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Introduction
Marxist Literary Study and the General Law
of Capitalist Accumulation

Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon

Periodizing Marxist Literary Study

This volume brings together fifteen essays by scholars who are pursuing fresh ways of thinking about literature through concepts developed by Karl Marx. Together, they represent a shift in Marxist literary criticism that has emerged from changes in capitalism itself, from shifts in political resistance to capitalism, and from changes in theoretical approaches to Marx's writing. To read these essays alongside the Marxist literary criticism from the 1960s through the early 2000s is to be struck by a significant collective rethinking of what a Marxist approach to literature might be, and do.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, there has been a marked revival of interest in Marx and his thought across the English-speaking world, one that compares to the "return to Marx" that grew up around the social revolutions of 1968. In the first few years after the 2008 crisis, work in the academic social sciences by established Marxist figures like the geographer David Harvey and the sociologist Giovanni Arrighi enjoyed a significantly expanded readership. In the electronic public sphere, the aftermath of the crisis produced a range of new Marxist writing online, from the militant communism of *Endnotes* (launched 2008) and *Viewpoint* (2011) to the widely read socialist journal *Jacobin* (2011). Marxist writing has also found a welcome in more mainstream publications like the new *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *n + 1*. In social movement contexts, it is now common for eco-activists to acknowledge that the demands of capitalist accumulation stand in the way of real social change around the planet's climate. And most strikingly, the left wing of the anti-racist activism that has taken shape under the banner of Black Lives Matter since 2015 has brought the concept of "racial capitalism" to the center of conversations about race and class both inside and outside the academy.

This uptick in Marxist discourse forms the immediate backdrop of our volume, but it is also part of a longer story about changes in capitalism, in politics, and in intellectual life over the last half-century. It is widely agreed that the period roughly from 1965 to 1973 was the beginning of what Robert Brenner has called “the long downturn,” a tendential decline in profitability for capital that has bred, over the past decades, a variety of capitalist pushbacks against this decline – from the waves of privatization and cuts to public services that began in the late 1970s, to the speculative bubbles in credit, technology, and housing that have punctuated the years since then. These have been accompanied by class victories for capital throughout the period. Some of these were immediately recognized as political, like the defeat of PATCO (the US air traffic controllers’ union) in 1981, or the Thatcherite victory over the National Union of Mineworkers in 1985. Others were less obvious but have proved at least as important, like the rise of personal consumer debt and its eventual financialization. Under pressure of declining profitability, capitalist classes were pushed to adopt new technological developments in transit and telecommunication, which led to the “deindustrialization” of declining real wages and increased personal debt in the global north, and to massive displacement from the country to the city in the global south, where forced “underdevelopment” pushed formerly peasant populations into low-wage work in rapidly expanding cities. This dynamic eventually produced what historian Mike Davis has famously described as our “planet of slums.”

Even before this, a circum-Atlantic Cold War anti-communism had sowed political terror across the globe, from the US-abetted murder of Marxists and communists throughout Latin America to the mass murder of communist party members – up to a million people – in Indonesia (also carried out with American support). Along with defeats to organized labor, deindustrialization, and the pinioning of working people by debt, these global waves of terror and violence have had an incalculable blunting effect on anti-capitalist struggle, and have imposed a rigid ceiling on popular political imagination, so that even radical movement energies have been continually reabsorbed into a liberal political project whose highest aim has been to fairly distribute the diminishing social surpluses generated by a capitalism that is increasingly desperate for high returns on investment. This dynamic shaped the left politics of the last quarter of the “American Century.”

At the same time, however, the social revolutions of the 1960s bequeathed new forms of Marxist theory as well as theory that would, long after any European communist party ceased to exercise intellectual influence, continue to define itself as “moving beyond Marx.” The 1960s were, after all, the last period in which Marxism was still a defining

political pole within a range of social movements, or at the very least a milieu with which many of these movements intersected. In the United States, where McCarthyism had been effective in purging communism from academia, Hollywood, and unions, dissident and unorthodox Marxisms found more of an opening with the New Left. The movements associated with the late New Left in particular – Second Wave feminism, Third Worldism, Black Power, Black feminism, environmentalism – all had a genesis in the context of a by-then deeply unpopular American war in Vietnam that helped to make the interconnections between racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and capitalism a common activist supposition. The Second Wave practice of “consciousness-raising,” for example, was first introduced by the New York Radical Women who took inspiration from Chinese communist “speak bitterness” campaigns that targeted the patriarchal structure of the rural Chinese family form along with landlordism. For Robert F. Williams and the Black Panther Party, the revolutionary communisms of Cuba and China offered concrete counterexamples to US racial oppression which informed their programs for Black liberation. And the Black feminism pioneered by Frances M. Beale understood Black women to be part of a larger international grouping called “Third World women” subject to the triple jeopardy of imperialism, patriarchy, and racism. The late New Left’s quest to conceptualize the interconnections between these forms of struggle, all understood to be global, was to remain an unfinished project. Long past the official demise of New Communism and conducted outside any Party framework, that unfinished project is detectable in the scholarship seeking to recover from the long-twentieth-century history of the Black radical tradition’s encounters with Marxism new theoretical insights into capitalism’s formal subsumption of earlier racial regimes and its invention of new ones.¹

The clearest advance in Marxism’s ability to relate divergent political tendencies without subsuming them into one narrative came in this period from the uptake of the work of French philosopher Louis Althusser, who had developed an anti-dialectical theoretical vocabulary in which different levels of political action, cultural activity, and economic production could be brought into relation without reducing them simply to expressions of an underlying economic reality, while still leaving open a way to imagine them as part of a complex unity. One of the most probing descriptions of the wide utility of Althusser’s work was offered by Jamaican-British theorist Stuart Hall. In a landmark essay of 1980 called “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” Hall gave sustained attention to the Althusserian concept of articulation, which was conceived

as a figure for joint-making or connection-making – to articulate two things was to bring them together at their most appropriate point of contact. Hall persuasively demonstrated how this concept opened up space, not only for the study of the “relative autonomy” of processes of production, consumption, and exchange in capitalist economies, but of multiple kinds of political struggle. Hall felt that the promise of these concepts might be fulfilled with help from the earlier work of Antonio Gramsci on the concept of hegemony, which described how dominant classes developed nondirectly economic means of obliging other classes to adopt their worldview – that is, how actual movement might occur among the “levels” of capitalist societies. He was thinking about race, primarily, but he was clear that the analytic possibilities extended beyond it.

Hall’s optimism about the applicability of Althusser’s work across a range of political terrains had roots in his enthusiastic reception by students in France. As François Dosse has argued, for a young generation of leftists in France this reconception of Marx was powerful on two fronts: the struggle among academic disciplines for prestige in the French academy, and the struggle of young activists on the left with the official lines of the French Communist Party (PCF), not least over its relation to the disaster of the rightward movement of the Soviet Union. Dosse puts it this way:

This new Althusserian reading represented a youthful cure for Marxism and rid it of its tragic cast. Everyone used the mature Marx to turn him into the harbinger of the scientificity of his discipline, as the remarkable sales of the very theoretical *For Marx* attested. Moreover, the totalizing conception of Althusserian thought gave each discipline the feeling that it was an active participant in a common adventure. Marx became the intersection of all research, a veritable common denominator in the social sciences. (*History of Structuralism*, 309)

In the 1960s, the “tragic cast” that Marxism had taken on had to do, first, with the ongoing absorption of the extent of Stalin’s murderousness in the years of his power, and second, with the terrible contradiction between a Soviet Union that claimed to have abolished social classes and become a “humanist” society, on the one hand, while brutally crushing uprisings in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956, on the other. For Althusser, overcoming this tragic coloration in readings of Marx was only possible if a “scientific” Marx replaced a Hegelian one.

Althusser’s stance was highly persuasive and its triumph extended to the Anglophone academy, including literary and cultural studies in English, where it supplied an enduring method for reading texts politically. In a

1976 essay with the very Althusserian title “Toward a Science of The Text,” Terry Eagleton sets out to establish the specificity of literary study, using structuralist language throughout:

Since the text is generally a complex unity of such modes of aesthetic production, it may therefore incorporate a set of differential, mutually conflictual relations to the general forms given to it by the structure of its significations . . . In producing such significations, the productive forms at once ‘pre-constitute’ them – that is to say, partly determine which significations are to be produced – and so operate on those selected as to displace, recast and mutate them according to the relatively autonomous laws of its own aesthetic modes, on the basis of those modes’ ideological determination and of the specific form and character of the ideological significations put to work. (“Towards a Science of the Text,” 326)

This passage deftly transposes Althusserian concepts from Marxist theory to the domain of literary study, where, like any other academic field, its object can be described as a “mode of production” that yields, not novels or poems or plays, but “significations” in “mutual conflict” that cannot exceed the structure. Literary texts are always ideological products of elite education, or the mass market, or both – but they enjoy a “relative[] autonom[y]” in that restricted terrain by being “operate[d] on” so as to shuffle them around: literary writers can alter the terms of a genre by mixing it with another, say, or can end up backgrounding a once-dominant mode by making it suddenly seem old-fashioned. But it is less an historical than a structural mode of analysis, focused on the specificity of literature as a subdomain or “level” of capitalist social production.

By 1996, when Eagleton and Drew Milne reprinted “Toward a Science of the Text” in their *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, Althusserian Marxism had lost its most significant adherents and interpreters. This may partly have had to do with the way the specifics of literature were difficult to establish without recourse to literary history. But there were external factors as well. As Eagleton himself notes in his introduction to the volume: “If . . . the 1960s came to an end in 1973–74 with the international oil crisis, then the heady Althusserian heyday of the early and mid-1970s, when something like a Marxist *culture* last existed in the West, was already, unbeknown to itself, the beginnings of a political downturn” (“Towards a Science of the Text,” 1).

This assessment points to the obverse of the crisis of the Soviet-style Party form that Althusserians were responding to in France: because the huge spike in oil prices in the early 1970s was in part an attempt by oil-exporting nations to counteract the effects of US President Richard

Nixon's uncoupling of the value of the US dollar from gold, it began a period of financial wealth creation (the cycling of "petrodollars" from oil-exporting countries to US banks and then to developing nations in need of assistance managing their increased energy costs) that was at the same time a blow to postwar US hegemony. The dollar, now obliged to prove its value as the world's currency on the basis of US economic and military power, extended American economic influence abroad while accelerating deindustrialization at home (Desai, *Geopolitical Economy*). As state communism began its downward spiral, US-led capitalism got high on oil fumes, enjoying the financial rush and ignoring the productive contraction underfoot. Marxist theory in the Althusserian vein had escaped from what it believed to be the foreordained certainties of Hegelian philosophy by shifting from a metaphors of ever-upward dialectical synthesis to a very present-tense metaphors of "production" – but by the 1980s it was confronted with the problem of a capitalism in which "production" was itself in crisis. Structure collided with history.

It was in this context that Fredric Jameson, by far the most probing and synthetic of American Marxist literary critics, reasserted the importance of a very different, German Marxist tradition of thinking about literature and art. In his 1990 study, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or The Persistence of The Dialectic*, Jameson saw fit to return to a figure he had been the first to introduce to Anglophone readers in *Marxism and Form* (1971). That earlier volume slightly pre-dated the rise of an anti-dialectical post-structuralism, whose proponents often took issue with the way dialectics seemed to presume a foreordained absolute "End of History." By 1989, however, with the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and with conservative commentators like political scientist Francis Fukuyama declaring precisely the "end of history" and equating it not with the dialectic, but with its terminus in an eternal capitalist future, Jameson brought the idea of the *critical* dialectic back into view. What was of "no great help in previous periods," Jameson wrote, "may turn out to be just what we need today" (*Late Marxism*, 5). Adorno was a key figure in the Marxist research center known as the Frankfurt School. Adorno was born fifteen years before Althusser, fled Nazi Germany, and lived in Los Angeles from 1941 to 1949, finally returning to postwar Germany to produce his masterworks, *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and the essays posthumously collected as *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

Unlike Althusser, Adorno remained committed to a version of the Hegelian dialectic, specifically to a humanist language of possibility and transformation. For Jameson, the dialectical character of Adorno's mature

work, as well as the staunch flow of German-American intellectual traffic after the war, made his thought seem parochial when measured against the backdrop of rising student militancy and anti-Hegelian theoretical positions on offer in France, which focused less on the long unfolding of history and more on the character of politics in the present tense:

The seventies – the age, in this country at least, of Theory and theoretical discourse, of *jouissances* that ranged from structuralism to poststructuralism, from Maoism to narrative analysis, and from libidinal investments to Ideological State Apparatuses – were essentially French; Adorno . . . seemed an encumbrance, not to say an embarrassment, during the struggles of that time. (*Late Marxism*, 5)

But if Adorno's thought seemed ill-equipped to grapple with younger radicals' resistance to capitalism, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy, Jameson suggested, it might turn out to be useful for understanding the other side of the dynamic that produced the radicalism in the first place: a fully developed global capitalism that had reached into every aspect of collective and individual life. What mattered for Adorno, in his attempt to rescue some sense of the possibility for human transformation in the face of an all-subsuming capital, were the intricacies by which individual consciousness tried to wedge open space for itself to breathe. The way to survive capital was to "stay human," as the singer Michael Franti puts it; and the way to do that, for Adorno, was to imagine happiness, fulfillment, an image of a world without capital, but to do so while centering attention of the ongoing horrors capital has produced. In the broadest sense this meant a loyalty to the idea that all pleasure and intellectual joy must be measured against the mass murder of European Jews by the Nazis; in the more restricted scene of artistic production, it meant that the dialectical capacities of the mind had always to be "negative," measured by impossibilities, limits determined by shifting social conditions. These limits shape human creativity, and run so deep that they can be thought of in almost Freudian terms, as "taboos" (*Late Marxism*, 192–193).

Indeed, one way to imagine the difference between the Adornian and the Althusserian currents is as an underlying difference between Freudian and Lacanian versions of psychoanalytic accounts of the birth of the individual as a subject – the Freudian one more organic, the Lacanian more structural. This difference can also be represented as a relative emphasis on capitalist form or logic (Althusser) instead of capitalist history (Adorno). Or, in turn, we can distinguish the two strands by key concepts derived from Marx: "reproduction," in Althusser's case, deriving from Marx's description of capital's need to reproduce the working class, which

Althusser extends to the reproduction of good capitalist subjects through ideology; and “commodification,” in Adorno’s case, derived from a blend of Marx’s initial analysis of the commodity and his analysis of the capitalist “subsumption” or restructuring of the labor process to suit its needs. Perhaps most usefully, though, the two theoretical strands can be read as competing abstractions of capitalist production: the one devolving from the spatial metaphor of “base and superstructure,” and the other derived from a temporal sense of capital’s power to subsume more and more of human experience over time.

But the declining profitability of twenty-first-century capitalism put the question to both the presentist model of base and superstructure and to the linear timeline of all-subsuming accumulation. Capital, while more productive of material goods than ever before, has proven incapable of maintaining a rate of surplus value that would enable another great expansion of accumulation along the lines of the postwar years.² This contrary situation – expanded production, declining profitability – calls for a theoretical vocabulary that imagines capitalist accumulation not only in terms of its ability to reproduce the working class, or to subsume social relations, but in terms of the capitalist imperative to overcome a tendency toward diminished profits, which has produced both the deindustrialization of the global north and the slumification of the south. The situation demands a vocabulary that contends with the incorporation of ever more people into the ranks of what Marx called “surplus populations” – those who are not worth incorporating into waged work on a regular basis. The scholars gathered in this volume have begun to take on this project, with the additional twist that literary studies itself has become a kind of “surplus” discipline in the academy today.

Reading *Capital* in the Post-2008 English Department

To propose that contemporary literary and cultural criticism might be able to contribute to the development of a Marxist social vocabulary is to do so from within a very different institutional context than the one when the English department had represented a stronghold of “theory.” The 1980s and 1990s, when literature along with everything else was regarded as a text, may not have been the first period in which literary critics drew upon the professional aura of scientific labor. It was, however, the first time that literature itself came to be analyzed systematically as ideology (Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 22). English’s “theory” moment made literary criticism in practice a form of ideology critique, in the sense that literary criticism’s

transdisciplinary prestige was based upon a widely shared semiological conviction that literature was a representative social text and that literary criticism was thus the potential source of critical social theory, regardless of the particular attitude of the literary critic or school toward Marxism. Indeed, but for the exceptional examples of a few singular and diverse figures (Jameson, Gayatri Spivak, Franco Moretti), the critical innovations within literary studies that commanded professional influence during these years were premised upon the idea of a world that had definitively moved “beyond Marx.” The fact that the reigning methods at the time – deconstruction, new historicism, late British cultural studies, and postcolonial theory – owed their authority to the shared premise of Althusser’s metascientific reading of Marx meant that critics would evoke the ghost of “orthodox Marxism” long after any communist party held intellectual sway, at the same time that Marx himself was only selectively read.

The turn of the millennium brought with it an opposite set of paradoxes characterizing the institutional basis and content of literary studies. With every financial downturn and especially after 2008, the sense of a crisis-ridden present has helped fuel a renaissance of Marxist economic, political, and social theory. Until very recently, however, these crises have not led to a reactivation of Marxist literary study.

What might explain this lag or dialogic gap? One obvious explanation is that the while the 1960s’ intra-Marxist critique of economism had provided the foundation for a post-1960s “cultural turn” to which former Third World revolutionaries, SDS alumni, and McGovernite liberals alike could subscribe, the current return to Marx gives no primacy to cultural revolution and thus no special epistemological privilege to the literary or cultural critic. Another explanation might be that the impact of neoliberal disinvestment in higher education has led to a sharp contraction of the theoretical ambitions of literary studies, seen now as an endangered craft practice, and the discipline’s retreat to a core remit of reflecting on reading – reading’s technical differentiation from other kinds of leisure activities in the age of new media – so as to defend the specificity of literary knowledge work. In the contemporary English department of radically reduced expectations, such hopes for transdisciplinary address (and socially transformative significance) as had once attached to literary reading can perhaps literally no longer be afforded.

But another legacy of the 1960s was a revolution in the social identity of literature (its writers and readers) conducted in the name of multiculturalism that ran opposite to the model of literary reading as a critique of the classroom text. Despite perennial right-wing effort, this democratic

representational ideal of literature has proven difficult to undo. Just as English in the nineteenth century had originally been institutionalized in the Mechanic Institutes as the poor man's classics – from the beginning promising to effect a solidarity between social classes via the cultivation of “larger sympathies” and the instillation of national pride – so too had the US canon wars of the 1980s concluded in English's internalization of a mission to represent the nation's racially diverse populations more faithfully than had yet been achieved by electoral government.

This institutionalization of multicultural literary education has developed a class dimension as well. With both English literary studies and US/UK world domination on a path of steady decline, the undergraduate English major was becoming a shrinking pipeline of social mobility and immigrant professional assimilation. And it was also becoming disproportionately non-middle class in constituency. Unable to afford four years of tuition at increasingly marketized public universities, community college transfers (many of whom are minority, immigrant, and first-generation college goers) would increasingly form the majority of the humanities, where many course requirements, unlike in the science and engineering majors, could be fulfilled in just two years.³ At a time when the “two cultures” problem is increasingly also a class divide among student populations, literature is neither necessarily for the elite nor even a perceived route to joining it. This divide is clear to students; in a widely circulated document released during the struggles against new austerity measures in the University of California system in 2009, the anonymous authors wrote,

Student loan volume – a figure inversely proportional to state funding for education – rose by nearly 800 percent from 1977 to 2003. What our borrowed tuition buys is the privilege of making monthly payments for the rest of our lives. What we learn is the choreography of credit: you can't walk to class without being offered another piece of plastic charging 20 percent interest. Yesterday's finance majors buy their summer homes with the bleak futures of today's humanities majors. (*Communiqué*, 3)

As English in the age of deindustrialization returns to its nineteenth-century institutional origins in providing a “poor man's education,” its students more often find themselves in unexpected proximity to the standpoint of the wageless. Experientially attuned to the racial stakes of the privatization of public goods and social services, the standpoint of precarity makes more students receptive to perceiving the political limits of racial liberalism, for instance, since that liberalism is premised on an obviously impossible expansion of middle-class prosperity. In this

literature classroom, to remix Stuart Hall and Michael Dawson, class consciousness (of our linked fates) can sometimes turn out to be an outgrowth of the way race is lived (Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 394; Dawson, *Behind the Mule*, 77).⁴ Revolutionary texts such as *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and the *Statement of the Combahee River Collective* (CRC) (1977) suddenly make sense together on one syllabus. Their synergy affects how we might read and teach *Capital* itself: with the melting of an earlier moment's antinomy between aesthetics and politics, and the task of opening structure to crisis no longer the lonely burden of the literary critic, the time is ripe for reading *Capital* less as a critique of structure than as a critique of the barriers to solidarity.

In the years of the dominance of the Althusserian framework, the first chapter of *Capital*, Volume 1 – the chapter on the commodity – was most likely to be all the literary student would have been assigned. But the problem with reading only the first chapter is that while the commodity analyzed there is for Marx the “economic cell form” of bourgeois society, it is also the most difficult chapter. This is partly because the analysis of the commodity requires a “power of abstraction” gained from Marx’s explanation of a concept of abstract labor that is only unfolded in the subsequent chapters of *Capital* (90).

In those chapters, Marx introduces a temporal delay between the buying and selling of a given commodity. And this element of time is the germ of all the social contradictions and historical violence that Marx will elaborate on in the rest of Volume 1. In Chapter 3, on money, Marx writes that “money is not the direct measure of labor time (i.e., value), but the measure of the commensurability of commodities in general through exchange” (190). This “commensurability” is not magically established by a universal consensus about the prices of things; it is the index of what Marx calls “a mode of production whose laws can only assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities” (196). It is the historical project of capitalism – more specifically, it is the class project of capitalists – to overcome these “irregularities” that impede profit as decisively as possible. By Chapter 6, on “The Sale and Purchase of Labour Power,” Marx has identified the process by which a special commodity, maximally plastic, can be made to smooth out the temporal gap between buying and selling, the social gap between the snapshot of prices and the totality of values, and the never-ending “irregularities” of the market. That commodity is a social invention, and it is not labor in general, as in Ricardo, but the capacity called labor power. That a capacity can come to be considered a commodity is the result of a long history of dispossession, which Marx narrates across Volume 1: the best, most

flexible sellers of labor power are those who have ended up with no choice but to do so.

Without an appreciation of the role of time in capitalist accumulation we lose a sense of the challenges it faces, and the terrible history it has engineered in response to them. This can lead to excessively epistemological readings of *Capital*, stoically centered on our ongoing inability to know it *in toto*. If one stops at the end of Chapter 1, Marx would seem to invite this. He writes,

Men [*sic*] do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see those objects merely as the material integuments of homogenous 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. Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every object of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language. The belated scientific discovery that the products of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labour. (166–167)

From Marx, we can understand that valorization is a complex social process that cannot be fully known at an empirical level – even today, it is impossible to know in real time what has been bought and sold, and on what terms, in any given period of time. But this limit on empirical knowledge is not a limit on conceptual knowledge: we cannot “know better” than to fetishize commodities as though their prices simply came from nowhere, but that doesn't mean we cannot name the social process that obliges us to act – in exhaustion, or resignation, or relief – as if they did. Literary and philosophical readings of *Capital* in the 1980s and 1990s, however, tended to foreground the unknowability of the products of exchange *in toto* as the first principle for an aesthetics quietly drawn from Kant's notion of the sublime: to try to comprehend capitalism was to be forced to acknowledge the uncognizable, possibly terrifying, totality of what it can produce, and perhaps, as with Kant, to take the shock of terror as the starting point for a chastened politics. We can see this in Jameson's decision to place the problem of the loss of “cognitive mapping” at the climax of his famous essay on the postmodern in 1981. For Jameson, the sheer productive capacity of capital had made it impossible to locate

ourselves in space and in history. Superhighways, strip mall, suburbs, oilfields, casinos – they all numb our intellects and our senses. We can also see this chastened politics in Slavoj Žižek's 1989 *Sublime Object of Ideology*, where Žižek turns to the problem Marx outlines above and swaps out Marx's Hegelian analysis of the process of exchange for the Kantian one provided by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in his *Intellectual and Manual Labor* of 1970. Where for Marx the totality of exchange makes no sense until we grasp the ongoing social project of maintaining that totality, for Sohn-Rethel, and for Žižek following him, money is perplexing not because it is constantly moving in and out of exchangeability with commodities, but because it is outside cognition: it is "sublime" (Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 12). Žižek famously avoids the political melancholy that devolves from the Adornian and Jamesonian positions on the productive power of capital, but only by finding our limited self-knowledge tragicomic.

The appeal of this stance in a time of defeats for labor, and of eclipse for Marxism, was that in its modesty it offered an alternative to the figure of the arrogant, clueless, or psychotic Communist Party leader, secure in his knowledge of the course of history. The problem with this stance, however, is that it ends up permitting an equation between the ability to think conceptually about a totality in motion, and the presumptuousness of total self-awareness. This is the irony of the various "anti-critical" and affirmative turns in recent literary study: they are rhetorically anti-Marxist, but they are enabled by a Kantian turn to epistemological modesty that was worked out by Western Marxists themselves.

For undergraduates and graduate students in the precarious academy today, however, the power of reading *Capital* lies in its capacity to help them connect present-day crises of unemployment, racialized exploitation and exclusion, gender hierarchy, imperialism and permanent war, and environmental devastation. In Chapter 23 the perspective of totality reveals reproduction to be the key category, and indeed to subtend production: only "when viewed . . . as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal" can we come to see that "every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction" (711); by contrast, when we look only at the single worker or the single capitalist, it is the illusion created by the money form of an equal exchange that prevails (711–713). It has been possible for social-reproduction feminists to build on the gender consequences of the processes involved in the renewal of labor power from the systemic perspective Marx takes of "the individual consumption of the worker" as that which "remains an aspect of the production and reproduction of capital," "whether it occurs inside or outside the workshop, inside or outside the labor process" (718).⁵

It is also only from “the standpoint of society” that it becomes easier to see that “the working class, even when it stands outside the direct labour process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the lifeless instruments of labour are” (719). Because capital exerts its command over unpaid labor and, as Marx puts it, “the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist” (723), it follows easily in Chapter 25 that capital accumulation constantly produces a population superfluous to its needs, or a “surplus population” (782). This “general law of capitalist accumulation” provides the basis for uniting the employed and the unemployed on the basis of their construction from the point of view of capital as a common mass of disposable labor power, and their subjection to the constant threat of expulsion into the reserve army or even long-term exclusion from the wage relation altogether. The “worker” in *Capital* is thus defined not by their concrete labor but by the condition of their separation from any means of production. The recent revival of James Boggs’s 1960s writing – in which Chapter 15 on the machine and Chapter 25 are clearly influential on his thinking about Black unemployment in Detroit – has made “surplus population” a key phrase in contemporary discussions of racial capitalism, and racialization a key aspect of those who study automation in global supply chains.⁶

Though Chapter 25 brings us to the crisis end of the logic of capital, it does not represent the end of *Capital*’s story. The concluding chapters (26–33) circle back to capitalism’s violent beginnings in “primitive accumulation,” which contain not only the history of the earliest examples of the transition to capitalism but also a conceptual account of the perennial preconditions for capital accumulation that help to explain the state’s ongoing role in brute land expropriation (Roberts, “Primitive Accumulation,” 2–3). In this version of what we might call (following the lead of Kevin Anderson, Harry Harootunian, and Jairus Banaji) a peripheral-historical *Capital*, we find a Marx concerned to conceptualize the *differentia specifica* of the tyranny of the capitalist wage relation that does not simply contrast the wage to chattel slavery, corvée labor, and other forms of formally unfree labor, but that takes interest in the possibility or even necessity of their dynamic global coexistence at different historical moments.

After Marx: An Overview

The chapters of this volume can be read as self-standing essays, but they are also intended to be read together. Together they fill in different aspects

of the larger picture of contemporary Marxist criticism whose outlines have been sketched in this introduction.

Nikhil Pal Singh and Iyko Day introduce two leading sites of renewed Marxist praxis that until recently had been submerged as largely academic disputes over the primacy of race or class in the critical study of capitalism. The Black Lives Matter movement and contemporary indigenous struggles, such as the South Dakota Access Pipeline protest and the Wet'suwet'en opposition to the Coastal GasLink Pipeline, are providing new impetus for seeing the anti-capitalist import of the Black radical tradition and Native modes of survival and relation. Singh's "Black Marxism and the Antinomies of Racial Capitalism" traces the tensions in the concept of "racial capitalism" to the historical conjuncture of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Cedric Robinson and Stuart Hall staked out different approaches to the race/class relation with the aim of renewing an emancipatory tradition in a period of political defeat. Where Robinson saw Marxist categories like exploitation as insufficient for understanding both antiBlack racism and the resistance to it, Hall explored anti-racist possibilities in the Marxist concept of ideology. The universal potential in Robinson's account of the Black radical tradition's repeated encounters with Western Marxism might be recovered, Singh argues, by supplementing Robinson with Hall. Day's "Eco-Criticism and Primitive Accumulation in Indigenous Studies," meanwhile, surveys contemporary Indigenous Studies' rereadings of Marx's concept of "primitive accumulation" in order to rethink the relationship between the Marxist category of exploitation and the broader concepts of dispossession and extermination, which have tended to be viewed as opposed to one another. Day's contribution is to help us see Indigenous history and resistance through a lens in which displacement from land, and even state-led attempts at extermination, could be seen as aspects of a capitalist project of creating conditions for exploitation, a project in which dispossession is both an origin point and an ongoing resource for capital.

Mark Steven and Crystal Bartolovich turn our attention to cultural texts and their formal ways of engaging the interlocking problems of race/class and colonialism/capitalism. Steven's "Screening Insurrection: Marx, Cinema, Revolution" describes the possibility of a Marxist cinema after the end of actually existing socialism, focusing on how the viral visuality of social media might serve to unite the postindustrial surplus populations of today in the way intellectuals once hoped that the slicing-and-dicing of images in the early technique of film montage would activate a revolutionary consciousness in the industrial working class. In both cases, a

formal technique – though liable to capitalist appropriation – provides people with a way to grasp capitalism as a totality: to see their struggles as connected with other struggles elsewhere. Returning to a key theorist of totality in the early twentieth century, Bartolovich finds in the work of Theodor Adorno a lasting riposte to the anti-dialectical holism offered by recent “New Materialist” thinking, which sees environmental crisis as requiring existential concepts that Marxist categories cannot provide. Looking to an earlier moment when “life itself” seemed to be at stake in a great historical transition – that is, in the first period of primitive accumulation – Bartolovich’s “Marxist Ecology and Shakespeare” rereads Shakespeare’s *Tempest* in order to show that, if the malign sorcerer Prospero is to be seen as an allegory of political power, it is not because he magically controls the very objects out of which we build the world. That would be where the New Materialism imagines itself as finding a vantage point existentially prior to, and therefore more urgent than, the Marxist one. Rather, Bartolovich suggests that the materiality through which Prospero wields power over others gains its “magic” through its embeddedness in precisely the totality of social relations Adorno once argued gave us the capacity to think “existentially” in the first place.

Adorno’s concept of totality, though, has a drawback that many critics in this volume seek to overcome. For Adorno, capital’s ability to “totalize” social relations meant that it could commodify ever more aspects of social life that had once been external to it. This overlooks the ways in which capital actually requires the reproduction of unvalorizable zones of social life (housework, slavery, colonial peonage) in order to keep waged labor cheap. In a chapter cheekily entitled “There Is No ‘More Commodification’: Periodizing Capitalist Transformation,” Leigh Claire La Berge observes the negative consequences of Cultural Marxism’s narration of history through the linear conceit of “increasing commodification.” Rather, our attention should be on the logic of the commodity form, which Marx argues can only expand by producing shifting ratios of waged labor and unvalorizable surplus populations.

What if literary production, at least in its most prestigious forms, has also fallen into that zone of unexploitable surplus? Joshua Clover and Sarah Brouillette mince few words about the need for literary critics to reevaluate their fundamental investments in the novel’s social-diagnostic capacities as well as its future literary quality. Clover’s “The Irreconcilable: Marx after Literature” marshals the work of the early Georg Lukács, Giovanni Arrighi, and Leon Trotsky to argue that as value production wanes, so too does the capacity of the novel form to help us orient ourselves within it.

Brouillette's "The Rise and Fall of the English-Language Literary Novel since World War II" takes an empirical approach to the trend lines of literary-fiction publishing that augurs the disappearance of even the kinds of novels that once found commercial rewards in the assumption of a market-ironic attitude. Neither Clover nor Brouillette would model a close reading to support their forecasts of the end of the novel, and the implication is that today's Marxist critics must go in search of new objects or new methods adequate to the literature of our increasingly non-labor-absorptive economy.

Juliana Spahr's chapter also cautions against seeing literature as necessarily a venue for critical thinking or resistant politics. Her "Literature and the State" holds the USSR accountable not only for defanging a revolutionary Russian literature, but, more unexpectedly, for inspiring the US's own instrumentalist use of writers for Cold War ends. Spahr's focus on the reach of the state, though (as opposed to that of capital), means that her account leaves room for truly revolutionary moments when "the nation state form is briefly cracked open" and for literatures to emerge that are, like Marx's elusive metaphor of the artist as a silkworm, momentarily "expressions of their own nature" (138). Such moments might include the Paris Commune of 1871, which inspired Arthur Rimbaud's *Season in Hell*, 1917 itself, and 1956, when Aimé Césaire resigned from the French Communist Party and published a more anti-statist version of *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. Spahr concludes by asking whether, after the end of all actually existing socialisms, the radical literature of the coming years might have a chance to champion the values of small-"c" communism and anarchism, against all odds.

Actually existing socialism changed history, of course, and a cluster of chapters in this volume begin with its aftermath. By no means intended to stand in for the full range of non-Western Marxisms, the chapters on Russia, China, and Latin America give updated reports and theorizations from parts of the world where Marxist revolution once created global literary and aesthetic inspiration. Marijeta Bozovic and Rossen Djagalov's "Post-Soviet Aesthetics" provides an indispensable account of the variety of literary and art forms in which a New Russian Left since 2011 has found strongest expression. Any description of post-Soviet aesthetic politics cannot avoid theorizing what is Russian Marxism now, and Djagalov and Bozovic suggest that one would have to begin with a reconstruction of the submerged, creative Soviet Marxisms of the 1920s and the Thaw period. With "Lu Xun's Literary Revolution in Chinese Marxism," Petrus Liu provides this volume with the case of a Marxist revolution that had

originated in literary revolution. Perhaps it is only fitting that the homeland of a strong form of Cultural Marxism (Mao Zedong Thought) – in which cultural transformation of the subject predicates economic and total social transformation – would have produced an author whose modernism was (and remains, in present-day rereadings) a critical realism. In Lu Xun's frame narratives, there is always a gap between intellectual consciousness and a depicted peasant subject, one that once indexed China's violent incorporation into the capitalist world system and, now, its ever-growing disposable population under postsocialism. Historicizing the relationship between two of Latin America's best-known postwar intellectual exports, dependency theory and magical-realist "boom narrative," Ericka Beckman's "Latin American Literature and Dependency Theory Today" shows their restored relevance to today's world of extreme structural inequality. Both dependency theory and magical boom narrative grew up in the era of US attempts to incorporate Latin American countries more fully into the capitalist world order by loaning money to their elites in the name of "development," and both fell out of fashion in the early days of IMF-led neoliberalism. But terrible economic violence has followed on the dawning reality of those loans proving unrepayable. For Beckman, this deepening violence gives new, tragic relevance both to the narrative form of a realism stretched to its limits, and to the economic theory that first identified the actual outcome of "development" as immiseration. All three of these chapters give literary critics new ways to explore the consequences of the twenty-first-century capitalist wage coming nowhere near replacing the broken promise of state-led socialism.

In the age of a fully global downturn, that wage promises less than ever, even in the nations once called "developed." But our theoretical accounts of the end of the wage have remained attached to futurist and utopian language about technology and artisanship. Annie McClanahan and Michael Shane Boyle address this lag by focusing on two key, dialectically related, categories that since the 1970s have often justified the belief in the "end of class": technology and service work. Their chapters provide a new critical assessment of the canonical Marxist writings on technology and performance; and they also recover an alternate Marxism relevant to comprehending contemporary forms of intellectual labor, from academia to the performing arts. McClanahan's "Industry Culture: Labor and Technology in Marxist Critical Theory" demonstrates the lasting relevance of James Boggs's early 1960s analysis of industrial automation to today's generalization of low-wage white collar gig work: where Black workers building cars in Detroit were the first to be displaced by automation, the

barely waged Amazon search engine adjusters in McClanahan's essay point to capital's irreducible need to find human workers to underpay, even in the age of algorithms. Boyle's "In Service to Capital: Theater and Marxist Cultural Theory," meanwhile, provides a new opening for Marxist theater criticism to explore art's complex economic relation to capital by shifting away from a long debate about whether performance is somehow inassimilable to wage labor, or somehow at the heart of it, and focusing instead on how "the fact that some theaters continue to be organized along capitalist lines while others are not attests to the persistence of value's tendency, as Marx understood it, to subsume or expel activities as capital accumulation requires" (222).

Can literature be a form of theorizing? Can poetry make something happen? For original, affirmative answers to these age-old questions, one can hardly do better than to turn to Amy De'Ath's and Jasper Bernes's concluding chapters. In "Hidden Abodes and Inner Bonds: Literary Study and Marxist-Feminism," De'Ath shows us why poetry, as something especially attuned to the differentials between lived experience and total system, can be an indispensable aid to Marxist-feminism's goal of inter-relating the different (raced and gendered) ways in which capitalist subjects identify. Identification, rather than misrecognition, is here the recommended focus of a cognitive work that, by attending to the social objectivity of sensuous, situated knowledge and feeling, gets us closer to the affective ground of potential solidarity. De'Ath is clear that poetry cannot do this kind of theorizing all by itself; it requires dialectical readers. Bernes's chapter "Poetry and Revolution" centers on the ideal dialectical reader, the revolutionary. In a tour-de-force reworking of Jameson's three horizons of literature's political unconscious, Bernes takes the perspective not of the academic critic who aspires to ascend them as scales of analysis but of the revolutionary, who descends them, with an aim of intervention. The revolutionary pays attention to the whole but is always waiting for the decisive occasion when a particular symbolic action – leading a march or reading aloud a poem – might produce definite political effects. Turning us, on the one hand, to poetry's origins in didactic purpose, and, on the other, to the communicative dimensions of revolutionary action, Bernes illuminates the surprising bonds shared by the reader and the comrade, whose characters are at stake in responding to the enjoinder to actions of imitation.

Though the essays that follow address a variety of literary kinds, and focus on literary production across a range of locations, they share a sense of the pressures and the opportunities of this historical conjuncture. In

institutional terms, they write from an academy utterly transformed by the defunding that has taken on such momentum since the last wave of Marxist literary criticism. In terms of their readings of literary texts, they are less likely than their non-Marxist peers to sift literary objects into those that require ideological critique or ideological backing. And in terms of their reading of Marx, they are less inclined than their forerunners to think of capitalist production in terms of sublime unknowability, and more inclined to think about how capital is always reproducing the relation between the wage and what Michael Denning calls “wageless life.” Read together, these chapters allow us to imagine the wide range of relations to capital as ever-clearer grounds for new forms of solidarity, while remaining mindful that the political barriers to it may be higher than ever before.

Notes

- 1 For wide-ranging applications of “racial capitalism,” as credited to Cedric Robinson, see Johnson and Lubin, *Futures*. For an influential historical materialist uptake of Robinson, see Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings.” For an insightful critical assessment of Robinson, see Burden-Stelley, “Modern US Racial Capitalism.”
- 2 For an empirical analysis of the pressures on capitalist profitability in this period, see Roberts, *The Long Depression*.
- 3 For the increasing racial and economic stratification resulting from the state defunding of public universities, see Bleemer et al., *What Metrics Matter?*
- 4 For a bold assessment of the longstanding race/class problematic, see Chandra and Chen, “Mapping the Race/Class Problematic.”
- 5 See, originally, Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, 145 and, more recently, Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class,” 73–75.
- 6 See, for example, Benanav and Clegg, “Misery and Debt”; also, Smith, “Nowhere to Go.”

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