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Loneliness and alienation – Romantic motives in the reflections of Karl Marx

In modern times, in times of capitalism, social inclusion works via exclusion. The money I have is the money the other does not have. My egoism is what I have in common and what I share with all others. Modern times are times of paradoxical loneliness: we are in touch with the rest of the world but this relation is abstract, it is mediated by money. There are complementary tendencies too: only in modern times we can afford the romanticism of personal taste, love, and style – if we are willing to accept the risk of loneliness.

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„Einsamer sucht Einsame zum Einsamen.“
Kontaktanzeige

In his early essay on *The Jewish Question (Zur Judenfrage)* Marx has brilliantly analysed the paradoxes of modern bourgeois resp. capitalistic societies. In those societies and economies egoism, distance, and difference to one another is what men resp. citizens have in common. Marx's analysis is the result of his close reading of a text, which is highly prestigious in progressive and left-wing circles – of the *Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (declaration of human rights and – not to forget – citizen-rights), which was published and addressed to the whole world by the French revolutionaries in 1793. These “natural and inalienable rights” are (and Marx quotes the famous second paragraph of this declaration) “l'égalité, la liberté, la sûreté,

la propriété” (equality, liberty, safety, and property). The declaration argues that there is no liberty without the safety and guarantee of property. This commodity, this property is mine and not yours – that is the promise and guarantee for everyone, given by the legal system of civil societies which is based on human rights. Marx analyses this promise, this guarantee as a problematic construction:

The human right of liberty is not based on the connection of the human being to the other human beings (*Verbindung des Menschen mit dem Menschen*), but rather on the separation and distance (*Absonderung*) of the human being to other human beings. It is the *right* of separation, the right of the separated individual, focussed on himself (*auf sich beschränkten Individuums*). The practical use of the human right of liberty is the human right of private property. What is the kernel of the human right of property?

Marx quotes the French text:

Article 16. (Constitution de 1793): “Le droit de *propriété* est celui qui appartient à tout citoyen de jouir et de disposer à son gré de ses biens, de ses revenus, du fruit de son travail et de son industrie.” (The right of property is the right, which belongs to every citizen – the right to use and to enjoy his properties, his benefits, the fruits of his labour and of his diligence and to dispose of them in the way he wishes).

And Marx comments:

The right of private property is the right to dispose of one’s fortune and to relish it without any respect to other human beings, without respect to society. This individual liberty as well as the use of it is the basis of bourgeois society. In this society, every human being experiences in other human beings not the *fulfillment* (*Verwirklichung*) of his liberty, but the *limitation* (*Schranke*) of his liberty. This society establishes before all other rights, the human right to use and to relish his properties, his benefits, the fruits of his labour and of his diligence and to dispose of them in the way he wishes.¹

¹ Marx, “Zur Judenfrage”, 365. (my translation). Cf. Hamacher, “Das Recht, Rechte zu haben”.

The analysis by Marx is convincing. Marx characterizes loneliness, isolation, and egoism as the deep structure of bourgeois societies which respect the rule of law. In these societies, the connection between citizens is based on their separation, on the egotistic will to save one's property. Social synthesis is the result of the acceptance of egoism and individual vices. The classical quotation is well known: private vices become public benefits (Mandeville, Adam Smith). This is obviously a genuine dialectic construction: inclusion works via exclusion. The money I have is the money the other does not have. Digitalisation does not start with the invention of binary logic and computer systems – it starts with the innovation of money: to have or not to have, to buy or not to buy, heads or tails. My egotism is what I have in common, what I share with all others. Modern times are times of paradoxical loneliness: we are in touch with the rest of the world, but this relation is abstract, it is mediated by money. Marx (as well as other thinkers for example in the tradition of Aristotelian or Christian ethics) does not like this dialectic, though he is a fan of Hegel's dialectical philosophy. The socialist alternative proposed by Marx has a lack of exactness and a lack of dialectic as well. This however, is why this alternative is popular and attractive for all those who like harmony and consensus and dislike contradictions of all kinds. They suppose that an economy and society planned by a strong and central hand might be more productive and more fair than a society based on the invisible hand of a market which allows egotism and the quest for great personal advantages. It is remarkable that Marx and Engels, as critics of the invisible hand, also use the hand-metaphor. They argue that a socialist economy and society does not only need the strong arms of workers, but also the sensitive hand of a conductor. In his address from December 19 1893 to the International Congress of Socialist Students in Paris, Friedrich Engels writes: "The liberation of the working-class needs . . . doctors, agronomists, experts in chemistry and other specialists, because it is necessary to follow a conducting hand with solid knowledge in order to coordinate not only the political machinery but society as a whole." And Marx writes in *Capital*: "An isolated violinist may conduct himself, an orchestra needs a conductor" (by the way: Marx writes 'Musikdirektor', not 'Dirigent').² Isolation and loneliness as well as the complementary

² Marx and Engels, *MEW* 23, 350.

concepts of coordination and collaboration are central issues for Marx from the very beginning of his intellectual career. Let us get a glimpse of the life of the young Karl Marx. There is his high school graduation essay from 1835 with the remarkable title *A Young Man's Reflections on the Choice of a Career*. This essay expresses, or rather unfolds, quite early on, an idea that will bother Marx for the rest of his life. The talented young Marx who is definitely ambitious and eager for fame – how else could a genius born during the late years of Goethe's life be? – he flirts with the idea of becoming a poet and thinker. Yet he imposes restrictions and certain conditions on this narcissistic dream immediately. These restrictions give an early hint to the centre of his thinking. Marx claims that only the person who is aureate, distinguished, inventive, brilliant, and noble is aware of the “welfare of mankind” in general and “for the good of his fellow men.”

However, the chief guide which must direct us in the choice of a profession is the welfare of mankind and our own perfection. It should not be thought that these two interests could be in conflict, that one would have to destroy the other; on the contrary, man's nature is so constituted that he can attain his own perfection only by working for the perfection, for the good, of his fellow men. / If he works only for himself, he may perhaps become a famous man of learning, a great sage, an excellent poet, but he can never be a perfect, truly great man.³

Young Marx felt appointed to become a poet. He wrote several poems and had them published. His lines sound in parts like those of Schiller, in other parts like the Romantics, as the following sonnet shows:

Einen Götterjüngling seh' ich steigen
Zu der Menschen nied'rem Erdensitz,
In der Hand des Himmels hehren Blitz,
Auf der Stirn gedankenvolles Schweigen.
Um ihn tanzen her in frohen Reigen
Charitinnen, leis im Zephyrtanz,
Wärmen sich an seines Herzens Glanz,

³ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, Volume 1, 8.

Und die Himmel sich zur Erde neigen.
Wo er hinblickt, wo sein Auge weilt,
Einert sich die Form und der Gedanken,
Muß sich Schönheit um das Große ranken,
Naht die Freude und der Schmerz enteilt.
Leben, Sang und Lust, sie werden Tugend,
Und die schnellen Zeiten ew'ge Jugend.⁴



Karl Marx as a student

The Russian aesthetician Mikhail Lifshitz (1905-1983) who was closely connected with Georg Lukács in the 1930s and presented a study on the art philosophy of Marx in 1933 writes in this context: “The conflict between the urge to write poetry and the stern necessity

⁴ Marx and Engels, *MEGA I/1.*, 716 sq. [This poem is not translated into English.]

of finding an answer in the field of science to the problems of life, constituted the first crisis in Marx's intellectual development."⁵

The early Marx wanted undoubtedly to be a "truly great man." He probably shared this impulse with many of his age group. In the 1810s, the era of the Napoleonic wars and the restoration of Europe after the Congress of Vienna, MEW 23, Franz Liszt, William Thackeray, and Robert Bunsen were born (all in 1811) as well as Richard Wagner, and Georg Büchner (both in 1813), Otto von Bismarck, and the later Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens, and Guiseppe Verdi, Charlotte Brontë, Werner von Siemens, Robert Schumann, and Theodor Fontane, Hermann Melville, and Jacques Offenbach, and also Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. It is a cohort of one generation that will alternate idiosyncratically within their theoretical, aesthetical, and political works, between romantic exuberance and a "certain realistic tic" (as Goethe reflects on his own disposition⁶). They all try to understand the tension between individualism and society, between egoism and cooperation, between (romantic or disturbing) loneliness and solidarity.

Not all of them will balance out practical policy and aesthetised illusions of grandeur like Richard Wagner, the true antipode of Karl Marx. These two men shared so much more than their year of death in 1883: They were both enthusiastic and then disappointed 1848-revolutionaries. Both were bothered by utopian ideas. Both were influenced by the materialistic philosophy of Feuerbach in their early years. Both were forced to emigrate from Germany. Both were supported by generous patrons (Friedrich Engels and Otto Wesendonck as well as Ludwig II. respectively) – both were geniuses in pumping money nevertheless.⁷ And both presented an *opus magnum* with *The*

⁵ Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, 13. On Marx's approaches to writing an aesthetics see Stefan Morwaski: The aesthetic views of Marx and Engels; in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28/3/1970; Vazquez, *Las ideas estéticas de Marx*. Koch, *Marxismus und Ästhetik - Zur ästhetischen Theorie von Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels und Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin*. Rose: *Marx' Lost Aesthetic – Karl Marx and the Visual Arts.*; Chris Rasmussen: "Ugly and Monstrous: Marxist Aesthetics". Maynard Soloman (ed.): *Marxism and Art – Essays Classic and Contemporary*.

⁶ Goethe, "Brief an Schiller vom 9. Juli 1796", 230.

⁷ Cf. Kesting, *Das Pump-Genie – Richard Wagner und das Geld*.

Ring of the Nibelungs and *Capital* respectively that share a fascination for economy, including its covered and hidden metaphysical-religious-aesthetical dimension. Siegfried sings “Ich bin so allein / I am so alone” and looks for true friends – he will be disappointed. Expropriated workers in capitalist societies long for solidarity – and will sometimes be successful, sometimes disappointed too.

If we bring to mind the fundamental-economical punch line of Marx’s theoretical concept from today’s perspective, it has merely lost this punch line because – in spite of rumours which suggested otherwise – everyone who claims that men’s social being determines consciousness has become a Marxist in an almost spectral manner – “it’s the economy, stupid.” This quote from Bill Clinton’s successful campaign of 1992 with his entry into the White House soon became demotic. With this anyhow it is part quote, Clinton did probably not think of Marx or of Goethe’s winged word ‘politics is the fate’⁸ of the tradition of key words which allow for a simplification of over complex developments. What such diverse thinkers as Marx and Wagner, Brontë and Büchner, Offenbach and Dickens share is the key intuition that politics is the fate of the Napoleonic era and economy is the fate as of the 19th century when men’s social being determines consciousness. Today, the idea that “everything” has an economic foundation has lost its provocative meaning. It is almost a banal insight. Certainly, politics, science, religion, art, and law are founded on economic terms in times of national debt crises, four Asian tigers, international struggles for natural resources, excesses in the art market, and the hype of third party fundraising at universities. At the same time, I cannot deny the insight of systems theory that all parts of a social system follow their specific functional logics auto-poetically within modern societies. They are oriented according to a specific binary leading code, a code that is exclusively determined by these partial systems. Science is expensive and extremely relevant for economic development. Nevertheless or rather because of that, it has to orientate itself according to the leading difference of true/false. A research result cannot count on being true

⁸ “Die Politik ist das Schicksal.” Goethe uses this phrase in his *Unterredung mit Napoleon*, 577 sqq.

on the basis of its expenses compared to an alternative hypothesis. The same counts for law and the art system. The star lawyer might cost a lot of money for the accused. But no judge will note in his judgment that he set the accused free due to the high costs of the lawyer. And nobody in their right mind will seriously claim that the same artwork from van Gogh was bad one hundred and thirty years ago because it was cheap then, and that it is great now because it is extremely expensive.

In one word: modern societies are based on lonesome subsystems. In the slang of Niklas Luhmann's system-theory: social subsystems are differentiated and auto-poetic. They are obliged to be isolated from other subsystems. Every system (law, economy, science, religion, art, sport etc.) has a specific code, which cannot be identical with and not even truly communicate with the code of another system. The law system for example, works with the distinction lawful / unlawful; it cannot use the code of the art-system (beautiful / ugly resp. formally coherent / incoherent) or the economy-system (to pay, to buy / not to pay or to buy). The legal system cannot argue: the accused young and beautiful woman, who has killed her lover, is not guilty, because she is so rich and beautiful, because she even knows how to play brilliantly a sonata by Beethoven. The so called whole man (*der ganze Mensch*) is not relevant and may not be relevant for modern societies and their isolated and lonely subsystems. Marx couldn't read the works of Talcott Parson and Niklas Luhmann, nevertheless he agrees with their later description of modern western capitalist societies. Both concede that one can buy sex, but not love; that a cheap work of art may be better and more complex than an expensive one.

Marx was aware of the problem of the economically determined non-determinate nature of processes in isolated social sub-systems. He was concerned with this problem precisely in view of aesthetic phenomena. His concern with questions of aesthetics was intense during the 1850s, when important works of the avant-garde arose or rather appeared in a legendary aggregation such as *Madame Bovary*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, or Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.⁹ Marx's notebooks

⁹ On the important year of 1857 see Hörisch: *Gott, Geld und Glück*, Chapter 3: Achtzehnhundertsiebenundfünzig; and Matz, *1857 – Flaubert, Baudelaire, Stifter*.

from 1857/58 contain detailed excerpts¹⁰ from the article on aesthetics of *Meyers Konversations-Lexicon*, for example, or from Friedrich Theodor Vischer's just finished *Aesthetic, or the Science of Beauty* (1844-1857) in six volumes, or from Eduard Müller's *History of the Theory of Art among the Ancient (Geschichte der Theorie der Kunst bei den Alten, 1834-1837)*. The biographical background of this major interest in aesthetic questions is easy to find. The influential American journalist and administrative consultant Charles Anderson Dana (1819-97) asked Marx in a letter of April 6th, 1857, if he could write an article on aesthetics for his upcoming *New American Encyclopedia* that he intended to publish efficiently. Marx gently refused – his article should not exceed one page. He recommended Friedrich Engels instead who in fact, wrote articles for this encyclopaedia. Their topics include military issues (articles on *army*, *artillery* for the first volume, among others).¹¹ Charles Anderson Dana lived in isolation on Brook Farm in Roxbury near Boston which was oriented from early socialist to utopian ideals – and was connected with the rest of the world nevertheless. The romantic writer Nathaniel Hawthorne was also enthusiastic about this farm project for a short time and it influenced even parts of the American commune movement in the late 20th century. This famous farm was founded by George Ripley who was married to Dana's sister, Sophia Willard. Ripley and Dana were part of the so-called group of transcendentalists who included such prominent thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott. They all trusted in the power of a preferably undisguised nature, in solidarity, and individuality, and they criticized institutions and the state. After the economic collapse of the Brook Farm project, Dana travelled to Cologne as the editor of the *New York Daily*

Marx and Engels did not refer extensively to the mentioned writers. Richard Wagner is almost an exception here. Friedrich Engels concedes "talent" in Wagner in his polemic *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (MEW Bd. 20, p. 108). Engels shows a remarkable interest in the family constellations of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* in his treatise on the foundation of the family.

¹⁰ Cf. Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, 95 sq.

¹¹ Engels had already published an article on 'The Armies of Europe' anonymously in 1855 in the journal *Putnam's Monthly* that Dana co-edited.

Tribune. It was the year of the revolution – 1848 - and he met Marx then as an appreciated colleague, the leading head of the *Rheinische Zeitung*. They stayed in contact after MEW bd 20 onwards. Almost ten years after the revolution of 1848, Dana wrote to Marx from New York: “New York April 6./57 / My dear Marx, / I have taken the editorship of Appleton’s New American Cyclopaedia, - in fact I originated the enterprise. I count upon you to furnish the military articles, and some others.” These other articles contain one on aesthetics since the letter A had to come first. Marx apparently suggested himself to write the article in a non-conveyed letter to Dana from April 24, 1857. Dana confirmed quickly:

May 8./1857 / My dear Marx, / The page of the Cyclopaedia contains about 1050 words, which I think is about the same as that of Brockhaus [...]. I also add to your list *Aesthetics*. This needs to be treated fundamentally from the Hegelian idea, but not in too abstract a manner for English and American readers. A word should be said in it with reference to Burke and other English writers on the subject, not forgetting the Frenchmen of course.¹²

Yet any attempt to find this article on “aesthetics” by Marx in Dana’s encyclopedia or in Marx’s complete works is in vain. There is only Dana’s letter to Marx from the summer of 1857: “New York August 1./1857 / My dear Marx, / It is now a month since the day set for the arrival of your mss (manuscripts, J.H.) for the Cyclopaedia, and not a word of it has come. We are printing the volume.”¹³ Such pragmatism characterizes US capitalism even though a left, liberal head like Dana promoted a project such as the *American Cyclopaedia*. The article on

¹² Marx and Engels, *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)*, 3. Abt., vol. 8, 397.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 447. See the commentary of the MEGA-editors: “Den Artikel ‘Aesthetics’ zu schreiben hat Marx Dana vermutlich in seinem nicht überlieferten Brief vom 24. April 1857 vorgeschlagen Es kann angenommen werden, daß Marx unmittelbar danach mit der Materialsammlung zu diesem Artikel begann. Exzerpte dazu, die von ihm wahrscheinlich April/Mai 1857 angefertigt wurden, sind aus folgenden Werken überliefert: Friedrich Theodor Vischer: *Aesthetik...*, Eduard Müller: *Geschichte der Theorie der Kunst bei den Alten ...*” (p. 674). There is no translation of this passage in *Marx and Engel’s Complete Works (MECW)*.

aesthetics in Dana's encyclopaedia is not from Marx. We have to resign from the pleasure to read an article on aesthetics from Marx next to the entries from Friedrich Engels on Military issues in a US encyclopaedia of the 19th century.

Marx over-compensated his handicap of not having submitted a complete aesthetics in a way by referring remarkably often to works of art (primarily from literature) in his political-economic analyses. Hardly any other philosopher of the nineteenth century (with the sole exception of Nietzsche!), neither Kierkegaard nor Schopenhauer, referred to world literature so decidedly in order to make his arguments plausible, suggestive, and powerful. It is very clear that Marx greatly respects the canonical works of literature. He cannot be beaten by any cultural conservative citizen in his admiration for poets like Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Goethe (quite similar to Sahra Wagenknecht today, the aesthetic figurehead of the German left party "Die Linke" in every way.)¹⁴ The difference is that Marx reads the works of these poets entirely other than the cultural conservative citizens, the *Bildungsbürgertum*. He reads them as contributions to a literary inspired criticism of capitalist money economy which contrast sharply the basic assumptions of classical economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

In March 1865, Marx wrote in the friendship book of his daughter Jenny Longuet and responded quite originally to the question of his favourite poets: "Dante, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Göthe." Marx's admiration for Goethe in particular is a red thread throughout his works. Marx clearly contrasts with the opinion of Friedrich Engels who was influenced by the young German opposition to Goethe and who published a series of essays on *German Socialism in Verse and Prose* in the *Deutsch-Brüsseler Zeitung* in 1847. Here, Engels first dismembers Karl Isidor Beck's *Songs of a Poor Man (Lieder vom armen Mann)* from 1846 and secondly Karl Grün's book *On Goethe from a Human Viewpoint (Ueber Göthe vom menschlichen Standpunkte)* also from 1846. This is quite remarkable because both Karl Beck and Karl Grün, share Marx's absolutely clear leftist, Young German positions – in addition to his first name. Yet Engels reads Beck's truly

¹⁴ Sahra Wagenknecht, "Lest mehr Goethe".

unintentionally humorous collection of poems *Lieder vom armen Mann* as a manifesto for being “entangled in pretty-bourgeois illusions”¹⁵ and as an expression of “that kind of blathering about the Jews which is typical of liberal Young Germans.”¹⁶ Beck, who is almost forgotten today but at least invented the phrase of the “beautiful blue Danube,” receives annihilating criticism: He addresses “petty tirades against the evil of an immortality of money.”¹⁷ Karl Grün’s essay on Goethe does not receive any better criticism. Engels mocks Grün’s attempt to “have turned Goethe into a disciple of Feuerbach and a true socialist.”¹⁸ In Engel’s opinion, rife with the polemical rhetoric of Young Germany, Goethe is occasionally “a true philistine.”¹⁹ “Goethe is thus at one moment a towering figure, at the next petty; at one moment an obstinate, mocking genius full of contempt for the world, at the next a circumspect, unexact, narrow philistine.”²⁰ A formulation at the end of his essays demonstrates how ambivalent Engel’s image of Goethe is in fact. “He either skims hurriedly over all works in which Goethe was really great and a genius, such as *Römische Elegien* of Goethe the ‘libertine,’ or he inundates them with a great torrent of trivialities, which only proves that he can make nothing of them.”²¹ Marx’s reading of Goethe and Shakespeare is, on the other hand, completely different. It is not ambivalent but decidedly cooperative, which is supposed to mean that Marx reads the works of Shakespeare and Goethe (*Merchant of Venice*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Faust* primarily) similar to the ‘poets and thinkers’ scheme. For Marx, they are aesthetic key contributions to a factual analysis of most complex political-economical structures. In a fascinating analogy to Sigmund Freud who will also develop his theories from the interpretation of world literature a few decades later (from Sophocles’ drama *Oedipus*, the myth of Narcissus, the novel *Venus in Furs*, the novella *Gradiva* et al.), Marx understands and uses

¹⁵ Marx and Engels *MECW*, Volume 6, 237.

¹⁶ Marx and Engels *MECW*, Volume 6, 242.

¹⁷ Marx and Engels *MECW*, Volume 6, 243.

¹⁸ Marx and Engels *MECW*, Volume 6, 258.

¹⁹ Marx and Engels, *MECW*, Volume 6, 267.

²⁰ Marx and Engels, *MECW*, Volume 6, 259.

²¹ Marx and Engels, *MECW*, Volume 6, 273.

classical literature dauntlessly and pragmatically as a genuine medium of his theory-building process. To comprehend artworks and especially literature as a medium of alternative knowledge²² is an attitude Marx presents quite early on and insistently in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Here, young Marx analyses the enigmatic power of money with Goethe:

By possessing the *property* of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, *money* is thus the *object* of eminent possession. The universality of its *property* is the omnipotence of its being. It is therefore regarded as omnipotent... Money is the *procurer* between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But *that which* mediates *my* life for me, also *mediates* the existence of other people for me. For me it is the *other* person.

What, man! confound it, hands and feet
And head and backside, all are yours!
And what we take while life is sweet,
Is that to be declared not ours?
Six stallions, say, I can afford,
Is not their strength my property?
I tear along, a sporting lord,
As if their legs belonged to me.
Goethe, Faust, Mephistopheles.²³

In this dense, all too dense text that is tied to world poetry, Marx conceives money with Goethe as the enigmatic “*object*” which is more than all other objects and has therefore to be understood as “the *object* of eminent possession.” The object money is eminent because money as a universal medium matches everything with everything. It isolates me (because it is the money I have, that is the money the other doesn't have) – and it overcomes my isolation as well: it doesn't make any sense to make a deal with myself (which is obviously Donald Trump's

²² See Hörisch, *Das Wissen der Literatur*.

²³ Marx and Engels, *MECW*, Volume 3, 323.

phantasm). Insofar as money is not only a medium but a message as well. And the message of the medium money is, according to Marx: Money might be a profane thing, yet it can integrate all the extremes in a pseudo-sacral manner and keep them below the level of conflict-ridden antagonisms. In Marx's words: "Just as every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished in money, so money, on its side, like the radical leveller that it is, does away with all distinctions."

But money itself is a commodity, an external object, capable of becoming the private property of any individual. Thus social power becomes the private power of private persons. The ancients therefore denounced money as subversive of the economic and moral order of things. Modern society, which soon after its birth, pulled Plutus by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of the very principle of its own life.²⁴

It is fascinating that Marx compares money with the Holy Grail. The Holy Host may look like a coin – but bread and wine are goods shared by everyone who participates in the holy Eucharist communion. There is no scarcity-problem with holy bread – but with money. There is no loneliness-problem in the Eucharist-community, which organizes inclusion via inclusion – but in the money-community, which organizes inclusion via exclusion.

This is a remarkable inflection: Money is a "radical leveller." On the thing level, money arranges for equivalences between the most diverse things, on the level of inter-subjectivity, money – that pays for the commodity of manpower just as for precious goods – arranges for the being of other human beings to turn into a being of the other for me, and even in a transcendental sense, money turns its owner into an all-powerful, thus God-even dimension. To expand this argument Marx quotes an excerpt from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* right subsequent to Goethe's quote:

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No Gods,
I am no idle votarist! ...

²⁴ Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, 85.

Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant
... Why, this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
Pluck stout men's pillow from below their heads:
This yellow slave
Will knit and brake religions, bless the accursed [...]²⁵

And Marx comments:

Shakespeare excellently depicts the real medium money. To understand him, let us begin, first of all, by expounding the passage from Goethe. / That which is for me through the medium of money – that for which I can pay (i.e., which money can buy) – that am I myself, the possessor of the money. The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power.²⁶

While using the medium of literature to analyse economy, Marx discovers elementary poetic-aesthetical structures in the circulation of money itself. First of all, money functions as a metonymy. It does so because it defers the attributes of property to the owner. Money lends its specific potency to the person who owns it. (In Marx's words: "*The properties of money are my, the possessor's, properties and essential powers.*"²⁷) Second, this functions like an inverted *prosopopoeia* (*personificatio*). The classical rhetorical figure *προσωποποιία* (literally to make a person resp. a face; from Greek *prosopon* / face, person; and *poiein*/to make) cares for the fact that abstract principles, things, and issues articulate themselves like persons – if, for example, nature, beauty or faithfulness act as speaking figures. Marx understands money as an inverted *prosopopoeia* – this abstract medium money does not require any personification. It is rather effectively always already an acting super-subject that lends its power back to its empirical owner. This points thirdly to the fact that the medium money is qualified for a chiasmic power.

²⁵ Marx and Engels, *MECW*, Volume 3, 323.

²⁶ Marx and Engels, *MECW*, Volume 3, 324.

²⁷ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 130.

Thus, what I am and am capable of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. I, according to my individual characteristics, am lame, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessors. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. I am brainless, but money is the real brain of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless? Besides, he can buy clever people for himself, and is he who has power over the clever not more clever than the clever? Do not I, who thanks to money am capable of all that the human heart longs for, possess all human capacities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?²⁸

Marx begins his exegesis of classical literature with a big compliment that is also aimed at Goethe. “Shakespeare excellently depicts the real nature of money.”²⁹ The insights of world literature into the power of money are excellent because they comprehend money as a dialectical thus sensitive medium for antagonisms – first of all the antagonism of isolation and community. Money does not only tolerate antagonisms but it is virtually attracted magically to them. Money allows for foregathering what actually does not belong together. It has meta-morphological powers. It makes the ugly person attractive for nice persons, the weak strong, the lame fast, the unsocial, the lonely, the isolated social (Dagobert Duck is a wonderful example). It can do this due to its crypto-aesthetical qualities, namely its metonymical, personifying, and chiasmic qualities. Like Shakespeare and Goethe, Marx is obviously fascinated by the medium money and its particular coupling of rationality and irrationality, profane and magic qualities.

If money is the bound binding me to human life, binding society to me, connecting me with nature and man, is not money the bound of all bounds? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties? Is it not, therefore, also the universal agent of

²⁸ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 324.

²⁹ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 324.

separation? It is the coin that really separates as well as the real binding agent – the [...] chemical power of society. / Shakespeare stresses especially two properties of money:/ (1) It is the visible divinity – the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal confounding and distorting of things: impossibilities are soldered together by it. / (2) It is the common whore, the common procurer of people and nations. / The distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternisation of impossibilities – the divine power of money – lies in its character as men’s estranged, alienating and self-disposing species-nature. Money is the alienated ability of mankind (das entäußerte Vermögen der Menschheit).³⁰

Marx’s definition of money as “the alienated ability of mankind” is remarkable. Money shares its function in this definition with the ability of labour and art. Over and over, from his early to his late work, Marx characterizes labour as an elementary medium of self-alienation. To give you some examples: “External labour, labour in which men alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.”³¹ Alienated labour is the condition of the possibility of the alienated medium money that turns into capital:

True, it is as a result of movement of private property that we have obtained the concept of alienated labour (of alienated life) in political economy. But analysis of this concept shows that though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence, just as the gods are originally not the cause but the effect of man’s intellectual confusion. Later, this relationship becomes reciprocal.³²

Here again, we find a chiasmic figure of argumentation. What seems to be the basis, capital, that pays for labour as a manpower commodity

³⁰ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 324-325.

³¹ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 274.

³² Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 279-280.

is “rather its consequence.” There would be no capital without the alienation of labour.

The interdependency between that which labour and money are capable of is thus not symmetrical but radically asymmetrical: Money, which is nothing but the result of alienated labour, may as capital decrease manpower to a commodity among other commodities. Marx’s corresponding remarks on this topic anticipate the central arguments of Max Weber on the genesis of capitalism from the accumulation-driven spirit of asceticism:

Political economy, this science of wealth, is therefore simultaneously the science of renunciation, of want, of saving and it actually reaches the point where it spares man the need of either fresh air or physical exercise. This science of marvellous industry is simultaneously the science of asceticism, and its true ideal is the ascetic but extortionate miser and the ascetic but productive slave. Its moral ideal is the worker who takes part of his wages to the savings-bank, and it has even found ready-made a servile art which embodies this pet idea: it has been presented and bathed in sentimentality, on the stage. Thus, political economy – despite its worldly and voluptuous appearance – is a true moral science, the most moral of all the sciences. Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is its principal thesis. The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour – your capital. The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being. Everything ||XVI| which the political economist takes from you in life and in humanity, he replaces for you in money and in wealth; and all the things which you cannot do, your money can do. It can eat and drink, go to the dance hall and the theatre; it can travel, it can appropriate art, learning, the treasures of the past, political power – all this it can appropriate for you – it can buy all this: it is true endowment (das wahre Vermögen).³³

³³ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 309.

“Endowment” is a favourite term of Marx, like “alienation”. It is remarkable that the quite manifest double sense of the German word ‘Vermögen’ was hardly ever a concern among philosophers. So far, we heard different translations of the single word ‘Vermögen’ in English: It encompasses “endowment”, “capacity”, and “ability”. Especially the Kantian tradition of transcendental philosophy cannot do without words that end on ‘-vermögen’ in the sense of “faculty”: “Erkenntnisvermögen, Urteilsvermögen, Denkvermögen, Vorstellungsvermögen, Wahrnehmungs-vermögen, Unterscheidungsvermögen, Erinnerungsvermögen, Einfühlungsvermögen,” and so forth. One of the unproductive paradoxes of the younger history of philosophy is that philosophy has lost blatantly its sense for language since its linguistic turn. Linguistic analytic philosophers tend to refuse to think language sensitively with the ear. They don’t care that the term ‘Vermögen’ has an economical primary meaning that it lends derivatively to other faculties (of recognition, judgement e. a.). Not to talk about other linguistic valencies: Why do thinkers who are called Fichte or Dieter/Dietrich Henrich who carry the first person singular “ich”/“I” in their names, think so much about the faculty of the Ego?. Nietzsche is a remarkable exception (his name carries the letter of ‘ich’ as well, yet not in compact form but rather in an eccentric manner.) Thanks to Nietzsche we have an impressive criticism of all idealistic philosophy of faculty.

“How are synthetic judgments *a priori possible*?” Kant asks himself – and what is really his answer? “By means of means (faculty)” – but unfortunately not in five words, but so circumstantially, imposingly, and with such display of German profundity and verbal flourishes, that one altogether loses sight of the comical *niaiserie allemande* involved in such an answer. People were beside themselves with delight over this new faculty, and the jubilation reached its climax when Kant further discovered a moral faculty in man – for at that time Germans were still moral, not yet dabbling in the “Politics of hard fact.” Then came the honeymoon of German philosophy. All the young theologians of the Tübingen institution went immediately into the groves – all seeking for “faculties.”³⁴

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil*, 16-17.

Marx, like Nietzsche, did not develop and elaborate an alternative recognition theory compared to the Kantian tradition, neither an aesthetic nor a theory of the faculty of aesthetic judgment accordingly. Anyhow, he points to the fact that three faculties,³⁵ which generally conflict one another, share an idiosyncratic structural correspondence. Money, labour, and art can likewise be understood as “the alienated ability” – shall we replace “faculty”? or “endowment”? – “of mankind.” These three powers have an aesthetic rendezvous in Marx’s theory. They have dramatically many and spectacular things to say to each other. All three powers (money, labour, art) are even closely related and conflicting just because of their relation. They are, to put it with Erving Goffman, “socially crazy places.”³⁶ What labour, money, and art share is that they transform that which exists into a second version. Labour is the basic operation for Marx, and not only for Marx, that transforms what exists (“Vorfindliches”). It is creative and creatural at the same time. Labour is – different from money and art – that which the human species shares with other animate beings: bees, ants, birds, and beavers have to work as well in order to reproduce their life. Labour produces surplus. Marx’s basic thesis that labour produces things that would otherwise not exist such as houses, clothes, infrastructure et al is not very original and hardly contestable in itself. It becomes focused only when manpower is contrasted with the power of money. And this is precisely what the final passage of the second *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 does. It is written densely like a telegram:

The character of private property is expressed by labour, capital, and the relations between these two. The movement through which these constituents have to pass is:

First. Unmediated or mediated unity of the two.

Capital and labour are at first still united. Then, though separated and estranged, they reciprocally develop and promote each other as positive conditions.

³⁵ ‘Power,’ in German ‘Kraft,’ is today a word that we don’t use as much in the German context. Yet it has a powerful tradition in theory. See Menke: *Kraft – Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie*.

³⁶ Goffman, *Asylums – Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, 130.

[Second.] The two in opposition, mutually excluding each other. The worker knows the capitalist as his own non-existence, and vice versa: each tries to rob the other of his existence.

[Third.] Opposition of each to itself. Capital = stored-up labour = labour. As such it splits into capital itself and its interest, and this latter again into interest and profit. The capitalist is completely sacrificed. He falls into the working class, whilst the worker (but only exceptionally) becomes a capitalist. Labour as a moment of capital – its costs. Thus the wages of labour - a sacrifice of capital.

Splitting of labour into labour itself and the wages of labour. The worker himself a capital, a commodity.

Clash of mutual contradictions.³⁷

The figure of argumentation in the tradition of Hegel is clear: Labour and capital form a hostile, alternating antagonism. They build an identity of identity and difference.³⁸ Without the creation of surplus values through labour the stockpiling of capital would not exist. The endowment of capital thus owes itself to its other, the manpower. Money and capital, however, are artificial products, inventions, fictions. When the world was created, money did not play any role. To imagine God as a dependent investor, craving for a credit from banks, is the theological sacrilege per se. Money is not envisioned in the divine idea of creation. Nevertheless, the founded, reliant thing takes effect on its source and founder. Marx follows a Hegelian figure of argumentation in *Science of Logic* here as well. Capital is nothing but a “consequence” of labour, yet it turns labour into the commodity of manpower that can be purchased like any other commodity (“Labour as a moment of capital – its costs.”) This is an inverted world that functions in spite of, or just because of this inversion.

The inverted world is an aesthetic *topos*³⁹ that Marx uses offensively. The most famous quote in this regard is the following passage from his *German Ideology*:

³⁷ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 289.

³⁸ Cf. on the following Hörisch, *Tauschen, sprechen, begehren – Eine Kritik der unreinen Vernunft*.

³⁹ Cf., for example, Tristan, *Le monde à l'envers*. Marx as an analyst who describes the spectres of capital together with Shakespeare, is in focus of the study of Jacques Derrida: *Marx' Gespenster – Der verschuldete Staat, die Traumarbeit und die neue Internationale*.

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology, men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.⁴⁰

If Marx finds out that the ideological basic structures of the inverted world are, in fact, an ideology, then this logic of a false illusion and of false images, this inverted world, has to be turned upside down. This is the popular quote of Friedrich Engel's essay *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Money is, according to Marx, the embodiment, the incarnation of the inverted world. Why? Money alienates labour, however, it appears inverted like in a *camera obscura*. As such it turns into a basis of labour and wealth.

The distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternisation of impossibilities (*Verbrüderung der Unmöglichkeiten*) – the divine power of money – lies in its character as men's estranged, alienating and self-disposing species-nature. Money is the alienated ability of mankind.⁴¹

But it is also a medium of fraternisation. Thanks to alienation and isolation we are able to develop deep feelings of intimacy. We can afford the luxury of romantic love, we can overcome loneliness and isolation. Romantic love as an antidote to alienation and as such a modern, a capitalistic phenomenon – such as independent art and literature.

⁴⁰ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 5, 36.

⁴¹ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 3, 325.

It is important to realize the punch line of this argumentation in order to be able to find a distance from powerfully wrong forms of Marx's reception. The excessively used quote from Marx that being determines consciousness remains often on purpose in this specifically short version. It suppresses the key adjective and thus turns Marx into a naive-realistic theoretician of recognition and his theory gets devalued. After all, it is not the naturalistic, ontological or creaturely being of men, but the social being that determines their consciousness. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."⁴² This means nothing else but this: Money is the wrong medium of the alienation of human abilities because it turns the actual conditions upside down (capital, in fact, means head). It is not a coincidence if Marx grounds this argument in literature. He writes, for example, in his *German Ideology*: "How little connection there is between money, the most general form of property, and personal peculiarity, how much they are directly opposed to each other was already known to Shakespeare better than to our theorizing petty bourgeois."⁴³

These and many other passages, in which Marx activates literature and poetry against obscure respectively camera-obscure theories and hypotheses, demonstrate how fascinated Marx is by aesthetics as a third alienation of human endowment after labour and money. Art and literature fascinate and irritate Marx because they are alienations of human abilities / endowments that do precisely not refer to fundamental economic structures and data in a functional or causal manner. To put it with Marx: "As regards art, it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor, do they therefore, to the material substructure, the skeleton as it were of its organisation. For example the Greeks compared with modern [nations], or else Shakespeare."⁴⁴ Marx clearly envisions the "double character of art" that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* formulates later. To Marx, art is autonomous (in the sense of not applicable algorithmically to social

⁴² Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 29, 262.

⁴³ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 5, 230.

⁴⁴ Marx and Engels, *MECW* Volume 29, 520.

structures) and fait social.⁴⁵ In his *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes in this manner:

Regarded from another aspect: is Achilles possible when powder and shot have been invented? And is the Iliad possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press, bar the singing and the telling and the muse cease, that is the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear? The difficulty that we face here is not, however, that of understanding how Greek art and epic poetry are associated with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still give us aesthetic pleasure and are in certain respects regarded as a standard and unattainable ideal.⁴⁶

Again, the revolutionary Marx presents here his remarkable trust in canonical works and his traditional orientation in aesthetic concerns.

Marx does not unfold systematically why he extracts art and literature from social determinism. Yet he did more than suggest that the aesthetic alienations of humans cannot be understood like money as “radical levellers.” On the contrary, they are radical differentiators. Art is crazy in a specific sense. It is like money, but also different from it. It is a specific form of labour that creates second versions of the world, those that don’t enclose contradictions but discharge them. This counts especially for the antagonism between capital and labour. In the inverted world in which relations are turned upside down as in a *camera obscura*, art provides for a reversal of the reversal, an inversion of the inversion, in the view of a learned Hegelian, of someone who knows how double negations function. In one word, art provides for a “socially crazy place” (certainly not transcendental!) that renders a properly eccentric observation of the inverted world of capital possible. Art hosts the rendezvous of labour and capital. It participates in the artificial character of money just as in the creaturely dimensions of labour. This is the reason why the works of Shakespeare and Goethe offer more insights than those of the economists. And this

⁴⁵ Cf. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 334 sqq.

⁴⁶ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 216-217.

is the reason why Marx can't help but imagine life in communism as a life in which all humans are artists and critical critics – and experts in the art of living anyway.

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