment of determinist themes in the *Manifesto*. The central point of disagreement between Marx (as I read him) and Laclau (as he reads the Marxist tradition) is the way in which the proletariat is construed. For Laclau, the idea of the proletariat is a rather outmoded and reductive identity held onto by those theorists who do not realize the impossibility of objective identities. For Marx (I will argue), the proletariat is a potential and spectral identity; for this reason, it is worth looking more closely at the relationship Laclau proposes between identities and potentiality. Laclau argues that all identities are dislocated, or, equivalently, that no identities are complete objectivities, because the construction of any identity is necessarily blocked by something external to it. For example, in his argument that, in class struggle, “antagonism is not inherent to the relations of production themselves, but arises between the latter and the identity of the agent outside,” Laclau explains that

A fall in a worker’s wage, for example, denies his identity as a consumer. There is therefore a “social objectivity”—the logic of profit—which denied another objectivity—the consumer’s identity. But the denial of an identity means preventing its constitution as an objectivity.⁷⁰

Laclau argues, that is, that what prevents the objectivity of any identity, or produces the primacy of dislocation, is that any identity necessarily comes into conflict with another identity. Laclau

⁶⁵Laclau, *New Reflections*, 50.

⁶⁶Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

⁶⁷Laclau, *New Reflections*, 17.

⁶⁸Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

⁶⁹Laclau, *New Reflections*, 50.

⁷⁰Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

does not go into great detail as to exactly how this conflict between identities occurs, but we can draw some conclusions. Laclau emphasizes the anti-Hegelian nature of his theory, that antagonism is not contradiction, that is, the antagonism between two identities does not mean the actual existence of two logically contradictory things at the same time. Rather, what are incompatible are the possible future developments of these identities, which is why Laclau equates the denial of an identity not with the rejection of it as it exists, but with the interruption of a process of which the present identity is a moment, “its constitution as an objectivity.”⁷¹ What is it, though, that renders this an antagonism? There is nothing incompatible about two actually-existing identities which do not logically contradict one another, so why, for Laclau, can these non-contradictory identities not exist alongside one another? The answer implied in Laclau’s argument is that these actually existing identities are subordinate to something else, a potential objectivity, and it is in the incompatibility of these potential objective identities which the antagonism lies. Note however that in making this argument Laclau is implicitly depending on the idea that he is attempting to reject, that is, the idea of fixed and given identities. To be sure, in Laclau’s argument such identities do not *actually* exist—there is no actual group which fully instantiates the identity of the proletariat, for instance—but what prevents the actual existence of such identities is the contradiction between their potential existence—the concept of the proletariat cannot be instantiated because it comes into contradiction with the concept of the bourgeoisie. Laclau’s argument for the primacy of dislocation does not eradicate the concept of fixed and objective proletarian identity, on the contrary, it depends on the continued coherence of this concept as a possibility.

We can see further evidence of the way in which Laclau maintains an essentialist understanding of identity as a horizon in his assertion that antagonism depends on an external source of change. Arguing against a Hegelianism which would explain any change by reference to an ultimate positivity, Laclau poses as the alternative an antagonism in which “it is an ‘outside’ which blocks the identity of the ‘inside’ With antagonism denial does not originate from the ‘inside’ of identity itself but, in its most radical sense, *from outside*.”⁷² The consequence of this which Laclau fails to draw is that, in the absence of an external impetus, these identities would be completely stable, that is, essences classically conceived. Laclau would argue that, because he understands the outside of an identity to be a “constitutive outside” which is “part of the conditions of existence of that identity,”⁷³ there could be no case in which the identity is not blocked, and so no case in which the stable identity actually exists. However, as I have argued, the “outside” is only antagonistic (rather than simply external) on the basis of the potential identity which it blocks, so, although the constitutive outside may prevent the actual existence of these stable identities, it does not prevent, indeed it requires, their potential existence. Laclau attempts to present a dichotomy between positive, objective identities, and dislocated identities blocked by a constitutive outside. What he does not consider is the possibility of internal negativity, of an identity which exists in conflict, not with something external to it, but with itself.⁷⁴

⁷¹Laclau, *New Reflections*, 16.

⁷²Laclau, *New Reflections*, 17.

⁷³Laclau, *New Reflections*, 21.

⁷⁴Although Laclau attributes the idea of the constitutive outside to Derrida (Laclau, *New Reflections*, 9), Laclau’s constitutive outsides are fully exterior, as they must be in order to produce the kind of antagonism he wants, and

Although Laclau does not recognize the extent to which his theory depends on positing objective, positive identities, he does explore a somewhat similar idea in his suggestion that identities provide us with a mythical fullness. Myth, for Laclau, is something that emerges from structural dislocation, and in particular from the traumatic effect of this dislocation: “the ‘work’ of myth is to suture that dislocated space through the constitution of a new space of representation.... It involves forming a new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of the dislocated elements.”⁷⁵ Myth, that is, is the objectivity we imagine could be formed by reorganizing the elements of the dislocated structure we find ourselves in. It is this vision of a complete objectivity which renders the myth politically potent—in contrast to the vision of completed objectivity presented by the myth, the actually existing dislocated structure appears as an arbitrary collection of dislocations, and the myth can serve to unite criticisms of present conditions.⁷⁶ What makes the myth mythical, however, is that the objectivity it presents could not actually be realized (as Laclau insists, such a realization is impossible), but rather it presents something which can present itself *as* an unfulfilled fullness: “the fascination accompanying the vision of a promised land or an ideal society stems directly from this perception or intuition of a fullness that cannot be granted by the reality of the present.”⁷⁷

Laclau’s idea of myth thus provides a way of thinking about the non-actual which can be usefully contrasted with the spectral. The way in which myth is non-actual is that it imagines a future fullness which does not actually exist; its mode of non-existence is fictionality. By contrast, spectrality is ontological (or, perhaps it would be better to say, hauntological): its non-actuality is not a gap between the real and the imagined, but a gap within reality. Spectrality is the presentation of an absence, the “paradoxical incorporation” of something which does not exist. The specter is thus internally divided in a way in which the myth is not; the myth is not paradoxical, because it does not actually exist (it only exists imaginatively or fictitiously) while the specter is paradoxical because of its existence, or its peculiarly paradoxical mode of existence as non-existence. We are now in a position to see more specifically what spectrality means for the proletariat, and how the spectral proletariat differs from both traditional Marxism and post-Marxism. The proletariat of traditional Marxism, as Laclau sees it, is an objective identity, something with determinate identifying characteristics which actually exists in the present and can be known to have certain objective interests and capacities. The traditional Marxist proletariat’s relationship to the future is that it is destined, via the workings of objective historical forces, to bring about a particular future (namely, communism). The post-Marxist proletariat would be one among many mythical subjects, which exists only inasmuch as some people ally themselves with an imagined future state of affairs. The relationship of this post-Marxist proletariat is that it is guided or inspired by a particular vision of the future, even though, according to Laclau, we know that this vision can never be fully realized.

thus are rather unlike the outside considered by Derrida, which “penetrates and thus determines the inside”(Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 152). Thus for Derrida, unlike Laclau, a constitutive outside is always also an internal negativity (see Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 39).

⁷⁵Laclau, *New Reflections*, 61.

⁷⁶Laclau, *New Reflections*, 62.

⁷⁷Laclau, *New Reflections*, 63.

The spectral proletariat, however, presents a third possibility distinct from the two considered by Laclau. The spectral proletariat does not exist as a fully formed objectivity; however, unlike the mythical proletariat, it also does not exist in relation to a vision of future objectivity. The spectral proletariat is related to the future only inasmuch as its existence in the present is as something not present, that is, in its existence as temporal discontinuity. The spectral proletariat is not related to a specific future, that is, but is instead related to futurity as such, the possibility of the non-present or of something other than the present. To return to the location of the proletariat within history which we saw in Marx's response to the bourgeois critic of communism, the spectral proletariat is located within history as a site of possibility. This possibility has a definite location but no guaranteed outcome, unlike both Laclau's traditional Marxist and Laclau himself (with the twist that, for Laclau, this guarantee will always be reneged upon). Having established, then, what is specific about the spectral proletariat, I now need to show that this is indeed how Marx construes the proletariat in the *Manifesto*.

4.4 The Future as Rhetoric

We do find a definite discussion of a fixed and objective proletariat in the *Manifesto*, but this figure is an object of critique; it is the various forms of non-communist socialism, which Marx critiques towards the end of the *Manifesto*, that propose a reified vision of the proletariat. Both the "conservative or bourgeois socialism" of Proudhon and the "critical-utopian socialism and communism" of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen, in Marx's description, reify the working class by treating it as an object of philanthropic concern, rather than as the subject of the socialist movement. These forms of socialism attribute to the working class a set of interests that derive from their status as "the most suffering class" and "only from the point of view of being the most suffering class does the proletariat exist for them."⁷⁸ This way of identifying the proletariat leads to a politics which would maintain the *existence* and status of the proletariat while improving its conditions, a policy "desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society."⁷⁹ These socialists "desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements."⁸⁰ This idea of a fixed proletariat can have one of two consequences: for the bourgeois socialists it leads to a desire to preserve the role of the proletariat, it requires "that the proletariat should remain within the bounds of existing society, but should cast away all its hateful ideas concerning the bourgeoisie"⁸¹ and accept that "the bourgeois is a bourgeois—for the benefit of the working class,"⁸² as Marx acerbically puts it. For the utopian socialists, on the other hand, the fixity of the proletariat is due to viewing it as "a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement."⁸³ They thus try to derive the principles for the

⁷⁸Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 254.

⁷⁹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 252.

⁸⁰Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 252 The bourgeois socialists are thus rather like those who believe in Laclau's myth, without being aware of its mythical character.

⁸¹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 252.

⁸²Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 253.

⁸³Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 254.

emancipation of the working class from something outside of the historical development of the proletariat:

Historical action is to yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones, and the gradual, spontaneous class organization of the proletariat to an organization of society specially contrived by these inventors. Future history resolves itself, in their eyes, into the propaganda and the practical carrying out of their social plans.⁸⁴

The utopian socialists' belief in the fixed, objective character of the proletariat leads them, according to Marx, to a dogmatic attachment to their particular utopian vision and a "fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effects of their social science."⁸⁵ The alternative that Marx proposes is "historical action" which does not depend on drawing up detailed plans for "future history."⁸⁶

This understanding of the proletariat as historical carries with it an understanding of the proletariat as transitory. By historicizing the proletariat, Marx also renders the proletariat spectral. The kind of historicism that Marx practices in his description of the proletariat in the *Manifesto* doesn't *fix* the proletariat historically, but submits it to flux and change; like all specters, the proletariat arises in and through history, which is not the same as saying that the proletariat is determined by history. This is the importance of Marx's insistence throughout the *Manifesto* on the fact that the proletariat is produced. Marx characterizes the proletariat as produced from the moment it is introduced into the text, when after an extended panegyric to the bourgeoisie, Marx writes that in developing its own power the bourgeoisie has "forged the weapons that bring death to itself" and "has also called into existence the men who are to wield the weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians."⁸⁷ This rather mystical-sounding conjuration of the working class is then expanded on through an account of the production of manufacture of the working class in the most literal sense: "Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine."⁸⁸ This is, then, a very unnatural, and non-naturalized, account of the proletariat, the proletariat not as something fixed or given, but as artificially and mechanically produced.⁸⁹ Note that what is produced here is not (just) individual workers, but something collected, or at least unindividuated: "the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character," Marx writes, and so produces "masses of labourers, crowded into factories."⁹⁰ It is in this rendering of labor power as an undifferentiated mass that capitalism produces the proletariat in a very specific form, as "a commodity, like every other article of

⁸⁴Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 254.

⁸⁵Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 256.

⁸⁶Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 254.

⁸⁷Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 226.

⁸⁸Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 227.

⁸⁹This idea of the proletariat as one of the mechanical components of capitalism is explored by Marx in chapter 15 of *Capital*, in which he describes how "the workers are merely conscious organs, co-ordinated with the unconscious organs of the automaton" Marx, *Capital*, 544.

⁹⁰Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 227.

commerce.”⁹¹

Marx here is drawing *political* consequences of the relationship between the proletariat and the commodity: the produced, and so unnatural, nature of the proletariat is what allows the proletariat to incarnate the future’s “blurred lineaments.” The full theoretical account of the commodity will have to wait until *Capital*, but the political effects are already in place by the time Marx writes the *Manifesto*. Derrida points out the close connection between the commodity and the specter, which Marx himself draws when he explains commodity fetishism by reference to the haunted table at a séance.⁹² What makes the commodity so difficult to analyze is that, as exchange value, the real commodity is indifferent to “the immediately visible commodity, in flesh and blood.”⁹³ The commodity is a physical thing indifferent to its physical properties, a “sensuous non-sensuous” in which “what surpasses the senses still passes before us in the silhouette of the sensuous body that it nevertheless lacks of that remains inaccessible to us.”⁹⁴ The commodity thus exhibits the same properties as the prosthesis of the specter, that uncanny body that presents the non-present; in the case of the commodity, however, Derrida emphasizes the technical character of this prosthesis, the way in which it depends on “automatic autonomy, mechanical freedom, technical life.”⁹⁵ The spectral quality of the commodity, that is, comes from its essential location within a system of mechanical production which does not endow it with a predictable mechanism but an uncanny, dislocated unpredictability. The commodity, that is, shares the logic of the prosthesis, in which it is the physical “body” incarnating the specter which allows the specter to be disembodied.⁹⁶

Marx draws on the proletariat’s status as a commodity to emphasize the connection between the historically and materially produced status of the proletariat and the proletariat’s spectral, unformed, and thus revolutionary character. Laborers are, Marx writes, “a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.”⁹⁷ The proletariat differs from previous classes in being a commodity, and because of this, unlike previous class forms, it is not fixed.⁹⁸ Thus, the growth and development of the proletariat which takes place as a result of the increasing economic dominance of capitalism is not a consolidation of the class in the sense of an increase in its identity and stability, but rather an increase in its instability:

With the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised.⁹⁹

⁹¹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 227.

⁹²Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 151.

⁹³Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 150.

⁹⁴Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 151.

⁹⁵Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 153.

⁹⁶Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 8.

⁹⁷Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 227.

⁹⁸Marx describes society prior to capitalism as “*Ständische und Stehende*,” which the standard translation renders as “solid,” missing the connection between this fixity and feudal estates (*Stände*); Carver instead translates this as “fixed and feudal” (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 223; Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 4).

⁹⁹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 229.

This strength goes hand-in-hand with, and indeed is a consequence of, this increased equalization and commodification, which also leads to increased precariousness of the proletarian identity:

The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious.... Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots.¹⁰⁰

This compresses Marx's account of the proletariat into a nutshell: as capitalism develops, the proletariat becomes increasingly powerful because of its increasingly dislocated place within that system, which leads to a general tendency to the breakdown of the system, though the nature and location of that breakdown is contingent and unpredictable.

Further, it is not just that the proletariat is located at the site of the breakup of the capitalist system, rather the proletariat embodies this breakup in itself:

In the condition of the proletariat, those of old society at large are already virtually swamped. The proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family relations; modern industry labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.¹⁰¹

Marx is doubtless exaggerating here, describing his projected proletariat of the future rather than the barely existing proletariat of Germany in 1848. But this is rather the point, because the existence of the future in an incomplete form is essential to Marx's concept of the proletariat. It is in this indistinct presentation of futurity that the proletariat that Marx draws in the *Manifesto* exhibits what Derrida calls spectrality.

Marx writes at the beginning of the *Manifesto* that it is "high time that communists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, and their tendencies."¹⁰² This openness is not, however, a simple act of transparency, the manifestation of an already existing, already constituted communist movement. The openness Marx exhibits in the text is not so much an openness about a previously secret communist movement, but an openness towards a future in which a communist movement might exist. To the extent that the *Manifesto* makes anything manifest, it does so by constructing an appearance which does not (yet) have any essence to be the appearance of. This reflects a general philosophical approach which we can see operating in the *Manifesto*, and which, despite Marx's differences with Derrida, we could reasonably call hauntological in its displacement of attempts to provide ontological foundations for politics. This requires a reassessment of the role of class in the *Manifesto*, as class has frequently been taken to be *the* ontological underpinning for Marxist politics. The *Manifesto*, on my reading, begins to develop an understanding of class that is compatible with hauntology, although this

¹⁰⁰Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 229.

¹⁰¹Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 231-2.

¹⁰²Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 218.

remains incomplete here, and indeed will remain incomplete until the fuller analysis of capitalism given in *Capital* (which forms the subject of the next chapter).

Determinist readings of Marx draw a close connection between history and the proletariat as an objectivity: the idea is that there is a positively identifiable group, the proletariat, with an identifiable location within history, which history objectively determines the future possibilities for this group. Attempts to restore space for subjective agency often take the form of an indeterminism or voluntarism, a reversal of this determinist position, in which agency depends on denying the inscription of an agent in a historical situation.¹⁰³ Spectrality presents an alternative to these two positions, in which futurity derives from an inscription in history because that history is itself split, non-linear or “out of joint.” If Marx is not completely consistent in the *Manifesto* in presenting the proletariat as spectral, he nonetheless shows an awareness of the relationship between agency and the dislocated character of history throughout the text. The aftermath of 1848 would require Marx to push this position further, as we saw in the previous chapter, and would eventually lead him to develop a much more detailed account of the way in which capitalism produced this particular kind of dislocation, and so produced the proletariat in its strange spectral futurity. The most complete statement of this theory is of course *Capital*, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁰³This is true of Laclau, as discussed above, and also in slightly different ways, of Badiou’s theory of the event as subtracted from history (see p. 105) and Ranciere’s discussion of the proletariat not as a class but as a “part with no part” (see p. 103).

Chapter 5

The Fetishism of Commodities and the Witnesses Thereof

In his debates with the Young Hegelians in the 1840s, Marx introduced the idea of “practical illusion” to explain the relationship between politics and economics, or, rather, to name the way in which the separation to the two would be at the same time illusory and of the most practical importance. To the extent that this concept of practical illusion is theoretically elaborated in the 1840s, it is through the idea of ideology. Marx, however, abandoned the theory of ideology in 1852 in the face of the revolutions of 1848,¹ which had presented the problem of practical illusion to an extent that was off the scale of what the theory of ideology could deal with. Two aspects of this have been the subject of the previous two chapters: the difficulty of understanding the appearance of the future in the present without assuming any guarantees of the future which we can see in the rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto* (in chapter 4), and the political significance of the autonomous appearances explored in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (see chapter 3). The study of political economy, which took up so much of Marx’s time after 1852, was in large part an attempt to grapple with the question of practical illusion in the new dimensions revealed by this experience, in particular how to understand the possibilities of working-class political action in a world of autonomous appearances. This research reached its most developed form in volume 1 of *Capital* which, in the theory of commodity fetishism, develops a materialist theory of appearance able to comprehend the practical illusions of modern society. In this chapter, I will explain how Marx’s analysis of the commodity functions as a materialist theory of appearance, and how this helps understand the account of the working class as political agents which we find in *Capital*.

¹Marx never explicitly rejected his early theory of ideology, but he did not use the term after 1852, see Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 42.

5.1 Appearance Without Essence

A certain moralizing criticism of capitalism would put great stress on the supposed reality of use values, in order to maintain a rejection of the supposedly unreal or excessive exchange values.² This idea of the plainspoken honesty of the use-value, as against the duplicity of exchange-value, is given some support by a remark of Marx's, in which he describes the tendency of English to use "worth" to mean use-value and "value" to mean exchange-value, which Marx explains by reference to "the spirit of a language which likes to use a Teutonic word for the actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflection."³ However, I don't think it is any accident that here Marx is referring to writers from the 17th century, rather than his own, because the thrust of his analysis of commodities in capitalism is that commodity production upsets this moral division, and makes use-values at least as duplicitous and unreal as exchange-values, while exchange-values may find themselves expressing certain truths. To put it another way: because Marx's analysis of the commodity involves two interrelated dialectics—one of form and content, another of essence and appearance—we might be tempted to align Marx's two key terms, use-value and exchange-value, with the two poles of these dialectics. But part of what makes the relationship between use-value and exchange-value a genuine dialectic is that they don't have this kind of stable opposition, but rather continuously change position. The reflection Marx is interested in in the analysis of the commodity, that is, is not the kind of reflection which is contrasted with reality, but is more like a hall of mirrors in which appearances take on a life of their own, with the twist that sometimes the reflections escape the mirrors entirely.

This mirroring is present from the start, a mirroring both of Marx's discussion of commodities, and the existence of the commodity itself. Introducing the distinction between use-value and exchange-value, Marx writes that "commodities come into the world *in the shape* [Form] of use values."⁴ A use-value, that is to say, is not just a thing, but is rather a shape or, as Marx puts it, the "plain homely, natural form" of a commodity.⁵ The use-value is material, that is, but not just material; rather it is embodied form, specifically the form of the commodity. Marx then distinguishes this form from the commodity's other form. Where the use-value is a "natural form," the exchange-value is a "value-form."⁶ Both use-values and exchange-values, then, are forms; presumably forms of something else which is the content. This brings up the first complexity of the commodity, the question of its materiality or lack thereof. This is a key element of the opposition between use-value and exchange-value, because use-value is a property of the material specificities of the commodity, whereas "not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as

²See for instance McLellan's argument for the superiority of user over exchange value drawing on Marx's early critique of James Mill (McLellan, "Unalienated Society", 464), or Mies, who connects the superiority of use over exchange with a feminist defence of the concrete body (Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, 217-8). But, as Spivak points out, and I will attempt to show below, "use (concrete) over exchange (abstract)...is far too luddite a binary opposition to account for the theoretico-practical breadth of Marx's work" (Spivak, "From Haverstock Hill Flat", 2). Indeed, abstract labor and exchange value turn out to be useful to communist society, see p. 89 below.

³Marx, *Capital*, 126.

⁴Marx, *Capital*, 138, my emphasis.

⁵Marx, *Capital*, 138.

⁶Marx, *Capital*, 138.

values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects.”⁷ However, “commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labor... their objective character as values is therefore purely social.”⁸ So the *embodiment* of labor in the commodity is at the same time an *expression* of the value of that labor. That is, the materiality of the commodity which makes up its use-value is the appearance in which the (non-material) value becomes “manifest.”⁹ So we have multiple layers of appearance present in the commodity: the use-value is the material appearance of exchange-value, which is itself a kind of form or costume of “the value that lies hidden behind it.”¹⁰

This process of appearance is complicated, however, by the fact that the value of an individual commodity cannot appear on its own; rather, value “can only appear in the social relation of commodity to commodity.”¹¹ This is crucial to the dialectic of use-value and exchange-value because, in the individual commodity, use-value and exchange-value are quite separate, or even opposed, whereas in the relation of one commodity to another, the relation between use-value and exchange-value becomes reversed, with the two now being equated. Marx introduces two new forms, the relative form and the equivalent form, and in any comparison of one commodity to another, one commodity appears in relative form, and the other appears in equivalent form.¹² The commodity the value of which appears is in the relative form; the other commodity, the value of which remains hidden, is the equivalent form. Marx concretizes both of these forms through his continual example of linen, as relative form, and a coat, as equivalent form (a choice of examples I will return to later). The interesting point here is the way in which the value of the relative form appears *in* the equivalent form. Or, to put it another way, the relative form *has* value because the equivalent form *is* value: “in this relation the coat [equivalent form] counts as the form of existence of value, as the material embodiment, for only as such is it the same as the linen.”¹³ The equivalent form is only able to be, to embody, value, however, because its own value remains hidden. This is a general, but paradoxical, feature of appearance: an appearance must be the appearance *of* something, but it must also be different from that thing (or there is no appearance, just the thing itself). So the value of the commodity in the relative form appears by being equated to something which does not appear as value, the equivalent form: “the commodity linen brings to view its own existence as value through the fact that the coat can be equated with the linen although it has not assumed a form of value distinct from its own physical form.”¹⁴ But this has a paradoxical consequence: the equivalent form, the coat, *is* value, that is, expresses the value of the relative form, only because it is a use-value. “Use-value becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, value.”¹⁵ Use-value and exchange-value here now exchange places. Where, in one

⁷Marx, *Capital*, 138.

⁸Marx, *Capital*, 138-9.

⁹Marx, *Capital*, 139.

¹⁰Marx, *Capital*, 139.

¹¹Marx, *Capital*, 139.

¹²Marx, *Capital*, 139.

¹³Marx, *Capital*, 141.

¹⁴Marx, *Capital*, 147.

¹⁵Marx, *Capital*, 148.

commodity, use-value and exchange-value are two separate forms, with use-value the bodily form and exchange-value the manifestation of value, now, with two commodities, it is the *use*-value which is the form of value.

This reversal already establishes that Marx's analysis of commodities does not depend on a simple binary of appearance and essence, but the relationship becomes increasingly complicated as Marx develops it, moving from the relationship between two specific commodities (the elementary form) to the relationship between the "whole world of commodities," the expanded and general forms of value.¹⁶ The expanded form arises from considering many particular comparisons between commodities at the same time, that is, moving from expressing the value of linen in coats, to expressing this value in coats or tea or coffee or corn or gold or iron "or etc."¹⁷ We have the same situation in which the value of a commodity is expressed in the form of a use-value, but now, "particular form of use-value in which it appears is a matter of indifference."¹⁸ This is rather peculiar, however, because the point of involving use values in the equivalent form of value is that a particular use value provided a concrete bodily form to express the exchange value. With the chain of indifferent forms of use-value in the expanded form, the equivalent loses its determinate concreteness. The equivalent becomes an abstraction: use-value in general, rather than a use-value in particular.¹⁹ Indeed, this is the point at which use-value as such becomes visible, although only for a moment, as use-value disappears again, and for good, in the transition from the expanded form of value to the general form.

Where the expanded form abstracts the commodity through a generalization of use-value, the general form materializes the value of the commodity through another reversal. The expanded form expresses the value of a single commodity via the world of other commodities; in the general form, this world of commodities has its value expressed through a single commodity, the universal equivalent.²⁰ Here, the use-value disappears. The universal equivalent is a commodity that was previously expressed in the relative form, that is, a commodity which has value, but not use-value. Upon the reversal into the general form, the use-values which previously expressed that value now take on the relative form themselves, and also have value, but not use-value. The general form thus displays the value of a commodity as a relationship among values, and in doing so, it renders the use-value invisible:

The value of every commodity is now not only differentiated from its own use-value, but from all use-values, and is, by that very fact, expressed as that which is common to all commodities. By this form, commodities are, for the first time, really brought into relation with each other as values, or permitted to appear to each other as exchange-values.²¹

The general form represents the materialization of value, because one commodity in particular comes to stand for value as such, and this materialization is accomplished through an autonomiza-

¹⁶Marx, *Capital*, 158.

¹⁷Marx, *Capital*, 155.

¹⁸Marx, *Capital*, 155.

¹⁹Marx, *Capital*, 156. Spivak, "From Haverstock Hill Flat", 2 points out the abstract character of use-value.

²⁰Marx, *Capital*, 157.

²¹Marx, *Capital*, 158.

tion of value. The world of commodities is now a self-contained world of value relating to value, and is no longer an appearance which must relate to an external essence; with the assumption of the general form, the commodity is an autonomous appearance, an appearance without essence.

5.2 Material Fetishism

If the commodity is a materialization of the abstraction, value, however, what is the status of commodity fetishism? Fetishism is a category of misrecognition, developed by European anthropologists to describe the way in which non-Europeans perceived objects as having supernatural powers, as opposed to the proper (European, rationalist) understanding of objects as inert.²² Marx's invocation of fetishism would then, one might assume, be deflationary, intended to contrast the false appearances of the commodities in capitalist society with their underlying reality. But if, as I have claimed, commodities are an appearance divorced from underlying reality, there could be no such demystification, so what would it mean to talk about a fetishism of commodities? We can see the answer through a comparison of two analogies Marx uses in an attempt to understand commodities, both of which he eventually finds to be inadequate.

The first analogy Marx uses is material and scientific; analogies of this sort recur throughout his attempt to explain the relationship between value and form. Marx explains the relationship of relative and equivalent forms of value through an example drawn from chemistry, the relationship between butyric acid and propyl formate, which are “different substance[s],” but “both are made up of the same chemical substances... moreover in the same proportion.”²³ The point of this analogy is that it gives an example of a commonality which underlies differences of form: “thus by equating propyl formate with butyric acid one would be expressing their chemical composition as opposed to their physical formation.”²⁴ Marx next has recourse to a material analogy to explain how one commodity can be the measure of the value of another, giving as illustration a simpler measure, that of weight.

A sugar-loaf, because it is a body, is heavy and therefore possesses weight; but we can neither take a look at this weight nor touch it. We then take various pieces of iron, whose weight has been determined beforehand. The bodily form of the iron, considered for itself, is no more the form of appearance of weight than is the sugar-loaf. Nevertheless, in order to express the sugar-loaf as a weight, we put it into a relation of weight with the iron.²⁵

Finally, Marx again has recourse to a material analogy to explain the relation between causation and appearance: “the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye.”²⁶

²²Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat”, 185.

²³Marx, *Capital*, 141.

²⁴Marx, *Capital*, 141.

²⁵Marx, *Capital*, 148.

²⁶Marx, *Capital*, 165.

In each of these three attempts to use physical phenomena to clarify the status of the commodity, however, Marx immediately disqualifies the analogy in the course of making it. In the chemical analogy, one chemical composition has two different forms, and is thus indifferent to this physical form, but “it is otherwise in the value relation of one commodity to another” because “the first commodity’s value character emerges here through its own relation to the second commodity.”²⁷ In the case of the weight of sugar loaves and iron, “the analogy ceases” because “in the expression of the weight of the sugar-loaf, the iron represents a natural property common to both bodies, their weight; but in the expression of value of the linen, the coat, represents a supra-natural property: their value, which is something purely social.”²⁸ In the case of the optic nerve, there

is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this.²⁹

The lack of connection between the physical nature of the commodity and the commodity relations it supports is what makes the analogy fail in each of the three cases, and what makes the material analogies so revealingly inadequate to explain the commodity. In the material cases Marx proposes as analogies, comparison of two objects serves to reveal some pre-existing natural properties of the objects. In the case of the commodity however, there is no such natural property to be revealed. What happens, instead, is that the act of comparison *creates* the property that it purports to reveal. It is only in particular circumstances that different objects can be equated with one another, that is, treated as commodities, and it is these circumstances that endow the commodities with the property of value:

It is only the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities which brings into view the specific character of value-creating labour, by actually reducing the different kinds of labour embedded in the different kinds of commodities to their common quality of being human labour in the abstract.³⁰

In response to the inadequacy of material analogies in understanding the commodity, Marx turns to a second analogy: religion. “In order therefore, to find an analogy, we must take flight into the misty realm of religion.”³¹ Marx’s acerbic characterization of religion here (and elsewhere) might encourage us to interpret this analogy with a certain degree of irony, as Marx making an atheist point about capitalism being as false and obfuscatory as religion. However, the analogy is intended rather more seriously.³² Marx emphasizes that religion is not an obfuscation, but a “reflection of the real world,”³³ and so he takes seriously the theology of the religions that flourish

²⁷Marx, *Capital*, 141-2.

²⁸Marx, *Capital*, 149.

²⁹Marx, *Capital*, 165.

³⁰Marx, *Capital*, 142.

³¹Marx, *Capital*, 165.

³²So seriously, in fact, that “analogy” may not be the right word; the structure of the separation of politics and economics is the same as the structure of religious belief (Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 83).

³³Marx, *Capital*, 173.

in a capitalist world:

For a society of commodity producers, whose general social relation of production consists in the fact that they treat their products as commodities, hence as values, and in this material form bring their individual private labours into relation with each other as homogeneous abstract labour, Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly in its bourgeois development, i.e., in Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion.³⁴

The structure of religion, that is, provides a real analogy which helps to understand the structure of commodity production. Nevertheless, as with the material analogies, the religious analogy immediately runs into a crucial disanalogy. In religion “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands.”³⁵ While religion is a mental misrecognition, that is, commodity fetishism is both material and practical; it is the materialization of what in religion is only an idea.

Marx’s tracking between two inadequate analogies reveals the central difficulty of which commodity fetishism is the explanation: Marx’s materialism requires a material explanation of the commodity, which “not an atom of matter enters into.”³⁶ As Stallybrass puts it, commodity fetishism is “one of Marx’s least understood jokes”; to fetishize the commodity is “to reverse the whole history of fetishism. For it is to fetishize the invisible, the immaterial, the suprasensible.”³⁷ Commodity fetishism, that is, is the inversion of fetishism traditionally understood, because it is not a misrecognition which mistakenly sees something immaterial in a material object, but rather, a practice which produces a material instantiation of something immaterial. As such, commodity fetishism does not name an error, indeed, quite the reverse; our “fetishistic” behavior in relation to commodities expresses the truth of capitalist production: “To the producers, therefore, the relations between their private labours *appear as what they are*, i.e., they do not appear as direct material relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things.”³⁸ This passage emphasizes the full paradox of capitalism, in which fetishism is required for things to appear as they really are. This paradox arises because the fetishistic practice is required to *make* things the way they are, that is, for the continued operation and reproduction of capitalism:

Men do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it.³⁹

³⁴Marx, *Capital*, 172.

³⁵Marx, *Capital*, 165.

³⁶Marx, *Capital*, 138.

³⁷Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat”, 184.

³⁸Marx, *Capital*, 165-6, my emphasis.

³⁹Marx, *Capital*, 166-7. We might see an echo here of Marx’s idea that communists inhabit the description of them given by the bourgeoisie (see p. 64).

5.3 The Structure of *Capital*

The first part of *Capital* develops the analysis of the commodity in the language of Hegelian metaphysics and at a high level of abstraction (features—both the metaphysics and the abstraction—which Marx assures us are necessary features of the commodity itself). The rest of volume one, however, is full of the empirical details of 19th century English capitalism. The difference is quite striking, and requires some sort of explanation. What is the relationship between the metaphysics of capitalism developed in the first part, and the description of capitalism that is so important to the rest of the book? Phrasing it this way suggests an obvious answer, a kind of hypothetico-deductive method in which the first part lays out a theory and the rest provides the evidence that confirms or applies the theory; but this is just an artifact of phrasing that suggests a sharp distinction between the theoretical and the empirical. In fact, Marx is developing his theory throughout *Capital*, in the chapters filled with empirical detail as much as anywhere else. Which simply makes the question more puzzling: what kind of theory is Marx developing such that description is itself theorization? I believe my account of commodity fetishism as a theory of appearance can provide an explanation of this, but before turning to that explanation, I want to consider the ways in which this question has typically been addressed in the Marxist literature.

The conventional interpretation, deriving from Engels, sees *Capital* as structured according to the historical development of capitalism.⁴⁰ Here, the increase in empirical details would be due to two factors. First, the historical development of capitalism is a development of increasing complexity, so more detail is required to explain the later, more complex, forms of capitalism. Second, the details involved in the later forms of capitalism, being the details of 19th century capitalism specifically, are of more direct relevance to Marx's readers. The problem with this interpretation is that there is little if any textual evidence that Marx is proposing a historical narrative in *Capital*.⁴¹ Further, the sequence of historical cases studied in *Capital* does not seem to follow a particular temporal logic: the discussion of the working day in chapter 10 discusses the most recent factory reports, while the subsequent chapter 15 on machinery covers an extensive, and rather indeterminate, historical period; and, of course, the final part, on "so-called primitive accumulation," covers the earliest period of capitalist development. The idea, then, that the turn to empirical detail is a result of a historical narrative in *Capital* seems untenable.

The main alternative to this historical interpretation of *Capital* is what Arthur calls the interpretation of "successive approximations."⁴² This proposes, instead of a historical development, a logical development, in which a variety of simplified models of capitalism, with each model made more complex than the last by the removal of some simplifying assumptions. However, the

⁴⁰In this and the next paragraph I follow the account of various interpretations of *Capital* in Arthur, *New Dialectic*, ch. 1.

⁴¹The description of the method of *Capital* which Marx quotes from I. I. Kaufman in the preface to the second edition could be read as a historical-developmental account, although this is not entirely clear, and in any case Marx's endorsement of it is complicated by his reference to the difference between the method of inquiry and the method of presentation. While the method of inquiry may study "forms of development" (which may or may not be historical), the method of presentation—that is, the logic underlying the structure of *Capital*—seems not to Marx, *Capital*, 100-2.

⁴²Arthur, *New Dialectic*, 21.

method of successive approximations has some difficulty accounting for the logical structure of *Capital*. The problem is that the various aspects of capitalism described at different points are not self-contained if simplified models of an economy; rather, they are parts or elements of an economy that do not make sense considered on their own. This is the impetus for what Arthur calls the “new dialectical” interpretation of *Capital*. In this interpretation, the relationship between chapters in *Capital* is neither a linear history nor a linear logic, in which development is a development from simple to complex. Instead, in the new dialectical interpretation, the development follows a dialectical logic, that is, each stage develops out of the limitations revealed by analysis of the previous stage. Each point of development is revealed or an incomplete abstraction which cannot fully explain the capitalist system as a whole, which spurs on the creation of a more complete, more determinate, abstraction.⁴³

While the new dialectical interpretation is valuable in explaining some aspects of the logical structure of *Capital*, this explanation comes at the cost of making the new dialectical interpretation incapable of answering the question I opened this section with, the question of the role of historical and empirical detail in the later parts of *Capital*. Because this interpretation is concerned with the logical development of abstractions, the empirical material cannot but seem otiose. Out of the entire book, Arthur’s *New Dialectic* contains only two pages on “historical illustrations in *Capital*,” which attempt to explain the historical material either as purely illustrative of categories which can be wholly derived from dialectical logic, or, as in the case of the final part on primitive accumulation, concerned solely with contingencies in the way this logic was historically actualized in particular places.⁴⁴ It is this question which my focus on the relation between commodity fetishism and appearance can help answer.

All three interpretations of the structure of *Capital* which I have considered so far treat the method of the book as basically continuous; there is a gradual move from past to present, simple to complex, or less to more determinate abstractions. But the text itself is more discontinuous than this; while the idea that the text is divided into theory and evidence is, as I discussed above, wrong, the intuition that the book is doing two different things is, I think, right. However, what the text is doing is two different sorts of *theory*. Part one, on commodities and money, develops an ontology of material appearances. The subsequent parts of the book follow up on the theoretical consequences of this ontology, which, because it is a theory of material appearances, necessarily requires that the theory be developed through examining the empirical manifestations of material relations. Or, to be more precise, as the first part of the book theorizes the process of appearance, the later parts develop theory by considering what appears and to whom; that is, the later parts of *Capital* are structured around a principle of witness and testimony. Marx weaves a variety of different testimonial reports (though primarily the reports of government inspectors) in order to show us how capital appears, and thus to reveal its processes.

⁴³ Arthur, *New Dialectic*, 25.

⁴⁴ Arthur, *New Dialectic*, 75-6. My criticism is in some ways similar to that of Kincaid, who takes Arthur to task for focusing on abstractions to the neglect of the concrete. However, I disagree with Kincaid’s suggestion that we see the concrete, in the form of use-value, as something external to capitalism which disrupts its abstractions (Kincaid, “Critique”, 68), as can be seen from my insistence on the abstract character of use value, above.

5.4 Machinery and Materialization

To begin explaining how this theorization of appearances works, I will discuss first Part 4 of *Capital*, “The Production of Relative Surplus Value.” The overall theoretical purpose of this part is to consider the production of surplus value through the intensification of labor, i.e., an increase in productivity which increases the proportion of surplus labor time to necessary labor time. This nominal conceptual purpose, however, provides the opportunity for an extended discussion of the relationship between technological development and capitalism which serves to illustrate and deepen the account of commodity fetishism. That is, if commodity fetishism is a theory of material appearances, the discussion that goes under the heading of “relative surplus value” serves to expand on some of the specific materialities that instantiate the system of commodity production. This discussion, which makes up Part 4 of *Capital*, considers cooperation, and the material organization of labor that facilitates it, focusing particularly on the physical gathering together of workers in manufactures, and the subordination of human beings to materialized production processes made possible by machinery.

The primary category that becomes visible through the discussion of manufactures and machinery is abstract labor. This might seem to be merely a mental operation, in which we imaginatively abstract away from the specifics of real, concrete labor.⁴⁵ However, Marx discusses the way in which abstract labor becomes an inescapable practical reality in capitalism. First, he discusses how cooperation gives material substance to the mathematical idea of average labor. Of course one can always calculate the average of labor of any arbitrarily chosen group of workers, but this only becomes significant for the capitalist when the different productivity of different workers “compensate each other and vanish,” and this only happens “whenever a certain minimum number of workers are employed together,” i.e., when production involves the cooperation of a number of workers together under the command of a single capitalist.⁴⁶ This is not a purely mental operation because of the practical effects it has on both capitalist and worker: a capitalist who employs too few workers, and so whose total profit fluctuates too wildly from the social average, will not survive, nor will the worker whose productivity drops too far below the average.⁴⁷ Cooperation produces average labor as a real thing, and so makes it possible that the capitalist “sets in motion labor of a socially average character.”⁴⁸

The cooperation which Marx is talking about here, and which produces abstract labor, is not just the simple fact of individuals working together. Rather, it requires that they be working together in a context where a unification and aggregation of their labor will take place, that is, where their labor will be subordinated to an infrastructure of mediation. It is this mediation which is provided by the capitalist system in general and the particular institutions of productive organization developed at a particular point in time. As Marx writes,

⁴⁵This is the position, for instance, of Wolff, who writes that “Abstract labor has no existence outside of our minds” (Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*, 59). This isn’t Marx’s position, as we will see; nor is it true, sadly for those caught up in the process of materialization of abstract labor.

⁴⁶Marx, *Capital*, 440.

⁴⁷Marx, *Capital*, 441.

⁴⁸Marx, *Capital*, 441.

[workers'] unification into one single productive body, and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, lies outside their competence. These things are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings them together and maintains them in that situation. Hence the interconnection between their various labours confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose.⁴⁹

That is, capitalist production involves something besides labor, a coordination which appears separate from labor and in which the specifically capitalist character of production becomes visible.

Abstract labor is rendered visible by its material manifestations even in its earliest forms of cooperation in manufacture, but it reaches qualitatively higher levels of materialization in modern, large-scale, industry, through the employment of machinery. "In simple cooperation, and even in the more specialized form based on the division of labour, the extrusion of the isolated worker by the associated worker still appears to be more or less accidental";⁵⁰ that is, abstract labor here seems to be the result of a more-or-less chance aggregation, the result of adding together concrete labors which at bottom remain fundamentally distinct, rather than something inherent to labor itself. This changes with large-scale industry because "machinery...operates only by means of associated labor, or labor in common. Hence the cooperative character of the labor process is in this case a technical necessity dictated by the very nature of the instrument of labor."⁵¹ To put it another way: in manufacture, the subordination of worker to capitalist remains formal, with the capitalist ordering the worker to work, but not fundamentally altering the character of the work; with the development of machinery, however, this subordination takes place in content as well as form, with the actual activity of workers changing in response to the materialization of capitalist control, the machine.⁵² This is important because the reorganization of the labor process in response to the needs of capital, objectified in machinery, is a further way in which abstract labor is manifested materially.

"Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one."⁵³ Not only does capital adapt the labor process to its requirements, but it continually modifies that labor process. "Thus large-scale industry, by its very nature, necessitates variation of labour, fluidity of functions, and mobility of the worker in all directions."⁵⁴ This great increase

⁴⁹Marx, *Capital*, 449-50.

⁵⁰Marx, *Capital*, 508.

⁵¹Marx, *Capital*, 508.

⁵²This is Marx's distinction between formal and real subsumption, although Marx's account of this distinction (in the section on "Results of the Immediate Process of Production," initially intended for, but removed prior to, the publication of volume 1) is not entirely consistent with his account of relative surplus value in the finished text, on which I am drawing here. In the unpublished text, Marx argues that formal subsumption, in which "*technologically speaking*, the *labour process* goes on as before, with the proviso that it is now *subordinated* to capital" (Marx, *Capital*, 1026), can only produce absolute surplus value, by extending working time (Marx, *Capital*, 1021), not relative surplus value. However, Marx immediately goes on to argue that formal subsumption allows for an increase of scale (Marx, *Capital*, 1022) and "increases the continuity and intensity of labour" (Marx, *Capital*, 1026), just as he argues cooperation in manufacture does in the finished text.

⁵³Marx, *Capital*, 617.

⁵⁴Marx, *Capital*, 617.

in the diversity of the labor process, in an apparent paradox, erases the concrete specificity of the activities that had made up the various handicrafts. As a limited number of diverse and fixed activities, these were “apparently unconnected”;⁵⁵ with the explosion of different activities and the fluidity demanded by large-scale industry, this diversity stopped seeming a result of essential differences, and “technology discovered the few grand fundamental forms of motion which, despite all the diversity of the instruments used, apply necessarily to every productive action of the human body, just as the science of mechanics is not misled by the immense complication of modern machinery into viewing this as anything other than the constant re-appearance of the same mechanical process.”⁵⁶ The diversity of labor introduced by machinery and materialized in the industrial factory depends on the fact that machinery allows the reduction of labor to its simplest and most generic form, that is, on the materialization of abstract labor.⁵⁷

The connection I’ve been elaborating here, in which machinery is both the materialization and manifestation of some of Marx’s structuring and apparently metaphysical categories, that is, the way in which these categories become visible as material appearances, is the occasion for one of Marx’s most striking pieces of figuration: “Here we have, in the place of the isolated machine, a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demonic power, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members, finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs.”⁵⁸ The machine, that is, is the site of appearance of a “demonic power,” which would otherwise remain hidden. For Jameson, this demonic power is capital itself: “one is tempted to say that the machine constitutes the ‘form of appearance’ of the production relation, which remains an unrepresentable entity without it.”⁵⁹ Jameson suggests that this might be a problem, as Marx’s figuration of capital in terms of machinery has led his readers to reduce *Capital* to a theory of 19th century heavy industry.⁶⁰ But the logic of commodity fetishism

⁵⁵Marx, *Capital*, 616.

⁵⁶Marx, *Capital*, 617.

⁵⁷It is worth mentioning that this is one of the fairly small number of points in *Capital* where Marx breaks with his customary reticence in talking about the features of an alternative to capitalism, when he identifies the positive way in which the generic labor could develop if it was not subordinated to capital. Abstract labor, Marx argues, the kind of labor which renders the worker suitable for any employment, also underlies the fully developed humanity which would be *capable* of any kind of activity:

That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labour required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn (Marx, *Capital*, 618).

Abstract labor is frequently taken to be the object of Marx’s critique, but this passage shows that things must not be quite so simple. It’s also worth noting, in relation to the moralization of use value and exchange value discussed above, that abstract labor produces exchange value, which suggests that, if abstract labor can be recuperated to play a role in post-capitalist society, so can exchange value. Spivak is one of the few authors to explore the possible positive side of exchange value and abstract labor in Marx (Spivak, “From Haverstock Hill Flat”, 3-6).

⁵⁸Marx, *Capital*, 503.

⁵⁹Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 56.

⁶⁰“It is clear that Marx’s idea of production has often been displaced and stereotypically tainted by its period association with that late nineteenth-century heavy industry itself displaced by cybernetics and information technol-

as material appearance requires, it seems to me, that Marx employ this kind of figuration, because the logic of capital itself is a logic in which fundamental relations of production appear through materializations, and the particular materializations—and thus appearances—available to Marx are, of course, 19th century ones.

As always, however, appearance is a complex and contradictory category, in which what appears is both like and unlike what it is an appearance of. One of the images Marx chooses to use to characterize machinery expresses, perhaps accidentally, some of this ambiguity. In describing the way in which large-scale machines are themselves required for the production of large-scale machinery, Marx repeatedly (four times in two pages) refers to these machines as “cyclopean.”⁶¹ While Marx seems primarily to be drawing metaphorically on the giant size of the cyclops, it is also worth noting that the primary literary cyclops is the *Odyssey*'s Polyphemous, whose name means “many-voiced,” but who was one-eyed and, after his encounter with Odysseus, no-eyed; that is, he is capable of speaking but not of seeing. Whether Marx intends this resonance or not (and there is no particular reason to think he *does* intend it—he does not refer to the voice or vision of the cyclops at this or any other point in *Capital*) it serves nicely as an image of capital which, in objectifying itself in machinery, renders itself visible but not visible to itself, which is capable of endless mystifying talk about itself, but which is incapable of seeing itself. The image of capital as cyclops thus raises the question of *to whom* capital becomes visible. Who is capable both of seeing capital and telling us what they see when capital appears?

This question involves a shift in agency, from the agency of the capital that appears to the agent to whom it appears, the kind of agent we call a witness. Marx refers at one point to “us,” the readers of the book, as witnesses, indeed as particularly direct witnesses, eyewitnesses (*Augenzeugen*), but only in a particular and unusual situation, that of “the ancient Assyrian, Egyptian, and similar collections,” where the material residues of old labor processes are laid out for us.⁶² Without the help of museum curators, however, these ancient labor processes would remain opaque, because the lack of eyewitnesses is characteristic of pre-capitalist forms of production, in which “right down to the eighteenth century, the different trades were called ‘mysteries’ (*mystères*), into whose secrets none but those initiated by their profession and their practical experience could penetrate.”⁶³ Pre-capitalist production involved a particular kind of economic epistemology in which production was a riddle or secret *gnosis*, which could be neither seen nor spoken of. Things are different under capitalism, where “large-scale industry tore aside the veil that concealed from men their own social process of production and turned the various spontaneously divided branches of production into riddles, not only to outsiders but even to the initiated.”⁶⁴ Capitalism, that is, produces witnesses, and those witnesses are the very people who work in capitalist production.

Jameson alludes to the importance of these witnesses when, referring to the chapter on machinery I am currently discussing, along with the chapters on the working day and on the industrial reserve, to which I will turn shortly, he writes that “in these three longer chapters, people and

ogy” (Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 56).

⁶¹Marx, *Capital*, 506-7.

⁶²Marx, *Capital*, 452n19.

⁶³Marx, *Capital*, 616.

⁶⁴Marx, *Capital*, 616.

bodies begin to reappear, and yet it is important to register the fact that they are not summoned forth by Marx's own language; they appear only through lengthy quotations from the factory inspectors, they are mediated by the voices of others."⁶⁵ Jameson attributes this to a methodological fastidiousness on Marx's part, as a precaution "against personal expression, against passion, whether in indignation or in passionate sympathy," as well as "the jouissance in abstract dialectics."⁶⁶ While both of these may be elements of Marx's reasoning here, the more fundamental reason is that this mode of witness testimony is the epistemological counterpart of the metaphysics of appearance that structures *Capital*. We see this particularly in the testimony Marx presents to us at the end of the chapter on machinery. Here, the source is not the reports of factory inspectors, but from a parliamentary investigation into the condition of mine workers, which emphasizes the juridical character of this testimony: "The mode of examining the witnesses reminds one of the cross-examination of witnesses in English courts of justice, where the advocate tries, by means of impudent, confusing and unexpected questions, to intimidate and confound the witness, and to give a forced meaning to the answers thus extorted."⁶⁷ The extracts Marx chooses from the report show the mine workers exhibiting a rather admirable insistence on stating their case despite the efforts of the mine owners and other bourgeois representative on the committee; for instance:

"There are few collieries where night schools are held, and perhaps at those collieries a few boys do go to those schools; but they are so physically exhausted that it is to no purpose that they go there." "You are then," concludes the bourgeois, "against education?" "Most certainly not."⁶⁸

After some further crooked questions from these bourgeois, the secret of their "sympathy" for widows, poor families and so on emerge into the daylight. "the coal proprietor appoints certain gentlemen to take the oversight of the workings, and it is their policy, in order to receive approbation, to place things on the most economical basis they can, and these girls are employed at from 1s. up to 1s. 6d. a day, where a man at the rate of 2s. 6d. a day would have to be employed."⁶⁹

"Do you think that the juries would be impartial if they were composed to a considerable extent of workmen?" "I cannot see any motive which the workmen would have to act partially...they necessarily have a better knowledge of the operations in connection with the mine." "You do not think there would be a tendency on the part of the workmen to return unfairly severe verdicts?" "No, I think not."⁷⁰

"When you speak of sub-inspectors, do you mean men at a less salary, and of an inferior stamp to the present inspectors?" "I would not have them inferior, if you could get them otherwise." "Do you merely want more inspectors, or do you want a lower class of men as an inspector?"...This kind of examination at last becomes too much

⁶⁵Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 114.

⁶⁶Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 114.

⁶⁷Marx, *Capital*, 626.

⁶⁸Marx, *Capital*, 628.

⁶⁹Marx, *Capital*, 631.

⁷⁰Marx, *Capital*, 631-2.

even for the chairman of the investigating committee, and he interrupts.⁷¹

As we can see from these examples, then, the testimony of the witnesses to whom capital has appeared is not merely a report, but also a demand, a testimony *against* capital. So it is that Marx ends this extended quotation of the testimony of the mine workers⁷² with one of his rare discussions of political possibility. The insistence of workers such as these just quoted, combined with capital's own need not to destroy the workers, the source of value, entirely, mean that "the general extension of factory legislation to all trades for the purpose of protecting the working class both in mind and body has become inevitable."⁷³ This, however, merely expands the process of witness and, with it, resistance, because

it destroys both the ancient and the transitional forms behind which the dominion of capital is still partially hidden, and replaces them with a dominion which is direct and unconcealed.... By maturing the material conditions and the social combination of the process of production, it matures the contradictions and antagonisms of the capitalist form of that process, and thereby ripens both the elements for forming a new society and the forces tending towards the overthrow [*Umwälzungsmomente*] of the old one.⁷⁴

5.5 Testimony and Struggle

The relationship between witness and political struggle is developed more extensively in chapter 10, on the working day. As with the chapter on machinery, this chapter concerns the relationship between the logical-structural features of capitalism and its modes of visibility, but unlike chapter 15, chapter 10 begins with a discussion of an invisibility produced by capitalism, the invisibility of surplus labor. Marx compares capitalism to the quasi-feudal system of *corvée*, which "presents surplus labour in an independent and immediately perceptible form."⁷⁵ Here, necessary and surplus labor are temporally and spatially separate: "the necessary labour which the Wallachian peasant performs for his own maintenance is distinctly marked off from his surplus labour on behalf of the boyar. The one he does on his own field, the other on the seignoral estate."⁷⁶ The amount of time the peasant spent producing her own subsistence, and the amount of time producing for the landowner are directly visible. As a conceptual matter, capitalism involves the same division of time, "but this fact is not directly visible. Surplus labour and necessary labour are mingled to-

⁷¹Marx, *Capital*, 633.

⁷²Marx remarks that "the whole farce is too characteristic of the spirit of capital not to call for a few extracts," which extracts run to eight pages, Marx, *Capital*, 627-34.

⁷³Marx, *Capital*, 635.

⁷⁴Marx, *Capital*, 635. The original English translation adds an additional poetic resonance to this passage, which occurs just after discussion of the dangers posed by explosions in mines, by translating *Umwälzungsmomente* as "forces for exploding." Sadly, this resonance is an invention of the translator, Samuel Moore (Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 472).

⁷⁵Marx, *Capital*, 345.

⁷⁶Marx, *Capital*, 346.

gether.”⁷⁷ The chapter on the working day, then, concerns how this division between necessary and surplus labor time can become visible, and, through visibility, an object of struggle.

In the chapter on the working day, these forms of visibility are divided into three broad categories. First, Marx presents us with what seem to be natural signs. Natural signs are those signs which we can deduce the meaning of through reasoning (as an effect is the sign of its cause) without the intervention of any system of conventional meaning.⁷⁸ Marx identifies these natural signs of the extension of the working day on the bodies of the workers: “They are, as a rule, stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed in the chest; they become prematurely old, and are certainly short-lived; they are phlegmatic and bloodless, and exhibit their debility of constitution by obstinate attacks of dyspepsia, and disorders of the liver and kidneys, and by rheumatism.”⁷⁹ Even these natural signs do not directly disclose their meaning to Marx, however, but rather arise in *Capital* through multiple layers of quotation, the testimony of multiple witnesses, those doctors who report to the various health and employment commissions Marx quotes. These natural signs are thus not so natural—their identification as signs and as signs of something in particular depends on a whole process of appearance within which they become visible. We can return here to Jameson’s point that *Capital* discusses a total system and a system is, as such, unrepresentable. At the same time, however, capital is structured around appearance, so it cannot fail to be witnessed, and it is in the testimony of these witnesses that the structural categories of capital become visible, as when Marx discusses the reports of the factory inspectors which “provide regular and official statistics of the voracious appetite of the capitalists for surplus labour.”⁸⁰

The natural signs on the body of the worker, and the statistical abstracts of the production process, are two materials in which, through the inspectors reports, capital manifests an appearance. The third material, which we have already seen, is the speech of the workers themselves. There is nothing inherently radical about this speech; it need not be the unruly anti-authoritarian speech prized by Rancière, or speech as a mode of conscious, collective resistance. The plain, matter of fact testimony of children working in the potteries is sufficient to bring capital into visibility.⁸¹ It is in this process of making capital, as structure and system, visible, that the radical potential or workers’ speech lies. Because of the central role that appearance, as the logic of the commodity, plays in capitalism, capital is, as it were, forced to commit its crimes in public, and so to produce witnesses capable of testifying against it. This is shown in Marx’s report of the attempt by employers to repeal the 1847 Factory Act restricting work to 10 hours a day, which the employers pursued by attempting to argue that the workers themselves would prefer to work longer hours:

No method of deceit, seduction or intimidation was left unused; but all in vain. In relation to the half-dozen petitions in which the workers were made to complain of “their oppression by the Act,” the petitioners themselves declared under oral examination that their signatures had been extorted. They felt themselves oppressed, but

⁷⁷Marx, *Capital*, 346.

⁷⁸Grice, “Meaning”.

⁷⁹Marx, *Capital*, 355.

⁸⁰Marx, *Capital*, 349.

⁸¹Marx, *Capital*, 354.

by something different from the Factory Act.⁸²

That this visibility is not transparently politically effective is, however, made clear by Marx's next sentence: "If the manufacturers did not succeed in getting the workers to speak as they wished, they themselves shrieked all the louder in the press and in Parliament in the name of the workers."⁸³

The visibility of the mechanisms of capital is thus a pre-condition of political activity, not a guarantee. The politicization of the visible antagonisms within capitalism involves something like what Lenin calls "political exposure."⁸⁴ This does not involve either making visible the facts about capitalism's nature, or organizing activity on the basis of these facts. Both visibility and antagonism are necessary features of capitalism and preconditions of politics.⁸⁵ Political exposure involves those to whom capital appears giving that appearance a subjective character. This relationship between perception and action begins to be discussed in the chapter on the working day before, as we will see in a moment, exploding in the chapter on accumulation and the industrial reserve army. Marx discusses the relationship between the (what we might think of as "economic") struggle for the ten hour day and the (nominally "political") struggle for the vote by the chartists in order to argue for the inseparability of these two struggles. While the campaign for the ten hours bill was successful, "the fiasco of the Chartist party, whose leaders had been imprisoned and whose organization dismembered, has shattered the self-confidence of the English working class,"⁸⁶ and so "The manufacturers no longer needed to restrain themselves. They broke out in open revolt, not only against the Ten Hours Act, but against all the legislation since 1833 that had aimed at restricting to some extent the 'free' exploitation of labor-power."⁸⁷

The intimate connection between the processes of visibility and processes of struggle can be seen by the ubiquity of struggle within capitalism—as soon as the process of appearance called the commodity form arises, so does struggle (to put it another way, any process of appearance is a process of appearance *to* someone, and that "appearance-to" is a site of struggle).⁸⁸ The theory Marx is developing here, that is, is not one of a progressive development of class consciousness, in which over the long course of its existence capitalism's nature gradually becomes apparent to

⁸²Marx, *Capital*, 396. Marx's sarcasm about the source of the oppression of the workers is taken directly from the inspectors report, as a quotation in the footnote immediately following this passage makes clear.

⁸³Marx, *Capital*, 396.

⁸⁴Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 73.

⁸⁵Lenin expresses his position in the form of an imagined statement by a "Social-Democratic worker":

The "activity" you want to stimulate among us workers, by advancing concrete demands that promise palpable results, we are already displaying.... But *such* activity is not enough for us; we are not children to be fed on the thin gruel of "economic" politics alone; we want to know everything that others know, we want to learn the details of *all* aspects of political life and take part *actively* in every single political event (Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 73).

⁸⁶Marx, *Capital*, 397.

⁸⁷Marx, *Capital*, 397-8.

⁸⁸The ubiquity of class struggle is a central part of what is sometimes called the "workerist" approach to Marx, for which see Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*. The absence of a discussion of class struggle is one of the main criticisms of value-form Marxism in Kincaid, "Critique".

the proletariat, leading to their inevitable radicalization.⁸⁹ Indeed, capital is always in a process of appearing, although it may appear differently at different times; thus struggle against capital is an invariant, although the particular form of struggle may vary depending on capital's appearances. The visibility of surplus labor and the struggle against it is, according to Marx, something that arises early in capitalism's history. He quotes an author writing in 1770:

That mankind in general, are naturally inclined to ease and indolence, we fatally experience to be true, from the conduct of our manufacturing populace, who do not labour, upon an average, above four days in a week, unless provisions happen to be very dear.... If the bushel of wheat should cost but four shillings, he would be obliged to work but four days; but as wages in this kingdom are much higher in proportion to the price of necessaries ... the manufacturer, who labours four days, has a surplus of money to live idle with the rest of the week.... But our populace have adopted a notion, that as Englishmen they enjoy a birthright privilege of being more free and independent than in any country in Europe. Now this idea, as far as it may affect the bravery of our troops, may be of some use; but the less the manufacturing poor have of it, certainly the better for themselves and for the State. The labouring people should never think themselves independent of their superiors.... The cure will not be perfect, till our manufacturing poor are contented to labour six days for the same sum which they now earn in four days.⁹⁰

The extended duration of this struggle over the length of the working day is thus shaped by the contingencies of appearance of surplus labor and its effects. "The establishment of a normal working day is therefore the product of a protracted and more or less concealed civil war between the capitalist class and the working class."⁹¹ Here Marx refers back to the analysis in the *Communist Manifesto*, of the "more or less veiled civil war raging within existing society,"⁹² but now in the context of the theory of commodity fetishism as material appearance, which helps to explain how this "veiling" occurs, as well as the circumstances in which struggle overflows the invisibility of this veil, "breaks out into riots,"⁹³ "breaks out into open revolution."⁹⁴

5.6 Accumulation and Overflow

That the logic of appearance of the commodity is capable of overflowing both the categories of the economic and the economic and social forms of capitalism becomes especially apparent in the chapter on the general law of capitalist accumulation, chapter 25, in both its content and

⁸⁹Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 35-6 argues that, by the time of writing *Capital*, Marx had completely abandoned any belief in capitalism's progressive potential.

⁹⁰Marx, *Capital*, 388. For resistance to labor in early capitalism, see also Thompson, "Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism".

⁹¹Marx, *Capital*, 412-3.

⁹²Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 232.

⁹³Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 229.

⁹⁴Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 232.

its style. This chapter concerns excess, overcrowding, and overflow, because “the general law of capitalist accumulation” turns out to be its tendency to produce a surplus population, an industrial reserve army. As with the previous chapters, Marx presents this to us through a discussion of the ways in which it becomes visible and is witnessed to in inspectors reports, but in this chapter the scope of witnesses is expanded beyond the direct locations of production. The pithiest summary of what is happening in this chapter, and indeed to a large extent in *Capital* as a whole,⁹⁵ comes not in Marx’s own words, but rather in the quotation of a striking image: “the Swing riots, in 1830, revealed to us’ (i.e. to the ruling class) ‘by the light of blazing corn-stacks, that misery and black mutinous discontent smouldered quite as fiercely under the surface of agricultural as of manufacturing England.”⁹⁶ The metaphor here may not entirely make sense (how does light, from burning corn-stacks or elsewhere, make visible something veiled by a surface?), but it captures something important, namely, that in these events the structures of capitalism (the “economic”) become visible outside of their habitual sphere, throughout society as a whole.

The general law of capitalist accumulation is general because it encompasses not just production of commodities or the reproduction of capital, but the reproduction of capitalism, the capital-labor relation.⁹⁷ Marx enters into this discussion via the political-economic category of population. Population serves as a kind of dark mirror for the accumulation of capital in classical political economy because the expansion of the population is usually a site of anxiety for the political economist; because of this, the theme of the expansion of population serves as a site for the expansion of theory beyond its narrowly economic focus.⁹⁸ Marx begins the discussion of the general law of capitalist accumulation on firmly economic ground, discussing the way in which accumulation proceeds via the centralization of capital.⁹⁹ However, this is immediately reflected in, because it takes place through, a series of effects on the population of workers.

The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth.... Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization, and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.¹⁰⁰

The particular site of visibility of this general law of capitalist accumulation is not in the factories, or in what we might think of as the strictly economic, but rather in the houses of workers. It is in “the housing situation” where “every unprejudiced observer sees that the greater the centralization

⁹⁵Chapter 25 is the last chapter before the book turns to discuss the “so-called primitive accumulation,” and so could be seen as the culmination of the book’s description of developed capitalism, as opposed to capitalism’s pre-history. Opinion on the role of the final part of volume one in the book’s overall scheme differ, compare Arthur, *New Dialectic* and Read, *Micropolitics of Capital*.

⁹⁶Marx, *Capital*, 830, quoting Samuel Laing.

⁹⁷Marx, *Capital*, 763.

⁹⁸For the historical entanglement of the ideas of politics and population in the development of 19th century understandings of the economic, see Foucault, “Governmentality”, 215.

⁹⁹Marx, *Capital*, 780.

¹⁰⁰Marx, *Capital*, 798-9.

of the means of production the greater is the corresponding concentration of workers within a given space; and therefore the more quickly capitalist accumulation takes place, the more miserable the housing situation of the working class.”¹⁰¹ It is in the housing situation, the tenements and the streets around them, the places where “the spectacle has lately been seen in the East of London of a number of families wandering about some Saturday night with their scant worldly goods on their backs,”¹⁰² that surplus, accumulation, and concentration become visible as overcrowding, as a process of trying to fit ever more bodies in ever smaller space: “It will of course be understood that all the measures for the improvement of public health which have been taken so far in London have in fact, by demolishing uninhabitable houses, driven the workers out of some districts only to crowd them together still more closely in other districts.”¹⁰³ Marx’s own discussion of population overflows the page of *Capital* in a footnote which is digressive even by his standards, beginning with a discussion of Malthus before spending two pages meandering through parsons, celibacy, the breeding of churchmen, Hume, and unproductive labor.¹⁰⁴

This expansiveness continues to be reflected in Marx’s subject matter as well as his style when he turns from considering the bare fact of population increase to the conditions within which this increasing population lives. Discussing the housing conditions of agricultural workers, Marx gives “a short selection of examples” from a public health report, which short selection runs to seven pages and covers twelve counties.¹⁰⁵ The discussion of housing conditions also employs a wide and seemingly arbitrary range of methods of presentation, with the pages filling up with lists and tables of various sorts. The excessiveness of the methods Marx uses to convey the excess of population is in keeping with the theoretical position Marx has been developing throughout *Capital*, in which excess, or surplus (*Mehr*) is a central concept. This is true even before Marx introduces the concept of surplus value (*Mehrwert*), indeed appears in the opening sentence, where Marx connects “wealth” with the “immense collection of commodities.”¹⁰⁶ This connection of commodities to richness and excessiveness, continues in Marx’s choice of examples of commodities: for instance, the example of detail work Marx chooses is that of gilders, who apply gold leaf to carriages,¹⁰⁷ or, a further sort of gilding, which Marx references in explaining how commodities come to represent value: a coat signifies value “just as some men count for more when

¹⁰¹Marx, *Capital*, 811-2.

¹⁰²Marx, *Capital*, 814.

¹⁰³Marx, *Capital*, 814.

¹⁰⁴Marx, *Capital*, 766-8. Here it is perhaps helpful to remember Marx’s fondness for that apotheosis of digression, *Tristram Shandy*:

Though my digressions are all fair, as you observe,—and that I fly off from what I am about, as far, and as often too, as any writer in Great Britain; yet I constantly take care to order affairs so that my main business does not stand still in my absence.... By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced in it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too—and at the same time (Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 53-4).

¹⁰⁵Marx, *Capital*, 842-8.

¹⁰⁶Marx, *Capital*, 125.

¹⁰⁷Marx, *Capital*, 455.

inside a gold-braided uniform than they do otherwise.”¹⁰⁸ Marx here draws a connection between value and the excess of appearance involved in uniform or costume. Indeed, this connection runs through Marx’s discussion of commodities because of his consistent choice, as example commodities, of a coat and a bolt of linen. No doubt the importance of the textile industry to the British capitalism Marx is studying influenced his choice of example, but as the analogy to a military uniform quoted above shows, costuming was also on his mind, a reappearance in *Capital* of the theme of costume, performance, and appearance developed in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.¹⁰⁹ However, in the earlier work, this discussion of the excess of appearance was a discussion of *politics*; in *Capital*, appearance and its excess has moved to be central to what seems to be an economic analysis. This shows that costume, performance, and appearance are not, for Marx, excessive in the sense of being otiose, epiphenomenal, merely part of a political “superstructure.” Rather, appearance is a category that Marx uses to allow us to understand the surplus that lies at the heart of capitalism, and is the principle of its material organization, including the subjective organization of resistance to it. As Stallybrass writes, Marx, having throughout his life struggled to analyze the material significance of appearances, “knew the value of his own coat.”¹¹⁰

5.7 Conclusion

This is the situation Marx leaves us with at the end of *Capital*. At the beginning of the book, Marx succeeds in developing a materialist theory of appearance, which has been an implicit concern of his work since 1843. One of the consequences of this theory is that capital includes an inherent tendency towards becoming visible. It is the depiction of this process of becoming visible which takes up most of the book, and which underpins the discussions of politics which periodically interrupt the text. In this way, Marx succeeds in *Capital* in writing about politics (in the colloquial sense) *through* writing about economics, that is, without endorsing the autonomy of the political, or the autonomy of the economic, which his early work had already identified as a pathology specific to capitalism. This tendency within capital towards the production of its own appearances is so strong in Marx’s time, he thinks, that it threatens to overflow any possibility of keeping track of it; such is the revolutionary possibility of capitalism, but this also increasingly seems to render impossible any attempt to analyze capital and its politics. In any case, *Capital* is, it seems, borne away on the increasingly strong tides of proletarian unrest Marx seems to see in his own time, and does not settle down to attempt the kind of analysis which could be directly adapted to our own situation in the 21st century. It is to this that I turn in the next, and final, chapter, in which I attempt to lay out some directions in which the analysis of Marx presented here could be taken in order to understand our current political possibilities.

¹⁰⁸Marx, *Capital*, 143.

¹⁰⁹See chapter 3

¹¹⁰Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat”, 203.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 From Politics to Appearance

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to show that one of the themes that motivated Marx's work was a concern with understanding the category of appearance, and in particular how this category could be used to understand the sphere of activity that is usually labeled "political," and the way this sphere is tied up with the material organization of human life. The question of appearance arose for Marx in a specific context, primarily philosophical but also political, namely, his debates with the Young Hegelians Feuerbach and Bauer. This is a debate over the legacy of Hegel which touches on question of idealism versus materialism and the philosophy of religion, but Marx's main interest lies in the discussion of politics which, conditioned by Hegel's own state-centric conception of politics becomes a debate about the nature of the state. Marx attempts to counter the abstraction and idealism he sees *both* in Hegel and in the young Hegelian criticism of Hegel, and in doing so he develops an original and important concept, that of practical illusion. The separation between state and civil society, Marx argues, is a practical illusion because it is, in a sense, and illusion, but is not a merely mental misrepresentation, but a specific sort of illusion that rises from and is embedded in material practice. The concept of practical illusion allows Marx to respond to Hegel not just by rejecting Hegel's idealism, as the young Hegelians attempted to do (thereby, according to Marx, maintaining idealism in an inverted form), but by providing a materialist explanation of why idealism seems such a persuasive philosophy. Marx begins to develop in his early work an account of the way in which illusion or appearance is itself a product of the particular form of organization of modern society, and the development of this account is one of the main influences on his subsequent work.

Part of the reason for Marx's ongoing interest in the relationship between appearance and the category of politics is his experience of the failure of revolutions of 1848. To some degree, Marx could take the failure democratic and socialist revolutionary attempts in 1848 as a confirmation of his critique of political emancipation, and of his ensuing argument of the need for a revolution which was not restricted solely to a political sphere imagined to be autonomous. Further, the experience of 1848 showed Marx that the stakes were higher and the need for a critique of political economy was more urgent than he had previously realized. The aftermath of 1848, particularly

the rise of Napoleon III, seemed to Marx to represent a world in which appearances *themselves* had power: the “practical illusion” of political autonomy now became the autonomy of illusion itself. As Marx rethought his theory in the wake of 1848, he increased the scope of his interest in appearance; what had once been tied up with a rather specific young Hegelian account of the state became a more general category with which to analyze the organization of society. Along with (and perhaps because of) this increase in the scope of the category of appearance came further efforts to try and understand the category ontologically: to find out what appearance is and how it is generated by modern economic and social systems.

While the development of the ontological account of appearance became particularly important to Marx’s work after 1848, it already underpinned some of his prior work, and looking back on this earlier work with the increased clarity which Marx gained after 1848 can be helpful in understanding it. One important case is the *Communist Manifesto*, written just before the 1848 revolutions and containing partially developed forms of ideas which Marx would develop in more detail in response to 1848. This is something which is missed by some critics of the *Manifesto*, among them post-Marxists including Laclau, who read the text through the lens of a determinist approach to Marxism. Thinking about Marx’s work in relation to the category of appearance helps draw attention to some aspects of the *Manifesto* which the determinist reading misses. The *Manifesto* figures the proletariat as an apparition, something which appears in a specific time and place without simply being reducible to that time and place, in the same way that the appearance of a thing is not simply identical with the thing itself. Reading Marx’s discussion of 1848 in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in which the ghosts of past revolutions walk on stage in borrowed costumes, back into the *Manifesto* shows that the understanding of politics in the earlier work is not as straightforward as it might have appeared to be, and as critics who want to emphasize the autonomy of the political charge.

While politics is foregrounded in the *Manifesto*, and the discussion of appearance more implicit, the position is reversed in *Capital*. While *Capital* has frequently been interpreted as an economic text in which politics plays little or no role, paying attention to the way in which the category of appearance structures the text allows us to see that—in keeping with the critique of the separation of politics and economics which dates back to Marx’s early works—*Capital* in fact discusses a social organization in which politics and economics are inseparable. The inseparability arises from the way in which appearance structures the categories political economists in Marx’s time had taken to be “economic.” Marx begins *Capital* with a discussion of value in order to show how a society structured around the production and exchange of commodities materially instantiates what he had previously called “practical illusion,” which is the category which defines the (illusory) separation of the political from the economic. In *Capital*, the same separation is critiqued, but from a different standpoint Marx now undermines attempts to treat the economic as a separate and autonomous sphere. The critique of the autonomy of the economic requires a more developed account of practical illusion, which gives the idea of autonomous appearances a more worked-out materialist basis, and goes by the name of “commodity fetishism,” and structures the whole of *Capital*. It is because commodity fetishism explains how appearances can become independent of the material relations of which they *are* the appearances that the discussion in the later parts of capital does not, indeed cannot, remain constrained to a narrowly economic sphere. Capitalist

economic processes always produce appearances which exceed the economic, whether that be the bodily organization of workers or the spatial distribution of families throughout growing cities. It is in this excess of appearance that the possibility of intervention and reorganization arises. Marx's analysis of the materiality of appearances in *Capital* shows that there is no sharp distinction between an economic sphere characterized by determinism and a political sphere characterized by subjective intervention, but rather that these two "economic" and "political" logics are two aspects of one logic of appearance.

What, then, are the consequences for political theory of Marx's arguments for the inseparability of politics and economics? The first consequence is that political theory cannot proceed by paying attention solely to those phenomena traditionally understood as "political." Marx's early critique of the separation of state and society establishes that, if we attempt to understand political phenomena entirely in political terms we will be systematically misled. The practical illusion of the autonomy of the political is a necessary part of the way in which modern politics functions, and so any attempt to understand politics must grapple with the way this practical illusion works. Understanding politics as part of a practical illusion does not mean we should treat politics as an epiphenomenon or explain away politics by reducing it to something else; to do so would be to neglect the "practical" (that is, materially instantiated) aspect of practical illusion. Rather, paying attention to the relationship between politics and practical illusion requires us to recognize that no discussion of politics can be complete if it remain solely a discussion of politics: we cannot understand rights without considering the supposedly private sphere which produces the subjects who claim these rights; we cannot understand justice without thinking about the economic structures which would produce just or unjust outcomes (and might produce them, moreover, through mechanisms other than the ethical choices of individuals); and we cannot understand the identities of political agents without understanding the range of social forces which produce and ascribe these identities. Following Marx's arguments we can see that no investigation which starts with the political will end there.

The second consequence of Marx's rejection of the separation of politics and economics is the importance of understanding political activity as essentially concerned with appearance. Appearance is the logic that supports the practical illusion of the autonomy of the political, and so to understand the operation of that illusion, that is, to understand politics, we need to understand the generation and manipulation of appearances. Political action depends on a particular characteristic of appearances, the ambiguous gap between appearance and reality, in which an appearance must be the appearance of some thing, but cannot simply be identical with that thing. It is in this gap that the performance of politics takes place (indeed, "performance" itself holds an analogous ambiguity, as it can mean both to really do some act, and to pretend to do or mime that act). Marx emphasizes the way in which performances which seem to be unreal acts (costuming, staging, the striking of parliamentary poses) nonetheless have real effects. Marx's discussion of the politics of appearance provides us with a useful perspective from which to look at current debates about the role of performativity in politics. Critics of attempts to understand politics as performative have tended to contrast performativity, which they label as mere unreal or make-believe activity, with some account of a supposedly more real form of political activity (frequently based on claims about the bodily or economic grounds of reality). Those who espouse and defend theories of performa-

tive politics, on the other hand, have tended to construe performativity as a property of language, which may not be the strongest ground on which to explore the complicated interrelationship between reality and unreality which creates the space for the performance of politics. The category of appearance already includes within it this idea of a gap between appearance and reality, and in Marx's use of the category we can see how this gap enables a particular kind of performance, the performance of politics.

The third consequence of Marx's rejection of the separation of the political and the economic is the undermining of the idea of the autonomy of the economic. This arises from an aspect of Marx's interest in appearance, which is present in his early discussion of practical illusion but becomes particularly important during the writing of *Capital*, is a concern to discover the materiality of appearances, or the ways in which appearances are instantiated in the material organization of society. The analysis of appearance animates Marx's investigation into political economy, such that, although he is developing his theory in large part through a critical dialog with economists, his fundamental interest is not in economics. Marx emphasizes the process of production as the main site for understanding the distinctively modern forms of appearance he discusses, but his mature work is no more willing to explain economic categories in solely economic terms than he is to accept purely political analyses of the state. Rather, economic categories have much broader ramifications and they do so through the category of appearance. Material processes generate appearances which (as Marx explains through the theory of commodity fetishism) both disclose and conceal reality. By producing appearances, these processes also produce certain positions of those to whom appearances appear, positions of witness. It is because economic processes are embedded in, and can only be understood by reference to, the production of appearances and witnesses, that they cannot be understood through a self-contained analysis which restricts itself to the economic. The economic is part of the same process of appearance in which political activity takes place. The reading of Marx in this dissertation thus undermines the position of those who attempt to read Marx as an economist in the strict sense, or who attempt to derive a purely economic theory from Marx, because one of Marx's main points is to show that the economy does not have the self-contained character that a purely economic theory would presuppose. Marx's rejection of the autonomy of the economic also casts doubt on theories that have responded to a supposed Marxist economic determinism by advocating instead the autonomy of the political. Such theories mistake their target (because Marx did not in fact focus on economics to the exclusion of politics, but worked instead to establish their inseparability), and, in doing so, reinforce the idea of the autonomy of the economic by positing the economy as a discrete sphere which politics could be autonomous from.

Badiou, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, the four post-Althusserians whose turn to the political led to my suspicion of the autonomy of the political and so inspired this dissertation, all pursue the problematic separation of the political from the economic, and we are now in a position to see the problems this causes for their respective theories. As I argue in chapter 1, all four post-Althusserians are concerned to establish the possibility of radical political action, that is, the possibility of political action which is not determined or restricted by the prevailing political situation. Their hope is that establishing the autonomy of the political, as a category and as a sphere of action, will also establish the autonomy of political agents. In this, the four authors

exhibit what Bosteels calls “speculative leftism” (a term he takes, in fact, from Rancière and Badiou), which is “the desire—in the name of science, theory, or philosophy as the class struggle in theory—radically to break with their [the ideological state apparatuses] power of subjection.”¹ Speculative leftism, that is, is a theoretical operation in which establishing the autonomy of a category (specifically, politics) is held to make this category the basis of a radical break with existing conditions. Bosteels’ concern is that this is a theoretical sleight-of-hand, in which radicalism in theory or philosophy is presented as the guarantee or ground of radicalism in practice; Bosteels describes speculative leftism as “the philosophical appropriation of radical emancipatory politics, as if this radicality depended on philosophy in order to be able to subtract itself from questions of power and the state.”² My own discussion in this dissertation (especially in chapter 3) evinces a certain respect for sleight-of-hand, but I share a suspicion of this particular theoretical move, in which a theory of the autonomy of the political establishes the conditions and limits of radical political practice. My concern, as suggested above, is that by conceiving of politics as autonomous from the social and economic situation, these theorists also conceive of the social and economic as autonomous from the political, and so lose any ability to understand how the political actions they favor could produce the kind of radical social and political change they desire. To put it in the language I have been developing throughout this dissertation, a philosophy which insists on the autonomy of the political loses the ability to understand the gap between appearance and the thing it is an appearance of, the space in which action takes place. The approach I advocate, which uses the category of appearance to understand the inseparability of politics and economics, provides a way of understanding action as intervention in and against the constraints of a specific situation. A political philosophy which attempts to establish the autonomy of the political precludes this kind of situated analysis.

6.2 Rancière’s Political Philosophy

Of all four of these authors, it may seem most obviously wrong to refer to Rancière as espousing a political philosophy, as he is the most strident in rejection the coherence of the conjunction of politics and philosophy.³ “The first encounter between politics and philosophy is that of an alternative: either the politics of the politicians, or that of the philosophers.”⁴ Rancière writes, before going on to argue that the “politics of the of the philosophers” is no politics at all, in fact it is just the opposite, “the set of reflective operations whereby philosophy tries to rid itself of politics, to suppress a scandal in thinking proper to the exercise of politics.”⁵ As Bosteels points out, there is something odd about the way this rejection of political philosophy proceeds, in that it “somehow thrives on the suggestion that it coincides with a ‘political interpretation of politics,’ the well-nigh

¹Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 24.

²Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 33.

³Badiou also rejects the discipline of political philosophy, but he does allow for a different form of relationship between the two, in which the distinct form of thought involved in politics “conditions” philosophy; I will discuss this shortly.

⁴Rancière, *Disagreement*, ix.

⁵Rancière, *Disagreement*, xii.

tautological authority of which depends on the supposition of a discourse capable of erasing the trace of its own separateness.”⁶ That is, Rancière rejects the authority that philosophers have claimed over politics, in the name of an authority which supposedly comes from a discourse which is entirely proper to politics. This is odd, because impropriety and the rejection of authority are, for Rancière, constitutive of politics. But, as Bosteels points out, this is just the problem: Rancière’s own strictures (what Bosteels calls his “nominalism”) do not seem to apply to his own theorization of politics.⁷ Rancière seems to know, or at least has no shyness in asserting, what politics is and is not, always and everywhere.⁸ Bosteels identifies a particularly telling phrase beloved of Rancière, the assertion of where or when “politics begins”;⁹ that is, (although Bosteels is too tactful to point this out explicitly) Rancière is telling us what we would call in Greek the *arkhe* of politics—just the thing that politics is supposed to scandalize philosophy by not having.

My objection is not to the theorization of politics as such, but rather to a theorization which purports to be the direct discourse of politics and as such denies its status as theory, thereby immunizing itself from theoretical and practical discussion and critique.¹⁰ To put it another way, Rancière engages in an ontologization of politics, the construction of a political ontology which provides an authorization¹¹ for his discussion of politics. Deranty, while agreeing that Rancière is engaging in a project of political ontology, argues that this ontology is “anti-ontological” because it centers on theorizing the “wrong,” a disruption which arises from the incompatibility between the fundamental equality of politics and the constructed hierarchy of the social.¹² But describing the wrong as an incompatibility makes clear that it derives from two separate elements. Rancière indeed describes the wrong as taking place in the *encounter* between two different spheres: that of equality, which he calls “politics,” and that of hierarchy, which he calls “the police”; while their encounter may produce an anti-ontological disruption, that encounter depends on their existence prior to the encounter, that is, the ontological precedes the anti-ontological.¹³

Dillon and, in a less polemical register, Hallward also express concern about the way in which Rancière’s ontologization of politics subordinates politics to philosophy.¹⁴ Dillon identifies in Rancière’s ontologization of politics an attempt “to domesticate the radical impropriety of politics by confining it to a proper *topos* and to proper *tropes* of encounter.”¹⁵ That is, Rancière always knows *where* politics takes place (the part-of-no-part), and the linguistic moves (dissensus) through which it takes place. What is missing in this linguistic and litigious account of politics is the dimension of “power and violence”¹⁶ or what Hallward calls “political will,” the ability of

⁶Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 90.

⁷Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 137–8.

⁸Bosteels collects an extensive “litany” of these assertions, Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 143–5

⁹Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 146.

¹⁰For a particularly subtle discussion of the political dangers of a theory which presents itself as a direct account of experience, see Lugones and Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You”.

¹¹Or a “warrant,” see Dillon, “(De)Void of Politics”.

¹²Deranty, “Contemporary Political Ontology”. The reference is to Rancière, *Disagreement*, ch. 2, esp 22.

¹³Bosteels makes this argument in more detail, Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 149–56

¹⁴Dillon, “(De)Void of Politics”; Hallward, “Staging Equality”, 157

¹⁵Dillon, “(De)Void of Politics”.

¹⁶Dillon, “(De)Void of Politics”.

action to “impose measurable change upon the configuration of a situation.”¹⁷ In contrast, Rancière’s politics is a politics of the spectator, in which what matters is “what can be *seen* of mass mobilization,” recognition or acknowledgement rather than antagonism.¹⁸ The centrality of the spectator to Rancière’s understanding of politics can be seen in the particularly limited account of theatricality he employs which, as Dillon charges, is fundamentally linguistic or, as Rancière himself puts it, “about what is seen and what can be said about it.”¹⁹ What Rancière misses because of his focus on the spectator is the dimension of performativity which is affective and embodied,²⁰ or the duality in “performance” which means both pretend and actual activity. The type of theatricality Rancière associates with politics, focusing as it does on the assertion of visibility through speech, deemphasizes action and in particular the constraints on action, the circumstances which enable and constrain particular interventions.²¹ Hallward asks rhetorically: “Does political action no longer need to be informed by a detailed understanding of how the contemporary world works, how exploitation operates, how transnational corporations go about their business?”²²

Rancière’s answer to this is not quite the simple “no” Hallward implies. In rejecting the charges of “speculative leftism” which Bosteels, Dillon, and Hallward all make in somewhat different ways, Rancière insists that he always understands politics as “entangled” with specific police orders.²³ Rancière, however, seems disinclined to provide an account of how this entanglement of politics would function, in particular how a theory of the entangling of politics and police would avoid positing the two as at least conceptually separate prior to their entanglement, as Rancière repeatedly does, sometimes even at the same time he is denying just this.²⁴ However, we do find a detailed attempt to think through a related problem in Badiou, who is particularly concerned with explaining how politics can avoid being determined by the non-political situation while taking place entirely within that situation. Nonetheless, as I will now argue, Badiou’s insistence on the categorical distinction of the political leaves him ultimately, like Rancière, unable to give a clear account of how the specific way in which the world is currently organized, socially and economically, enables certain political actions while also producing political constraints.

6.3 Subtractive and Abstractive Politics

Stripped to its schematic form, there does seem to be something paradoxical in a position like Rancière’s in which politics is somehow entangled with objective conditions while nevertheless retaining its subjective character. Badiou’s innovation (or provocation), however, is to claim that this paradox can be resolved by *more* schematic formalism: that the paradox is the result of the imprecision of our everyday language, and that modern mathematics provides a way of thinking

¹⁷Hallward, “Staging Equality”, 152.

¹⁸Hallward, “Staging Equality”, 152, 154. See also Deranty, “Contemporary Political Ontology”.

¹⁹Rancière, *Disagreement*, 283.

²⁰Dillon, “(De)Void of Politics”; see also my chapter 3.

²¹Dillon, “(De)Void of Politics”.

²²Hallward, “Staging Equality”, 156.

²³Rancière, “Staging Equality”, 287. See also Rancière, “(De)Void of Politics” and the spirited, but to my mind equally unsatisfactory defense of Rancière on this specific charge in Chambers, “Pure Politics”.

²⁴Bosteels, *Actuality of Communism*, 165–6.

rigorously about this question which makes it clear that this apparent contradiction is *only* apparent. For Badiou, the paradoxical relationship between the objective and subjective conditions of politics is an ontological question, which he addresses in two parts: how is radical (subjective) novelty possible in a consistent and ordered (objective) universe, and how can a universal (objective) truth manifest itself in a singular subject. Badiou proposes that the solution to this ontological question is supplied by the mathematical idea of a generic subset, a peculiar type of set which is made of elements of some situation, but cannot be described using the terminology of that situation (the role of mathematical formalism comes in convincing us that such an odd entity can be reasoned about consistently). A generic subset is both universal and novel because it escapes and exceeds the particular identities and categories countenanced within the particular situation.²⁵

Badiou spends most of his effort on establishing the universality of truth, on his definition, which he believed to be the most pressing task when developing his theory in the 1980s, in opposition to “relativism” and “sophism.”²⁶ He insists throughout that a truth is also “local” and situated, but this is not where his interest lies.²⁷ Badiou attempts to explain the connection between the universal and the local through his theory of the event. An event, in Badiou’s terminology, is a particular moment of radical novelty at which the universal truth becomes visible. Bensaïd criticizes Badiou for paying insufficient attention to the local aspect of the event, arguing that if “the genuine event remains irreducible to all instrumental reckoning,” but is also localizable to particular circumstances, “in what does this ripeness of circumstances consist? How is it to be gauged?”²⁸ According to Bensaïd, “Badiou remains silent on this score,”²⁹ but this isn’t exactly true: Badiou gives us a rigorous account of the ontology of ripe circumstances, which he calls “evental sites.”³⁰ However, this may just be to put the same criticism in different terms, because Badiou’s rigorous ontology takes place purely as mathematical formalism. An evental site is a “multiple such that none of its elements are presented in the situation,” that is, a subset of a set which shares no elements with that set.³¹ This definition is mathematically clear, but what does it mean in a particular situation, in “the dense thickets of real history”?³² For Badiou, mathematics is ontology, in that mathematics allows us to specify the formal properties of being considered solely as being; but “the content of particular nonontological situations is clearly not to be derived from mathematics itself”; which raises the problem of what these formal constraints mean when we are not considering being merely as being, but being as a scientific, historical, or political situation.³³

What is missing, that is, is a way of understanding the mediation between the science of ontology, the philosophical discussion of ontology, and the situations of politics and history. This is an instance of a more general problem concerning mediation in Badiou’s work, the mediation

²⁵Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 110–11.

²⁶Badiou, *Being and Event*, xi–xiii.

²⁷Badiou, *Being and Event*, 178.

²⁸Bensaïd, “Miracle of the Event”, 98.

²⁹Bensaïd, “Miracle of the Event”, 98.

³⁰Badiou, *Being and Event*, 173–7.

³¹Badiou, *Being and Event*, 175.

³²Bensaïd, “Miracle of the Event”, 98.

³³Hallward, *Badiou*, 277.

between knowledge and truths. Badiou uses the term “knowledge” for the description of a situation in its own terms, while reserving “truth” for the disruptive novelties that can occur in four domains (love, art, science, and politics); how do those four domains of truth relate to one another, and how do they relate to knowledge? Hallward points out an example of this question which is particularly relevant for this discussion of politics, Badiou’s rejection of the concept of society, because “society—in particular the variant known as ‘civil society’—articulates the subjective and the objective together.”³⁴ For Badiou, this kind of mediation is simply a way of avoiding politics, because politics involves a direct confrontation between “subject and state.”³⁵ Here, however, it is worth remembering Marx’s argument that the state only exists because of the operations in which it purports to separate itself from civil society, and that the two thus remain dependent on one another, though this dependence is expressed in the form of independence.³⁶ The rejection of the category of civil society in order to assert the significance of the category of the state thus cannot be maintained, and we can see the results of this difficulty in Badiou’s confusion over another category, which took the place of civil society in Marx’s later work, the economy.

Badiou rarely refers to economics, but when he does it is typically in scathing terms as “the modern name for necessity,”³⁷ the term in the name of which modern parliamentary regimes insist that there is no alternative to capitalist democracy, and thus no (in Badiou’s sense) politics. But if economics is so central to the organization of modern regimes, perhaps we should pay *more* attention to the economy rather than dismiss it, as it has a privileged role in the description of the prevailing situation. Indeed, Badiou himself suggests as much in his discussion of Marx. As Bensaïd remarks, Marx represents a problem for Badiou, as he doesn’t fit easily into Badiou’s categories, circling around history, science, politics, and philosophy in an undecidable way.³⁸ Badiou’s solution is to elevate Marx’s work in political economy to the status of science, “a theory of history, of the economy, and of the state, conforming to the ideal of science,”³⁹ and treat this as something separate from his involvement in politics.

What is there to say about the relationship between the two aspects of Marx? Badiou says little, but he does at least give us a name for the practice which would move between these domains: this is, for Badiou, what is distinctive about philosophy.⁴⁰ However, if we are going to define “philosophy” as the discourse which draws together or traffics between history, science, and politics, it is not clear that philosophy so-defined will have much in common with what usually goes by that name. Indeed it seems to me that Marx’s example shows us this quite clearly, because there is indeed a discourse in Marx which draws together history, science, and politics, and that discourse is

³⁴Hallward, *Badiou*, 279.

³⁵Hallward, *Badiou*, 279.

³⁶See my chapter 2. It is no surprise, then, that for Badiou the great theorist of the political is Rousseau (Badiou, *Being and Event*, 344), who for Marx is the theorist of the state, the liberal-capitalist conception of the political which is the object of Marx’s critique.

³⁷Badiou, *Ethics*, 30.

³⁸Bensaïd, “Miracle of the Event”, 104.

³⁹Badiou, quoted in Bensaïd, “Miracle of the Event”, 105. This is despite Badiou’s reluctance to extend the status of science to social sciences, or even biology, on the ground that they do not “touch on the being of appearing,” i.e., do not require the mathematical apparatus of ontology (Badiou, “Afterword”, 233).

⁴⁰Bensaïd, “Miracle of the Event”, 105. See also Badiou, *Being and Event*, 3-4

the critique of political economy, especially in *Capital*.⁴¹ The critique of political economy is more concerned with the specific details of our situation than philosophy is, in common conceptions and in Badiou's self-understanding, but we could take that as evidence that the mediation between politics and economics is more concerned with the details of both than philosophy is; indeed, this often seems to be Badiou's own practice, as his philosophical discourse is frequently interrupted to give more concrete examples, which he presumably does not regard as otiose.⁴² This kind of more situated theorizing is also evident in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, although they do not refer to their own practice as a critique of political economy. While I share with them a rejection of economic determinism, I think their approach suffers from a neglect of Marx's example, as I shall now explain.

The kind of historical specificities which drop out of Badiou's account are significant for Laclau and Mouffe because of their emphasis on contingency. Their main theoretical statement, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, is structured around a confrontation with what they see as the essentialism of classical Marxism, and a theory of hegemony which is contingent and conjunctural.⁴³ In particular, what is contingent from the point of view of hegemony is the identity of the subject of politics—rather than being assured by theory of the existence of the working class as subject, hegemony is based on the idea that the political collectivity is constructed from a number of identity categories, the diversity of which follows no overarching logic. Thus the fundamental logical category of hegemony, and the way in which it relates to specificities, is articulation, “the ways in which discursive articulations bind, however tenuously, discrete units to form an ordered social whole.”⁴⁴ What concerns me here is the idea that articulation operates on “discrete units,” elements that, though they may be modified by articulation, are already given before hand.⁴⁵ Identities exist separately, that is, and are then brought into relation with one another through political activity. Furthermore, these identities are brought into relation by something, a strategizing “hegemonic agent.”⁴⁶

Laclau and Mouffe's position is thus oddly voluntarist, odd because it is a voluntarism in which it is unclear what or who the subject is.⁴⁷ In Laclau and Mouffe's analysis, that is, identities manifest themselves in identification, the moment in which a subject identifies with and asserts a pre-existing identity.⁴⁸ However, a theory which only considers identification with an identity misses the moment of discovery or recognition, in which you realize that there is an identity

⁴¹See chapter 5.

⁴²For instance, in his discussion of evental sites, the formal mathematical definition is preceded by the example of the relationship between undocumented migrants and social recognition (Badiou, *Being and Event*, 174).

⁴³Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 3.

⁴⁴Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony*, 22.

⁴⁵A position Laclau and Mouffe explicitly endorse, Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 93.

⁴⁶Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 65.

⁴⁷According to Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe*, 184, the hegemonic agent in Laclau and Mouffe is “an historical force,” but I'm not sure how we are to make sense of this ideas of a historical force without recourse to the kind of teleological historicism Laclau and Mouffe reject. Laclau and Mouffe themselves prefer to replace the idea of a “subject” with that of “subject positions,” which are themselves discursively given (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 115).

⁴⁸See Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, ch. 2, esp. 30.

which applies to you independently of your identification with it or your strategic wielding of it,⁴⁹ in which, for example, I realize that what I thought were either universal norms of behavior or personal idiosyncrasies actually make up my performance of white masculinity.⁵⁰ That identities can exist prior to a subject's identification with them encourage us to ask questions about where these identities come from. Laclau and Mouffe do not reject questions about the origins of identities; the problem is that they bracket these questions, considering them prior, and irrelevant, to politics because on their account politics is concerned with the articulation of given identities rather than the genesis of identities. In its dependence on identities the origins of which are bracketed, their position shares something with the kind of linguistic constructivism criticized by Butler, in which an account of construction ends up presupposing something unconstructed, or at least inaccessible to the analysis of construction.⁵¹ Laclau and Mouffe do not argue that identities are unconstructed, but they do maintain that the processes by which identities are constructed “behind our backs,” without our participation, are irrelevant to politics. In rejecting considerations of identities prior to their political articulation, Laclau and Mouffe’s intention is to reject appeals to the economy as an extra-political and pre-discursive essence which would determine politics, but they do much more than that: they reject a consideration of what Butler calls “materialization,”⁵² which is a process of production which is shot through with both discourse and politics, rather than being prior to either. The aspects of *Capital* which I emphasized in the previous chapter are examples of descriptions of these materializations, albeit ones closely tied to tropes and sites we tend to view as paradigmatically economic.

6.4 Towards a Political Theory of Appearance

Laclau and Mouffe, then, reveal the problems inherent in the turn to the political. Insisting on the autonomy of the political “emancipates” the political in the sense Marx criticized, freeing political categories from any need to make reference to the material organization that underpins them.⁵³ Further, if we base our political theory on this emancipated, autonomous politics, we lose our ability to analyze the relationship between politics and material conditions. Maintaining the distinctiveness of the political comes at the cost of bracketing any consideration of categories which are not political, or do not immediately appear political, which, as my discussion of Marx in previous chapters shows, will leave us with an inadequate account of politics. The turn to the political involves a focus on the category of the political which purifies and abstracts that category, and in this case rendering the category abstract reduces its theoretical power. An abstract category of the political cannot help us see the roots of that abstraction, the material processes by which

⁴⁹The classic analysis of discovering that an identity is ascribed to you is Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, ch. 2.

⁵⁰I imagine I am not alone among white men in having come to this realization rather late, as the dominant status of white masculinity makes it particularly easy to avoid seeing it as an identity, a phenomenon nicely captured in a line from the 2004 film *Mean Girls*: “Oh my God, Karen, you can’t just ask people why they’re white.”

⁵¹Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 5-6. For a somewhat similar argument made directly against hegemony theory, see Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony*, 27.

⁵²Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9.

⁵³Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, 234.

the political comes to appear as separate, and if our theory does not help us understand how the autonomy of the political arises from a more fundamental heteronomy, it cannot, in the end, help us understand politics.

Marx's work is helpful because as a theorist he paid a great deal of attention to abstraction, and the way in which abstraction is produced. Marx's approach is particularly useful because he does not propose that we could do without abstraction, nor does he reject abstraction in favor of a concrete that is supposedly more real. Rather, Marx analyzes what he calls "real abstractions," that is, abstractions which are material and operative, and which become real because they are embedded in the organization of our practices.⁵⁴ What has not always been appreciated by readers of Marx, however, is the close connection between the concept of real abstraction and the critique of politics. One of Marx's primary examples of real abstraction is the way in which the abstraction of exchange value becomes real through the practices he identifies as commodity fetishism. As I show in chapter 5, Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism is his most developed version of his account of appearance, which develops from the early theory of the practical illusion of the separation of state and society. The account of commodity fetishism, that is, is part of Marx's account of the heteronomy of the political. What Marx's work shows us is that to understand politics as a sphere of appearance does not mean to treat politics as unreal, to reduce it to something else. On the contrary, Marx's work enriches the political by showing its multiple connections to diverse social, economic, communicative, and aesthetic practices.

Marx thus gives us an example of an alternative to the turn to the political and in particular an example of an alternative methodology for political theory. Marx, as I have read him in this dissertation, encourages us to pay attention to the richness of the ways in which politics is embedded in all aspects of our lives, and the way in which politics as a realm of appearance can, and if we are to understand it properly must, be referred to these apparently non-political spheres. This helps to strengthen the theoretical justification for some contemporary Marxist work which seeks to expand the reach of our analysis of the political. I would mention in particular Marxist feminism, which has long sought to question the narrowness of ideas of what counts as political through a rejection the distinction between public and private and an insistence on the political significance of domestic labor.⁵⁵ Weeks locates Marxist feminism within the productive tension between utopia and demand, that is, between the utopian creation of visions of future possibility and the analysis of the representations of the prevailing situation which enable the raising of particular demands. "Here lies the challenge," Weeks writes: "to think the relationship between present and future both as tendency and rupture. The future is at once that which we must map cognitively and that which exceeds our efforts at representation."⁵⁶ Marx's theory of appearance provides one way of conceptualizing this gap, in which we must both represent our current situation and recognize the incompleteness of these representations if we are to act effectively in and against this situation. Marx's theory of appearance also provides a useful way of approach-

⁵⁴For an overview of Marxist debates around real abstraction, see Toscano, "Real Abstraction".

⁵⁵Fortunati, *Arcane of Reproduction* argues for this expansion of our political ideas through a close reading of Marx which expands and reconfigures his central terminology, while Dalla Costa and James, *Power of Women* make a broader argument for Marx's political significance in response to debates within the women's movement.

⁵⁶Weeks, *The Problem With Work*, 197.

ing Marxist theorists such as Hardt, Negri and Virno who see contemporary economic processes as producing new forms of communicative and affective labor which are immediately political.⁵⁷ Marx's analysis of appearance allows us to understand the importance of these economic changes while cautioning against a rejection of all forms of mediation between economics and politics: the separation of the two may be illusory, but for all that, the separation is a practical illusion which we must reckon with if we are to understand how these economic changes produce new political possibilities.

The analysis of Marx in this dissertation also points towards possible ways of bringing Marx into conversation with non-Marxist theorists. While I have emphasized Marx's work in enriching political theory through an expansive understanding of the political and its interrelations, he is certainly not the only author to have carried this out. A consideration of alternative approaches which enlarge our concept of the political would certainly be helpful in developing Marx's account of appearances, and Marx's account might also be of use in providing additional theoretical resources for non-Marxist theories. To take only one example, consider Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The first chapter alone is a multiple history—of the American Southwest, of Anzaldúa, and of Chicanos. This description operates theoretically in a number of ways to construct the concept of borderlands which underlies the analysis in the book. Much has been written about Anzaldúa's multilingualism (the book moves seamlessly between English, Nahuatl, and multiple registers of Spanish),⁵⁸ but further multiplicities proliferate in Anzaldúa's descriptions: there are multiple objects being described (the Aztecs, the US-Mexico border, Texas, the Anzaldúa family, agribusiness, migration⁵⁹), and the modes used to describe them are also multiple (poetry, allegory, anecdote, secular history, mythology, economic analysis, reportage⁶⁰). What this so ably demonstrates is that "description" is not one thing, and the choice of what mode of description is used has theoretical consequences, and can be used to produce theoretical effects. In this case, the primary effect is one of multiplicity, an attempt to show that there are borderlands that cannot be understood except by approaching them from multiple different angles.

What this method shows is the concreteness of appearances. Anzaldúa's descriptions are specific, rich in detail and location. She thus presents us with appearances that pin down her concepts with specificity, a reminder of Marx's point that the concrete is not simple, but complex, made up of multiple determinations: "the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse."⁶¹ Through theory as description, Anzaldúa produces for us a wealth of appearances which also arise from multiple perspectives, appear to multiple witnesses or to an internally divided witness.⁶² At the end of *Capital*, the appearances Marx is describing to us have begun to overflow the narrowly economic sphere;⁶³ in Anzaldúa's text there is no question of appearances being tied to economics to begin with, but what she shares with Marx is that the generation of appearances is seen as a material process, and one which we can study

⁵⁷Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*.

⁵⁸See e.g. Mignolo, "Linguistic Maps".

⁵⁹Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera*, 23, 25, 27-9, 30, 31, 33-4.

⁶⁰Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera*, 23, 25, 26, 26, 27, 32, 33.

⁶¹Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101.

⁶²Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera*, 100.

⁶³See chapter 5.

to help understand how the specificities of concrete circumstances enable particular subjective possibilities.⁶⁴

The analysis of post-Marxism and of Marx in this dissertation, then, shows the limitations of the turn to the political, and the ways in which a focus on the political as an autonomous sphere produces a political theory that is incapable of understanding the richness of politics. The reading of Marx also demonstrates a better approach to political theory, one which, through an analysis of politics as appearance, reveals the many intersections and imbrications of the apparently political and the supposedly non-political. In many ways, this analysis is only the beginning, the announcement of a further research program which would found political theory not on the political alone, but on politics, economics, aesthetics and all the other fields into which our discussion of political concepts might take us. Such an investigation could draw on Marxist and non-Marxist theories, being limited neither by the purified notion of politics of post-Marxist, nor by the parochial textualism of too much Marxist theory. What this dissertation proposes is a reconceptualization of political theory which, by rejecting the autonomy of the political, is able to pay full attention to the richness of politics.

⁶⁴On materialism and subjectivity in Anzaldúa, see Fowlkes, "From Feminist Identity Politics to Coalition Politics".

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