

Cannibals and animals of *Capital*: On dehumanisation and the capitalist grotesque

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‘For these inclosures be the causes why rich men eat vp poore men, as beafts doo eat graffe : These, I say, are the Caterpillers and deuouring locustes that massacre the poore.’
(Philip Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England*, 1583)

I.

There are many Gothic creatures roaming the pages of *Capital*. From the ghostly objectivity (*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*) of value to the famously ‘vampire-like’ (*vampyrmäßige*) automatic subject of capital and its ‘voracious werewolf-like hunger’ (*Werwolfheißhunger*) for surplus labour.¹ Less well-known than these examples, we also have a single lonely cannibal wandering the final hundred pages of volume one:

Thus we may say that surplus-value rests on a natural basis, but only in the very general sense that there is no natural obstacle absolutely preventing one man from lifting from himself the burden of the labour necessary to maintain his own existence, and imposing it on another, just as there is no unconquerable natural obstacle to the consumption of the flesh of one man by another.²

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 128; 342; 353.

² Marx, *Capital*, 647. On a philological note, the comparison with cannibalism does not appear in the first German edition of 1867 (*MEGA* II/5, 413), nor in the second from 1872 (*MEGA* II/6, 481). It seemingly first appears in the French edition of 1872-75: ‘La nature n’empêche pas que la chair des uns serve d’aliment aux

The cannibal might not be the figure that springs first to mind for most people when thinking about the monsters of the Gothic, but H. L. Malchow argues that it is in fact the quintessential Gothic creature, and the cannibal is thus intimately related to Marx's other more famous Gothic metaphors.³ The same insatiable hunger that we find in Marx's use of the vampire and the werewolf as Gothic metaphors we find repeated in the cannibal, and what they have in common, what makes them all relevant as metaphors for the capital relation, is thus their emphasis on *devouring*. The vampire and the cannibal complement each other, as the vampire sucks the blood (or vitality) of its victims, while the cannibal devours their bodies.⁴ Similarly, capital – acting as both vampire and cannibal in one – consumes both the life-activity of the worker (i.e., their labour power) and their physical bodies, which are destroyed in the work process.

This destruction of workers' bodies is also at the core of David McNally's analysis of Marx's Gothic metaphors. In *Monsters of the Market* (2012), McNally argues that in *Capital* Marx employs the literary codes of his times express the horrors of industrial capitalism.⁵ One key aspect of this was precisely Marx's use of 'Gothic' language, which highlights the nature of what McNally calls 'the capitalist grotesque'. The capitalist grotesque consists in the specific way in which monstrosity is 'normalised and naturalised' under capitalism through the colonisation of our corporeal being by capital,⁶ and Marx's 'metaphorically charged' descriptions of capital's inflection on the bodies of proletarians are therefore not just literary expressions of an underlying theory but are rather elements of theory in their own right.⁷

To McNally, however, metaphors also serve to structure social reality. He understands the so-called 'real abstractions' of capitalism to be 'literally metaphorical', meaning that capitalism 'is a social order in which some things regularly stand in for, substitute themselves for, other things'.⁸ Commodity fetishism, for example, is an instance of this: The ontological

autres ; de même elle n'a pas mis d'obstacle insurmontable à ce qu'un homme puisse arriver à travailler pour plus d'un homme, ni à ce qu'un autre réussisse à se décharger sur lui du fardeau du travail' (*MEGA* II/7, 442). This is then incorporated into the third German edition (1883), though the ordering of the comparison's elements has been changed: 'So kann von einer Naturbasis des Mehrwerths gesprochen werden, aber nur in dem ganz allgemeinen Sinn, daß kein absolutes Naturhinderniß den einen abhält, die zu seiner eignen Existenz nöthige Arbeit von sich selbst ab- und einem andern aufzuwälzen, z. B. ebensowenig wie absolute Naturhindernisse die einen abhalten, das Fleisch der andern als Nahrung zu verwenden' (*MEGA* II/8, 486).

³ H. L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 45.

⁴ Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 124.

⁵ David McNally, *Monsters of the Market. Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012), 115.

⁶ McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 2.

⁷ McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 115.

⁸ McNally, *Monsters of the Market*, 120.

primacy of social relations and relations between things seem to be reversed, as the commodity ‘stands in for’ the social relations. My suggestion is that we should likewise understand the relationship between cannibalism and exploitation in reverse: it is not that cannibalism stands in for exploitation – *it is exploitation which stands in for cannibalism*.

In the capitalist grotesque, the class-relations are such that people literally devour each other, though it appears to us only in a fetishised form as the economic phenomenon of surplus-value extraction through exploitation. What is really the corporeal phenomenon of the capitalist grotesque, i.e., proletarian bodies being maimed, distorted, corrupted, and ultimately destroyed to ‘feed’ capital, appears as ‘only’ as an economic one – the capital relation. The capitalist grotesque colonises our bodies and subsumes our corporeal existence under the ghostly objectivity of the value-form. Capital is both vampire and cannibal: It not only devours our life-force, i.e., our labour-power, but also physically devours our bodies. Yet this relationship is masked by its fetishised appearance as the purely economic phenomenon of the capital relation, mystified by the wage-form.

In itself, this is a potent reading of the Gothic metaphor of the cannibal. However, what I will now argue is that this kind of language is not new in *Capital*, but that it rather originates with the so-called ‘philosophical Communism’ of the 1840s where it is intimately intertwined with a theory of *ontological dehumanisation*.

II.

In the first half of the 1840’s, Marx underwent a turbulent theoretical development, and in 1842 he began to come under the influence of the Moses Hess, who, in turn, was himself influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach. Hess was especially influenced by the concept of ‘species-being’, which for Feuerbach expresses the unification of the particular and the universal, but also the specific way Feuerbach made use of the concept of alienation. Hess’s particular innovation was, that he transferred these concepts to the social realm, re-interpreting Feuerbach’s abstract notion of ‘universality’ as social ‘collaboration’, as he does for example in “The Essence of Money” (*Über das Geldwesen*, 1845).⁹ This in turn allowed him to claim that in the individualistic ‘huckstering world’ (*Krämerwelt*) of industrial capitalism is an alienation of the humans from

⁹ Moses Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, in *Philosophische und Sozialistische Schriften 1837-1850. Eine Auswahl*, ed. Wolfgang Mönke (Vaduz: Topos Verlag, 1980), 331. Translations are my own but based on the uncredited English translation available at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/hess/1845/essence-money.htm>>.

their species-being, i.e., a severance of the particular individual from their universal (social) essence.

The universal essence of humans is not eternal but develops over time with the development of the productive force (*Productionskraft*). As such, the modern development of these productive forces should have made it possible to transgress the animalistic particularity of humanity's past, but instead it has been exacerbated, because the universal human essence has been externalised and alienated as money. The result of this, Hess claims, is a loss of their humanity; the breaking of communal bonds results in a relapse into a Hobbesian state of war of all against all where 'the animal becomes the truth of man', and where the social exchange (*Verkehr*) is perverted by individualism and greed and instead becomes exploitation.¹⁰

To express this, Hess turns to violent and Gothic imagery. Money is 'congealed blood and sweat'; capital is a 'caput mortuum', i.e., a severed head; we are all 'predators' and 'blood suckers', and finally, 'We are *all (...) cannibals*'.¹¹ We are, Hess says, forced to sell our 'life-activity', i.e., our labour power, and thereby we cannibalise ourselves. But we have no choice; we must 'howl with the wolves.'¹² This *animal* metaphor is not coincidental either: Hess continuously applies animal imagery together with his Gothic metaphors and visions of the capitalist grotesque. To Feuerbach, the universality of species-being is precisely what distinguishes humans from animals, and so when this is alienated and lost under capitalism, Hess concludes that we regress to an animal state. Under capitalism, we are not 'species-humans' but 'animal-humans' (*Tiermensch*), he says, and we are reduced to 'beast of prey' (*Raubtiere*).¹³ The language of capitalist grotesque thus makes way for a deeper, ontological point. Under capitalism, we are not simply forced to behave in self-destructive ways, we cease to be humans altogether. It not only makes cannibals of us, but animals.

What Hess sets out to prove theoretically, Friedrich Engels seeks to demonstrate empirically in *The Condition of the Working Classes in England*. Here, Engels depicts the industrial slums of Northern England as a site of such an ontological loss of humanity. He describes the moral degeneracy of the workers, employing both Gothic metaphors (especially that of the vampire) and – especially – animal imagery. However, he stresses that the debauchery of the working classes is the effect and not the cause of their pauperism: 'When people are placed under conditions which appeal to the animals only, what remains to them but

¹⁰ Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution. From Kant to Marx* (London: Verso, 2018), 147.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 346, 333.

to rebel or to succumb to utter bestiality?’¹⁴ Of course workers remain humans biologically speaking, but in their lived experiences of the capitalist grotesque – which Engels depicts in vivid detail – he continues to invoke their animalistic behaviour, ultimately stating that ‘There is, therefore, no cause for surprise if those workers who are treated like animals actually become animals (...) They are only human so long as they feel the wrath against the reigning class; they become animals [*sie werden Tiere*] the moment they bend in patience under the yoke’.¹⁵ To Engels, there is no question about what the capitalist grotesque does to people: It takes away their humanity and turns them into animals.

These themes of dehumanising grotesqueness are thus pervasive in the ‘philosophical Communism’ that Marx begins to subscribe to around 1842, and he also takes up this language in his manuscripts of 1843-44. Like Hess, Marx identifies life in industrial society as an alienated and dehumanised state. Since humans are a part of nature, they must ‘maintain a continuing dialogue [*beständigem Prozeß*] with it’, but this is disrupted by capitalist production, and their ‘advantage over animals’ is transformed into ‘the disadvantage that their organic body, nature, is taken from them’.¹⁶ The result of this, Marx says, is the utter deprivation of the worker who is reduced to ‘an abstract being, a lathe, etc., and [alienated labour] transforms him into a spiritual and physical monster [*Mißgeburt*]’.¹⁷ While Marx is not as explicit to employ the language of the capitalist grotesque (though it does crop up here and there in the 1844 Paris manuscripts and especially in the 1844 article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’), Marx is no less conclusive about the ontological reduction of the workers to an animal state.

Departing from Hess who sees alienation as an overarching feature of capitalist society, Marx emphasises the role of *activity*. Humans only prove themselves to be species-beings in their ‘fashioning of the objective’, i.e., through labour, Marx says.¹⁸ Echoing Feuerbach, Marx describes this species-activity as *conscious* activity, whereas animal activity is immediate and unreflected. What makes alienated labour alienating is precisely that it is more like animal activity than human species-activity – it is unconscious, repetitive, unreflected, etc.¹⁹ By labouring in this alien way, workers are alienated from their own humanity. The result is clear, as Marx says:

¹⁴ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 4 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 423-424. Translation modified.

¹⁵ Engels, *The Condition*, 411. Translation modified.

¹⁶ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 328-9.

¹⁷ Marx, *Excerpts from James Mill*, 269. Translation mended.

¹⁸ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 328, 329.

¹⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 328.

The result is that the human being (the worker) feels that they are acting freely *only in their animal function* – eating, drinking and procreating, or at most in their dwelling and adornment – while in their human functions, *they are nothing more than an animal*. What is animal has become human and *what is human has become animal*.²⁰

III.

Coming back to *Capital*, how can this language of dehumanisation and the capitalist grotesque employed by Hess, Engels, and Marx in the 1840s inform our understanding of the Gothic metaphor of the cannibal?

More than Gothic metaphors, *Capital* is filled with descriptions of the wretchedness of the workers and the colonisation of their bodies very reminiscent of Engels's depictions 20 years earlier. And like Engels and Hess, Marx also employs the same kind of animal imagery in connection with these depictions of the capitalist grotesque. He likens children to silk-worms and describes how capitalists are 'spinning silk for 10 hours a day out of the blood of little children', and he continues to then liken them to horned cattle.²¹ English workers are 'hard-driven animals', he says, and he quotes one Dr Simon as saying that the overcrowding of workers' living quarters involves 'such unclean confusion of bodies and bodily functions, such exposure of animal and sexual nakedness, as is rather bestial than human'.²² In Chapter 14, he says that manufacture 'cripples the worker and turns him into a monstrosity [*Abnormität*]', thus echoing himself from 1844, and adds that exploiting workers just for their labour-power resembles butchering 'a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow'.²³ Finally, the farm-labourer is described by Marx as an animal outright: 'of all the animals kept by the farmer, the labourer (...) was thenceforth the most oppressed, the worst nourished, the most brutally treated'.²⁴ As is clear from these quotes, not only is every instance of animal imagery followed by visions of blood, violence, and slaughter, they also all depict the capital relation, just as the cannibal metaphor does.

If we take this continued conjoining of depictions of the capitalist grotesque with animal imagery to imply that Marx remains committed to some version of a theory of ontological

²⁰ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 327. My emphases, translation modified. The final sentence is missing in the Penguin edition cited but is included in both the English *MECW* and German *MEW* editions (cf. *MECW* 3, 275; *MEW Ergänzungsband I*, 515).

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, 406.

²² Marx, *Capital*, 386; 812-13.

²³ Marx, *Capital*, 481.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 830.

dehumanisation, it begs the question whether this theory also continues to rely on Feuerbachian ideas about species-being and alienation as it did in the 1840's. I argue that his is *not* the case.

Recently, Søren Mau has argued that while Marx abandons the anthropological essentialism of Feuerbach, he nonetheless *retains a concept of human nature* – though a plastic and malleable one. As mentioned before, Feuerbach takes consciousness to be the thing that distinguishes humans from animals, and Marx adopts this approach in the 1844 manuscripts when he identifies alienated labour as unconscious, animal activity. Søren rightly emphasises the famous passage from the 1845-46 Brussels manuscripts in which Marx and Engels say that humans distinguish themselves from animals ‘as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their corporeal organisation’,²⁵ and he takes this passage to mean that Marx and Engels now distance themselves from Feuerbach’s emphasis on consciousness. This does indeed seem to be an abandoning of the Feuerbachian criterion, *yet it is no less a criterion*. From this as well it is possible to distinguish humans from animals, and it is still possible for humans to cease being human in an ontological sense if their ‘corporeal organisation’ is disrupted. So, the question is: What would this look like?

Marx’s general concept of production, as it appears both in the 1844 Paris manuscripts, in the 1845-46 Brussels manuscripts and 20 years later in Chapter 7 of *Capital*, is one of externalisation. Through my performing an action, I bring about a certain state of the world, and the product of this realisation is the independent, alien fact in which my activity is fixed.²⁶ Or, as Marx says in *Capital*: ‘Humans not only effect a change of form in the materials of nature; they also realize their own purposes in those materials.’²⁷ Contrary to this, animals such as spiders, beavers, or bees also ‘produce’ but not in this goal-oriented way. As Marx details at the end of Chapter 7, this is precisely what is disrupted by capitalism. Here, the worker is not free to produce in this goal-oriented way, but instead the worker works under the control of the capitalist, and the product of the labour process, i.e., the use-value in which the worker’s activity has been ‘fixed’, cannot be freely appropriated by the worker but belongs instead to the capitalist. Rather than freely determining the end of their activity, they are effectively coerced into producing boots, yarn, or microchips – whatever the capitalist, not the worker, desires. This is a disruption of the most fundamental human activity to the point where Marx says that the worker is reduced to ‘a thing’ purchased by the capitalist, the same as raw materials

²⁵ *MECW* 3, 31 (*MEGA* I.5, 8).

²⁶ Michael Quante, *Die unversöhnte Marx. Die Welt in Aufruhr* (Münster: Mentis, 2018), 27.

²⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 284. As such, one could argue that consciousness is still the underlying criterion for distinguishing humans from non-humans: It is not that humans *produce* (bees, spiders, and beavers also ‘produce’), it is that they produce *consciously*.

and machinery.²⁸ In fact, the worker is reduced precisely to machinery, or to an appendix to the machine, as Marx details in Chapter 15: Rather than the worker making use of a tool, the machine makes use of them.²⁹

Here, we again return to Mau, as he – following Marx – defines human beings as precisely ‘tool-making animals’. According to him, the essential quality of human beings is precisely their reliance on extra-somatic limbs, i.e., tools, which constitute a necessary part of the specifically human metabolism with nature.³⁰ So, even following this definition, when workers are reduced from tool-users to tools themselves, they again, in effect, cease to be human.

Finally, what does this mean for our understanding of the Gothic metaphor of the cannibal with which we began? The specifically capitalist appropriation of the labour process, which Marx talks about in Chapter 7, and which disrupts the corporal organisation of humans, is, of course, another way of talking about the capital relation, i.e., the fact that one person buys the labour-power that another person sells. And this was precisely what was expressed in the Gothic metaphor of the cannibal. By offloading the necessary labour for maintaining their own existence on the worker, the capitalist not only devours the worker like a cannibal, they simultaneously reduce them to an animal.

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²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 292.

²⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 548.

³⁰ Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 97-98.

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