

## **“Uma antítese misteriosa” Capitalismo e suicidalidade**

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**Resumo:** Esse artigo examina as persistentes imagens mortais e suicidas ao longo da obra de Karl Marx e argumenta que o capitalismo tem transformado nossas preocupações acerca da sujeição em angústias acerca de nosso próprio ser. Uma forma que toma tais angústias tem sido a suicidalidade. Argumento que nossa tendência moderna à suicidalidade chega a nomear tanto um meio de denunciar as condições violentas de nossa vida estranhada sob o capitalismo, quanto um meio de afirmar a possibilidade de imaginar novas formas de reprodução social.

**Palavras-chave:** Marxismo. Suicídio. Suicidalidade. Modernismo.

## **“A Mysterious Antithesis” Capitalism and Suicidality**

**Abstract:** This article examines persistent deathly and suicidal thought images across Karl Marx’s oeuvre and argues that capitalism has transformed our preoccupations about subjection into anxieties about our being itself. One form such anxieties take has been suicidality, and I argue that our modern tendency toward suicidality has come to name both a way of avowing the violent conditions of our estranged life under capitalism and a way of affirming the possibility of imagining new forms of social reproduction.

**Keywords:** Marxism. Suicide. Suicidality. Modernism.

## **“Una antítesis misteriosa” Capitalismo y suicidalidad**

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**Resumen:** Este artículo examina las persistentes imágenes mortales y suicidas a lo largo de la obra de Karl Marx y argumenta que el capitalismo ha transformado nuestras preocupaciones a cerca de la sumisión en angustias dentro de nuestro propio ser. Una forma que se vuelven tales angustias ha sido la suicidalidad. Argumento que nuestra tendencia moderna a la suicidalidad llega a nombrar tanto un medio de denunciar las condiciones violentas de nuestra vida enajenada relacionada al capitalismo como un medio de afirmar la posibilidad de imaginar nuevas formas de reproducción social.

**Palabras-clave:** marxismo, suicidio, suicidalidad, modernismo

## Introduction

The supersession [*Aufhebung*] of self-estrangement follows the same course as self-estrangement.

Karl Marx, **Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844**

I want that epigraph to read differently. As suicide itself names one form of self-estrangement, I want that epigraph to suggest that understanding our condition of estrangement under capitalism is necessary for contending with modern suicidality. Ultimately, I want it to say that our suicidality tends to follow a similar course as our estrangement under modern capitalism—that each phenomenon is connected. And while Karl Marx briefly examined suicide as a social problem of estrangement in his 1845 article, **Peuchet: On Suicide**, the epigraph comes from **Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844**. For it is there where he emphasizes more thoroughly the ways in which we affectively encounter capitalism on a more subjective level. **Capital**, then, mediates more carefully the structural mechanisms of estrangement in the modern era. By drawing from each, I look to put into conversation the tendencies of our more subjective experience of capitalism, on the one hand, with those of our structural economic conditions, on the other, all in the service of highlighting the ways in which persistent deathly and suicidal thought-images function

in anti-capitalist thought as a way of capturing how it has felt to suffer capitalism throughout its history. I argue that by examining the historical development of estrangement under capitalism, we may better understand the ways in which the reified human activity that makes capitalist production possible sets in motion the appearance of an *ad hominem* "I" that labors, a fantastical, bourgeois subjectivity misidentified as our corporeal bodies upon which our suicidality tends to direct its aggression. Our modern tendency toward suicidality is a way of avowing the violent conditions of our estranged life under capitalism.

I am also, and perhaps more, interested in the ways in which we fall short of corporeal suicide namely, our suicidal activity—nonfatal behavior characterized by suicidal daydreaming, fantasy, ideation, and planning, all the way to nonfatal acts of physical violence against one's body. I argue that literary moments of suicidal activity often reveal a somewhat surprising affirmation of the power to live, the power, even, of joy, as Spinoza might have it (DE SPINOZA, 1996). I am curious about the extent to which such moments of suicidal activity may be understood as modes of utopian thinking, imagining our conditions in the world other than they are in the service of material, social change. By way of illustration, I offer Marx's and Engel's slight, but illuminating analysis of Eugène Sue's character, Fleur de Marie, whose suicidal ideation confirms her estrangement under capitalism on a more subjective level, but also functions as a lively mode of being-in-the-world that helps her stay in her world. This article is interested in the ways in which suicidal activity may draw our attention to our social structures while revealing a relatively unexamined way of reconnecting with our worlds. I argue that modern suicidal activity can function not only as a way of confirming our collective estrangement. More importantly, suicidal activity can also function as a de-reifying affirmation of the possibility of imagining new forms of social reproduction.

## Entfremdung & Suicide

...because each is a stranger to himself and all are strangers  
to one another.

Karl Marx, **Peuchet: On Suicide**, 1845

Across Marx's lifework, the concept of value takes different shape. In **Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx asks, "for what is life but activity?," a question whose volume has tended to deafen us toward the necessity of answering in the affirmative, as if we haven't been able to listen (MARX, 1992a, p. 327.) Embedded in this simple, rhetorical question (Hey, look what I did?), and its necessary affirmation (Oh, how lovely!), is what I understand as Marx's early approach to value in general. Value names our enjoyment of objectified human activity, powered by life's energy, reflected back to us from within our worlds. At times, this reflection appears to us in the form of an affirmation by another (Oh, how lovely!). At others, it appears to us by way of our historically sensuous apprehension of our worlds themselves, as Marx famously stated, "The *senses* have therefore become *theoreticians* in their immediate praxis" (MARX, 1992a, 352, Marx's emphasis).<sup>2</sup>

Yet as we encounter Marx's more mature work, we learn the ways in which the character of value has manifested in various ways throughout history. It depends on its mode of production. To be sure, although Marx lucidly defines value as the historical externalization and objectification of human activity, the term

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<sup>2</sup> My understanding of Marx's claim here is influenced by Gregor Benton who argues that Marx was the first to disentangle objectification and alienation. Benton argues that "saw alienation rather as an aberrant form of objectification, which in itself is neither positive nor negative, but neutral. Alienation, for Marx, arises only under specific conditions – conditions under which man's objectification of his natural powers, e.g. through work, takes on forms which bring his human *essence* into conflict with his existence" (BENTON, 1992, p. 429, Benton's emphasis). For the quoted passage, see MARX, 1992a, p. 352.

also describes a seemingly innocuous process capable of nefarious manipulation. Slavery names one mode of that nefariousness, as does feudalism. Capitalism, of course, names yet another. In other words, in his more mature work, which takes capitalism as its focus, Marx defines the character of value not only as the externalization and objectification of human activity, but as the nefarious effect of labor-power. Labor-power, in other words, is Marx's translated idiom for that which produces value under capitalism. As such, value names "nothing other than objectified labour" produced by "self-acting, value-creating labour-power, living labour" (MARX, 1992b, p. 299). Marx argues, value "appears in all forms in the shape of a thing, be it an object or be it a relation mediated through the object" (MARX, 1993, p. 487). Yet under capitalist modes of production, this relation has taken aberrant forms. Value has not only become objectified in objects, but also fetishized in the commodity form, as if the commodity itself generates its own value, masking its cause. In short, capitalism names an aberrant mode of objectification, the effects from which we have become estranged.

And to be sure, by estrangement, I mean to emphasize less the effects of the innocuous activity of externalization and objectification, or the more problematic conditions of alienation (*Entäusserung*), as labor had become more formally subsumed under capital.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I mean to emphasize estrangement (*Entfremdung*). As Benton explains, "*Entfremdung* suggests more strongly than

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<sup>3</sup> Benton distinguishes between the related concepts of objectification, alienation, and estrangement (BENTON, 1992, pp. 429-432). Where objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*) signifies mere processes of human activity, alienation (*Entäusserung*) signifies processes of congealing labor-power in the service of the capitalist in more obvious and "aberrant" ways (p. 429). I understand processes of alienation, on the one hand, as one effect of labor's formal subsumption under capital (see, MARX, 1990, pp. 1019-1023). I understand estrangement (*Entfremdung*), on the other hand, to name more strongly the effects of labor's real subsumption under capital (see, MARX, 1990, p. 1025). For an interesting discussion of the historical translation and entanglement of the concepts *Entäusserung* and *Entfremdung*, see MARX, 1992a, 16-17.

*Entäußerung* that man is opposed by an alien power which he himself has produced but which now governs him" (BENTON, 1992, p. 430).<sup>4</sup> Yet, before unpacking that suggestion, I would like to argue that embedded within conditions of estrangement is a key to understanding modern suicidality.

In the middle 1840s, Marx too was preoccupied with such connections. In **Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx had begun highlighting the subjective effects of our structural estrangement under capitalist modes of production. For Marx, estrangement manifests in four ways: workers find themselves estranged from the products of our activity, from productive activity itself, from our own humanity, and from each another. And in each section of **Estranged Labour** in which Marx draws out estrangement's four-part materialization, we find estrangement described in ways that resonate with death and suicidality. Marx describes estrangement from the products of labor as a "loss of reality;" from productive activity as "self-sacrifice;" from humanity as a "tear[ing] away" from one's "own body;" and from one another as a process in which our "vitality" stands "as a sacrifice of life" (MARX, 1992a, p. 324, 326, 329, 334). In each of his four analyses, Marx's language sets in mind deathly, suicidal thought-images that, I argue, have become compelling and precise ways to characterize our affective encounter with capitalist exploitation.

By 1845, just one year later, Marx examined corporeal suicides themselves most explicitly as historical sites of criticality vis-à-vis our estrangement under capitalism. **Peuchet: On Suicide** is an inspiring odd document.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although estrangement presupposes a separation from the effect of an innocuous relation, the supersession of estrangement cannot suggest a reuniting-with or return to the effect of an innocuous relation of production. Rather, as discussed more below, Marx later writes, people "are still engaged in the creation of the conditions of their social life, and that they have not yet begun, on the basis of these conditions, to live it" (MARX, 1993, p. 162).

<sup>5</sup> See, Marx and Engels (1976, pp. 597-612); also, Plaut and Anderson (1999).

Unlike Marx's other short articles, **Peuchet: On Suicide** functions as both a critical article and a translation of the French critic, revolutionary, physician, economist, police administrator, and police archivist, Jacques Peuchet's 1838 memoir, **Mémoires tirés des archives de la police de Paris, pour servir à l'histoire de la morale et de la police, depuis Louis XIV jusqu'à nos jours** (Memories gathered from the Parisian police files in order to serve the moral and police history after Louis XIV till our days). Marx plays specifically with chapter fifty-eight, **Du suicide et de ses causes** (Suicide and its causes). By plays, I mean that in addition to offering a German translation, Marx also includes a brief introduction; he rearranges Peuchet's original text; he adds italicized emphases; and he altogether changes some of Peuchet's meanings here and there. At moments, he interjects with brief digressions. At others, he omits entire sentences and adds his own substitutions.<sup>6</sup> For instance, where Peuchet announces his purpose, "without engaging in any theoretical investigation, I shall try to adduce facts," Marx instead offers, "I found that any attempts short of a *total reform of the present order of society* would be in vain" (MARX, 1976, p. 604, Marx's emphasis). Close enough! **Peuchet: On Suicide** is perhaps best understood, as Kevin Anderson writes, as an edited translation. Like many of Marx's earlier works, it's a fun read.

In Marx's article, we learn that Peuchet's position within the police administration asked him to respond to suicides as part of his responsibilities, and in his memoir, he wrote about a host of then contemporary suicides. He details most specifically those of three young women and one young man. All were French bourgeoisie. The first details a daughter of a tailor who "rushed to the Seine" after being shamed by her family and neighbors for engaging in pre-marital sex with her fiancé. The next, a young creole's sister-in-law, had also "drowned herself" after suffering years of confinement and torture on the behalf of her wealthy and

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<sup>6</sup> For Marx's editorial translation skills in **Peuchet: On Suicide**, see Plaut and Anderson (1999, pp. 3-40).

jealous husband. The third Peuchet describes as a niece of a Paris banker who, after failing to secure the abortion of her married lover's fetus, "had slipped and fallen into a brook on the estate of her guardians at Villemomble and had drowned." And finally, a guard in the royal palace, after losing both his job and failing to secure any future prospects, despite his best efforts, "killed himself" (MARX, 1976, pp. 605-606, 611). Peuchet does not disclose the man's method.

But rather than detail these incidents with the moral fervor of his contemporaries, Peuchet's characterization of these victims stood apart.<sup>7</sup> In addition to offering great detail about the social circumstances of each suicide, he describes all of the victims as exhibiting "this energetic driving force of personality" with an "infectious enthusiasm" and "excellent spirit." Peuchet continues, that maintaining a "greatness of soul," each testifies to the ways in which their suicides "rebel against the thought of occupying a place of honour among the hangmen." In short, Peuchet describes these suicides as embodying, albeit tragically, a critical "love of life itself" in stark contrast to then predominant French attitudes toward suicide (MARX, 1976, pp. 603, 609, 610, 609, 604, 603). As Peuchet describes:

"Everything that has been said against suicide goes round and round in the same circle of ideas. People cite against it the decrees of Providence, but the existence of suicide is itself an open protest against her

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Minois (1999, pp. 314-315): "After the break of the French Revolution, the moral authorities (and even the political authorities), inflamed by a spirit of reaction and restoration, worked vigorously to return suicide to what they felt was its rightful place among acts that are forbidden and classified as counter to nature. But because those authorities were no longer able to coerce people into moral conformity, they moved repression of suicide inward, shifting it to the individual conscience. Their efforts were all the more effective when—surprisingly enough—the development of the humane sciences helped, quite involuntarily, to strengthen the individual and collective guilt complex regarding suicide."

indecipherable decrees. They talk to us of our duties to this society without explaining or implementing our own claims on society, and finally they exalt the thousand times greater merit of overcoming pain rather than succumbing to it, a merit as sad as the prospects it opens up. In short, they make of suicide an act of cowardice, a crime against the law...and honour." (MARX, 1976, p. 603)

Resisting the French tendency to moralize suicide at the time, Peuchet describes his intention, as mentioned above, to avoid "engaging in any theoretical investigation." Rather, he frankly states, "I shall try to adduce facts." And to the extent to which his memoir announces a motive for his writing, we learn that he merely "wished to learn whether among the causes motivating [the suicides] there were any whose effect could be obviated" (MARX, 1976, p. 604). Peuchet was a sympathetic person.

Marx agrees. He comments that Peuchet evinced "the warmth of life itself, broadness of view, refined subtlety, and bold originality of spirit, which one will seek in vain in any other nation" (MARX, 1976, p. 597). Which is to say, **Peuchet: On Suicide** is inspiringly odd in another way. As Eric A. Plaut writes, "what most commonly stimulated [Marx] to write was disagreement with someone." "In contrast," Plaut continues, Marx's "view of Peuchet is clearly favorable" (PLAUT and ANDERSON, 1999, p. 30). Yet despite Peuchet's attempts to establish some critical, amoral distance from his subject, this form of sympathy is not all we find. Peuchet indeed makes an argument—not surprisingly, a sympathetic one.

In the five moments where we may be tempted to adduce Peuchet's thesis, Marx's intervenes three times. In addition to the moment mentioned above where Marx speaks to the need for the "**total reform of the present order of society**," Peuchet argues that suicide "must be regarded as a symptom of the faulty organisation

of our society" (MARX, 1976, p. 598).<sup>8</sup> In other words, for Peuchet, suicide was an expression of a social problem.<sup>9</sup> For Marx it was an expression of the social problem of estrangement examined in greater theoretical detail just months earlier, as we shall see. Roughly half-way through, Peuchet makes another similar claim, but with Marx's added, italicized emphasis: "The classification of the various causes of suicide would be the classification of the **very defects of our society.**" The fourth is Peuchet's alone: "One perceives that for want of something better, suicide is the extreme resort against the evils of private life" (MARX, 1976, p. 610, 611). Marx, perhaps obviously, saw no reason to intervene.

And that fifth? If Peuchet's purpose, and by proxy, Marx's, was to expose the ways in which bourgeois social life sets in motion tendencies toward suicidality, then Marx's edited translation extended the spirit of Peuchet's argument about French social life into German social and intellectual life as well. As Anderson sharply acknowledges, not only was Marx "moving toward [...] more empirically grounded investigation[s] of the real social and economic conditions of modern society." His edited translation also demonstrated to his German readers that "it is not only the workers, but the whole of bourgeois society that suffers under dehumanized social relations" (PLAUT and ANDERSON, 1999, p. 10, 12). But in reframing the fifth of Peuchet's main arguments, I argue, Marx intervened most significantly and brings Peuchet's interests in corporeal suicide in harmony with his own.

Marx's translator writes, "taken by Marx from the description of another case of suicide given by Peuchet," "Marx gave a free

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<sup>8</sup> See Marx (1976, p. 598). The full passage reads, "The annual number of suicides, which is, as it were, normal and recurrent among us, must be regarded as a symptom of the faulty organisation of our society; for at times when industry is at a standstill and in crisis, in periods of dear food and hard winters, this symptom is always more conspicuous and assumes an epidemic character."

<sup>9</sup> So too had Durkheim, of course. For a more detailed gloss of the differences between Durkheim and Peuchet, see Plaut and Anderson (1999, pp. 29-40).

rendering” to Peuchet’s claim and added its “concluding words” (MARX, 1976, p. 609, footnote b). Where Peuchet concludes that “opinion [about suicide] is too much divided by people’s isolation, too ignorant, too corrupt,” Marx offers up its premise, “because each is a stranger to himself and all are strangers to one another” (MARX, 1976, p. 609). Not only, then, had suicide named for Marx a symptomatic expression of our estrangement, but the discourses that inform and organize our understanding of suicidal activity itself demand an avowal of our condition of estrangement under capitalist modes of production.

### **The Rule of Dead Labor Over the Living**

Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule  
of things over man, of dead labour over the living.

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Circa 1866

I want to return, now, to an earlier question, namely, how can externalized, objectified life-energy function as an alien power that governs us? In other words, how can an object and its structural processes of objectification come to appear as a subject, and vice versa? And what does this have to do with our subjective experience of estrangement, and ultimately, deathly, suicidal thought-images?

Marx examined capitalism in its historical development, and observes, on the one hand, what he calls the “formal subsumption of labor under capital,” an early development in that history (MARX, 1990, p. 1019-1023, 1025-1034). As more and more production processes began to take capitalist shape, commodities increasingly came to name the form value has taken, as both use-value and exchange-value. Yet a most peculiar “irrationality” appeared in the process (MARX, 1992b, p. 113).<sup>10</sup> Capitalists fixed a price on that

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this “irrationality,” see Marx (1992b, p. 113): “[An] irrationality consists in the fact that labour as the value-forming element cannot itself

which produces value as if that value-producing power itself has a value as a commodity. Human labor-power, the wage, names "a magnitude fixed in advance" both of production and circulation throughout capitalism's cycles (MARX, 1991, p. 1011). To say the absolute least (and I feel absolutely foolish saying it), reification has been a problem. As a result, Marx argues, "the creative power of labour" itself has appeared to "possess the qualities of a thing," a quite unfortunate absurdity (MARX, 1990, p. 1052). Workers have become reified through the dominant gaze and control of capitalists as mere variable capital.

Once purchased on the labor market, reified labor-power has then been put to use in the service of the capitalists who both own the means of production and have deployed reified human labor-power to enchant the means of production as they have seen fit. Workers have encountered little, if any, creative control over their creative activity such that they have come to feel less and less empowered as the value-producing agents they in fact are, and feel more and more "valuable" only in relation to the predominant, fetishized form value takes, namely, the commodity-form. Or worse yet, workers have felt "valuable" only in relation to that "special commodity" by which they have come to be treated by capitalists, as absurdly reified labor-power (MARX, 1990, p. 1052, 270). Not only, then, have workers become estranged from the products of their labor, as they have had no control over them nor their circulation. Workers also have become estranged from their own productive activity itself. Suffice it to say, this tends to hurt. In other words, the reification of human activity has set in motion not only the appearance of an "I" that labors (reified labor-

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possess any value, and so a certain quantity of labour cannot have a value that is expressed in its price, in its equivalence with a certain definite quantity of money. We know, however, that wages are simply a disguised form, a form in which the price of a day's labour-power, for example, presents itself as the price of the labour set in motion in the course of a day by this labour-power, so that the value produced by this labour-power in six hours' labour, say, is expressed as the value of its twelve-hour functioning or labour."

power), but also an “I” that comes back to us as a dead thing (the fetishized commodity). As Marx wrote in **Manuscripts of 1844**, labor constitutes a “loss of [one’s] self” (MARX, 1992a, p. 334, 327).

And what’s worse, this has become a particularly lonely and violent game for workers. Compelled to offer for sale reified labor-power as legally “free” proprietors on competitive labor markets, workers have appeared as self-estranged from one another (MARX, 1992a, p. 327-330).<sup>11</sup> As Marx’s earlier writings suggest, “the competition among [workers] has become all the more considerable, unnatural, and violent” (MARX, 1992a, p. 285). By 1848, Marx and Engels wrote of workers’ violent tendencies to

direct their attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labour, they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze, they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages. (MARX and ENGELS, 1985, pp. 88-89)

And by the 1860s, Marx (again, with the help of Engels) began to write of such instances as expressions of various “industrial pathologies” (MARX, 1990, p. 484, 554). Suffice it to say, the history of capitalism, let alone History, illustrates well the ways in which reactionary violence too often misapprehends its target.

In sum, under processes of the formal subsumption of labor under capital, commodities have appeared less vividly as the creative and productive effect (objectification) of a person’s life-

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<sup>11</sup> In **Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx makes a different case for the estrangement of people from one another in terms of our “species-being” (1992a, p. 327-330). Here I mean to emphasize the ways in which workers, compelled to sell their reified labor-power as a commodity on a “free” labor market, are forced to place themselves in opposition to one another in competition as a result of their material, economic conditions under capitalism (MARX, 1990, pp. 270-272).

energy, but more and more mistakenly as something "external and accidental to the individual," a manifestation of their fetishization (MARX, 1993, p. 487). As capitalism has come to name the predominant mode of production, then, the concomitant way to encounter creative, value-producing power has been in relation to the production of the commodity-form, mere, fetishized artifacts haunted by irrationally reified labor-power. In short, to acknowledge value under capitalism has necessitated some functional proximity to the commodity in its various fetishized or reified forms, what Marx, as early as the middle 1840s, began to describe in terms of death. In **Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx describes commodities as "dead capital" (MARX, 1992a, p. 284, 298). He would soon alter his idiom to emphasize the position of workers in their relation to capital.

As capitalism expands and intensifies throughout history, Marx theorizes, on the other hand, a development whereby the formal subsumption of labor under capital normalizes, ushering in what he describes as the "real subsumption of labor under capital." Although capitalism has expanded and intensified unevenly, this has surely become the condition of our present (at the very least in the United States). Here Marx argues, "living labour does not realize itself in objective labour which thereby becomes its objective organ, but instead objective labour maintains and fortifies itself by drawing off living labour." Rather than continue to describe commodities as dead capital, however, Marx began more regularly to refer to commodities as "dead labour." More poignantly, he began to refer to the capital relation as a process driven by a deathly thought-image—a process he curiously describes as "dead labour over the living." And what's worse, Marx argues, labor has become "one of the *modes of existence* of capital" (MARX, 1990, p. 988, Marx's emphasis). The death of workers' life energy has come to function as an expression of the mode of existence of production itself. Under increasingly normalized capitalist modes of production in our modern world, humanity has ceased to be the "aim of production." Rather, the capitalist mode of production itself—a mode of production predicated on the death of workers' collective life energy—has increasingly appeared "as the aim of

mankind” (MARX, 1993, p. 487-488). Capital has appeared, then, to take the place of the subject while human beings and their lives’ energy have merely appeared and are encountered as the “I” of reified death.

What is crucial to understand is that under the real subsumption of labor under capital, within our present, “all the **social productive forces of labour**,” our lives’ energy, “appear as the **productive forces** of capital, as intrinsic attributes of capital,” as dead labor (MARX, 1990, p. 1052, Marx’s emphasis).<sup>12</sup> Or in yet another way, all lively, creative activity has come to appear “as something independent of the workers and intrinsic to the conditions of production themselves,” as dead labor over the living (MARX, 1990, p. 1052-1053). Described as the “mystification[s] of capital,” this is where we may begin to observe the ways in which an alien power that people have produced has been experienced most intensely as a collectively-estranged specter that governs us (MARX, 1990, p. 1052-1058).<sup>13</sup> In sum, if the bourgeois commodification of reified labor-power has absurdly insisted that labor-power, our lives’ energy, is a thing, and if under the real subsumption of labor under capital all forces of our lives’ energy have appeared as forces of capital, then we may most fully understand the ways in which we have become structurally estranged from our humanity—what Marx means when he describes the capital relation as “the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living” (MARX, 1990, p. 990). Capitalism haunts us with the corpse of our collective death.

### **The *Ad Hominem* Capital Relation, or, Capitalism: Suicidal for the Whole of Mankind**

Far from leading to permanent peace, capitalism has led to  
two world wars and risks a third one, suicidal for  
the whole of mankind.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the real subsumption of labor under capital, see Marx (1990, pp. 1023-1025, 1034-1038).

<sup>13</sup> For more on the mystification of capital, see Marx (1990, pp. 1052-1058).

Ernest Mandel, "Introduction," **Capital**, Volume III, 1981

Marx's deathly thought-images function as expressions of his historical patterns of *ad hominem* that transform throughout his writings. And although his *ad hominem* characterizations focus mostly on capitalists and capitalism, Marx's ghosts have taken many sides. "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism" (MARX and ENGELS, 1985, p. 78). Yet while *ad hominem* is often understood in argumentation as a way to attack a person rather than the intellectual position that that person may take, Marx's uses of *ad hominem* perform different rhetorical functions that I understand as expressions of the radicalism of his youth and the literary sophistication of his adult life. In his **Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law**, for instance, Marx wrote,

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. (MARX, 1975, p. 182)<sup>14</sup>

By way of example, around the middle 1840s, Marx and Engels began to describe property owners as "vampires" (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, p. 203, 526). They sought simply to risk an assumption, namely, that the bourgeoisie had used their property as the means of production to which the life-force of social labor had been put to work, as another's blood to a vampire. In Marx's more mature writings, however, his use of *ad hominem* began to take more sophisticated shapes. With the publication of **Capital**, volume one in the middle-1860s, Marx continues to use the *ad*

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<sup>14</sup> I am deeply grateful to Sean Lovitt for drawing my attention to this passage.

*hominem* “vampire” on three occasions (MARX, 1990, pp. 342, 367, 415-416). Yet in each, he uses it not to characterize capitalists so much as capital itself in its fetishized, subject-appearance in more advanced stages of its development. To better understand the sophistication of Marx’s *ad hominem*, it might be best to examine *ad hominem* itself.

*Ad hominem* functions as a transliteration of a late sixteenth-century Latin expression that literally means “to the person.” The prefix “ad-” translates as the preposition “to,” but can also suggest several meanings at once: a motion or direction toward something; an addition, increase, or intensification of something; or lastly, a reduction or a change into something. In its prepositional form, the *ad* of Marx’s *ad hominem* gestures toward the historically changing appearance of the capital relation. As mentioned above, as capitalist modes of production both intensified and expanded throughout history, the products of human labor-power have appeared to maintain and fortify themselves by drawing off living labor, as might a vampire to another’s blood—which brings us to Marx’s object-personification. *Hominem* literally translates as “person.” As Marx began referring to capital as a vampire rather than capitalists, Marx plays with the ways in which, under capitalism, we encounter our world not as innocuous extensions of our own activity (objectification), but rather as menacingly oppositional, disembodied forces. Marx’s *ad hominem* not only resonates with the historical appearance of the fetishized subject-character of capital, but it also functions as a savvier *ad hominem* idiom. For where capitalists are people, capital, like a vampire, is always-already a corpse. In short, by risking the assumption of a vampiric, spectral place-holder, Marx’s *ad hominem* contends with the ways in which capitalism has made its otherwise absent subject a problem for us. In other words, if the appearance of the “I” that labors names *ad hominem* the fetishized, subject character of reified human activity, then Marx’s *ad hominem*, “vampire” functions in his later writing as his own literary idiom. It functions as his way of rhetorically re-fetishizing the deathly subject-character of always-already dead labor, or fetishized capital. And it will change shape, again.

Although volume three of **Capital** continues to describe capitalists and workers in *ad hominem* ways, as “embodiments and personifications of capital and wage-labour,” the deathly thought-images begin to transform as volume three examines capitalism more systematically (MARX, 1991, p. 1019-1020). No longer do we read explicitly about capitalism’s “*dramatis personae*” in such vivid language as we do in volume one. Which is to say, although Marx indeed examines capitalism as a process in the first two volumes, the capitalism about which we read in volume three is more than that of the activity of people within the factory or the market. No longer do we read about various manifestations of the “free-trader *vulgaris*” – the capitalist as “one who smirks self-importantly,” “intent on business,” while the “timid” worker “holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but – a tanning” (MARX, 1990, p. 280). The *ad hominem* of volume three details more the tendential, spectral motions between entire classes of actors and of broadly abstracted monetary functions. It focuses on the mystifications of capital themselves at their most abstract, systemic levels. It meditates on the commodity fetish at its peak. And although volume three doesn’t explicitly say it, the logic of this disembodied, *ad hominem* subjectivity appears suicidal.

I can offer no more concise explanation of capitalism’s *ad hominem* suicidality in volume three than by way of Ernest Mandel. He identifies its research question in a curiously laconic way, “Whither capitalism?” (MANDEL, 1991, p. 11). Summing up the three main moves in volume three, i.e., the discovery of 1) the rate of profit, 2) the tendency towards the equalization of the rate of profit, and 3) the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, Mandel writes:

From his definition of the average rate of profit as the sum total of surplus-value produced during the process of production divided by the sum total of capital, Marx derives the central ‘law of motion’ of the capitalist mode of production. Since that part of capital which alone leads to the production of surplus-value

(variable capital, used to buy labour-power) tends to become a smaller and smaller part of total capital, because of the fundamentally labour-saving tendency of technical progress – the gradual substitution of dead labour (machinery) for living labour – and because of the gradual increase of the value of raw materials in that of total output: since, in other words, the organic composition of capital in its value expression tends to increase, there is an inbuilt tendency for the average rate of profit to decline in the capitalist system. (MANDEL, 1991, pp. 30-31)

As capitalism has intensified and expanded, its vampiric bloodlust after surplus-value (especially surplus-profit) has simultaneously denied those who produce value from the outset – real, living, breathing people. Marx had suspected this tendency for a long time. In **Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx wrote, “So although political economy, whose principle is labour, appears to recognize man, it is in fact nothing more than the denial of man carried through to its logical conclusion” (MARX, 1992a, p. 342). And, as Mandel argues, capitalism names “a process which constantly realizes itself by negating itself” – as mentioned above, “suicidal for the whole of mankind” (MANDEL, 1991, p. 20). In other words, if deathly thought-images functioned for Marx throughout his work between the 1840s and 1860s in some *ad hominem* fashion for thinking about how capitalism intensifies and expands throughout history, then by the 1880s, I argue, suicidal thought-images more poignantly describe the *ad hominem* characterization of anti-capitalist thought more abstractly, as expressed in **Capital**, volume three. By the 1880s, the logic of capitalism describes a disembodied, suicidal subjectivity.

Yet this requires a little de-mystification itself, as we of course know that history, unfortunately, has not played out this way. And, it is tempting to risk, following that younger Marx, a little unsophisticated *ad hominem*. If Marx observes, “to be radical is to grasp the root of the matter,” and continues, “but for man the root is man himself,” what, then, about people themselves –

those embodiments of capital and personifications of wage-labor? (MARX and ENGELS, 1975, p. 182). Haven't real, living, breathing capitalists invented and continue both to invent and deploy what volume three calls "counteracting influences" to the law of the tendential (suicidal) fall in the rate of profit, "checking and cancelling the effect of the general law and giving it simply the character of a tendency"? Which is to ask, haven't capitalists increased the exploitation of laborers by "prolonging the working day" and or by "making work more intense" (MARX, 1991, p. 339); haven't capitalists reduced wages below their "value" and don't they continually try to cheapen the elements of constant capital (MARX, 1991, pp. 342-347); and as Mandel adds, haven't capitalists deployed measures spanning from simply finding new things to commodify all the way to engaging in colonial and imperial conquest, waging the violent wars associated with both (MANDEL, 1991, p. 81); and I would add, haven't capitalists also, by way of their political involvement, adjusted tax rates, interest rates, and increased the debt ceiling and government spending that those adjustments set in motion? Suffice it to say, haven't capitalists deployed mechanisms at their disposal to resuscitate capitalism's logical, suicidal tendencies euphemized to us as **crises**?<sup>15</sup>

Although Marx has demonstrated that the structural logic of the capital relation indeed names a violent relation both deadly and suicidal, the ways in which its various mystifications take shape make it difficult to see which actors engage in which acts of historical violence. In other words, it is easy to forget that the capital relation indeed names a relation.

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<sup>15</sup> Marx argues, "The **functions** fulfilled by the capitalist are no more than the functions of capital – vis. The valorization of value by absorbing living labour – executed **consciously** and **willingly**. The capitalist functions only as **personified** capital, capital as a person, just as the worker is no more than **labour** personified" (MARX, 1990, p. 989, Marx's emphasis). The ways in which the capital relation animates those it embodies is one thing, but it can never serve as an alibi for the conscious will of the capitalist.

For instance, in thinking about capitalism's suicidal, structural tendencies, I have long enjoyed the temptation to reframe these tendencies in different ways. I have wanted to say that capitalism cannot be suicidal, for it names *ad hominem* the mere fetishized appearance of the activity of a synthetic, self-same subject. In other words, it has no self-same subject to kill. And besides, under capitalism, our labor-power is always-already "freely" dead. But don't those capitalists reek of murder? Perhaps it's more entertaining as an exclamation? Capitalism, in its historical materialization, cannot be suicidal; but those capitalists sure do look murderous! Or better, perhaps they're necrophilic! But this, too, would be a mystification, as murder and necrophilia, too, name a relation. Which is to suggest, if capitalism, in its historical materialization, cannot be suicidal, and if capitalists, by definition, cannot be necrophilic murderers, then where does that leave us?

In **Capitalist Realism**, Mark Fisher gestures toward the disembodied, fetishized subjectivity of capitalism while avowing its affective realization in people, as he reminds us of the nature of the capital relation. He writes, "what needs to be kept in mind is **both** that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure **and** that it would be nothing without our co-operation" (FISHER, 2009, p. 15, Fisher's emphasis). Like Fisher, we in criticism tend to be really good at avowing a mystification, as Fisher writes of capitalism, "the ultimate cause-that-is-not-a-subject: Capital." We also tend to be really good at identifying impasses of various sorts, as has Fisher, that "it is only individuals that can be held ethically responsible for actions, and yet the cause of these [capitalists'] abuses and errors is corporate, systemic" (FISHER, 2009, p. 69-70). But perhaps we can begin to learn a bit better from our tendencies toward *ad hominem*.

After acknowledging the demystification of the subject-appearance of capital in peak *ad hominem* form, Fisher then describes the ways in which capitalism's mystifications feel. He writes: "Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is our own, **and the zombies it creates are us**" (FISHER, 2009, p. 15 my emphasis). Fisher's *ad hominem*, attributing to-the-person the

character of a zombie, resonates. I feel it. And so too had Marx. In **Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx wrote of the feeling of laboring for a capitalist: "labour is *external* to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; [...] he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind" (MARX, 1992a, p. 326, Marx's emphasis). Or, perhaps more directly, we feel as if we have "become," as Marx insisted, "the tense essence of private property" (MARX, 1992a, p. 342). I understand Fisher and Marx, here, as suggesting that estrangement under capitalist modes of production has made the otherwise innocuous absent subject of innocuous objectification appear, *ad hominem*, as a problem not only **for** us, but **of** us. Our bodies don the corpse of the "I" that labors. It's no wonder that in that tension we often feel as if we are zombies—or worse yet, as if we are already dead.

But we are not dead. Rather than suggest *ad hominem* that we feel as if we are already dead, however, we sometimes try to offer evidence for such a claim. Sometimes we tend to suggest that we feel as if our lives aren't worth living. Or perhaps, we feel as if our lives have no value. Or another way, we feel as if we don't have a life to live—or worse yet, that we don't have life, as Adorno writes, as if "there is life no longer" (ADORNO, 2005, p. 15).<sup>16</sup> And worst, sometimes we say we can't imagine life outside of its organization under capitalism.

I suspect that this feeling is often felt as the affective fodder that then sets in motion the *ad hominem* inference—we are already dead. And yes, some of us try to prove it. I suspect that those among us—those in our suicidal lot—may say things like this while we simultaneously sense the lie. We livelily pronounce our death! For saying things like this is the stuff of suicidal activity, and suicidal activity is a lively activity; our living, breathing utterances betray it. Yet this lie surely hurts.

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful for both John L. Stiger and Jonathan Flatley for helping frame this observation.

Or in another way, to suggest that we are already dead, or that our lives don't have value, I argue, are also fantastical *ad hominem* expressions organized and exacerbated by our estrangement under capitalist modes of production. And it is not that there is some "who" or some "we who" speak these things—that there is some grand Being with whom we may be romantically reunited if only we could shed that corpse. As Marx writes, people "are still engaged in the creation of the conditions of their social life, and they have not yet begun, on the basis of these conditions, to live it" (MARX, 1993, p. 162). It is rather that capitalism's aberrant processes of objectification have made our humanity appear *ad hominem* as a problem of our being. For rather than engage in processes of mere objectification—(Hey, look what I did?), the innocuous activity of engaging with our world whose affirmations set in motion the innocuous solicitude of being-with one another—(Oh, how lovely!), we have encountered capitalism, aberrant processes of engaging with our world whose character sets in motion not only nefarious ways of being-with one another, but also necrophilic processes of problematizing our humanity that invite deathly and suicidal preoccupations with Being itself. Suggesting that "we feel as if we are already dead" or "we feel as if our lives have no value" are lively, affective exclamations of our shared humanity. We feel! Or, rather...Feeling! These lively exclamations, however, have become distorted as they are repeatedly mediated—rehearsed—through the corpse of abstract labor—human affects mumbled through the ignorant, bourgeois, *ad hominem* "I" of our fantastically inarticulate subjectivities produced by capitalism.

These subjectivities suggest we have no value, that we are already dead, and for good reason. We encounter them as suggestions from a corpse. As Marx suggests in a similar context, our experience of estrangement affects our "**human** relations to the world." And what he means is "our seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, loving," and on and on. These media of sensuous relations, for Marx, enable "the **confirmation of human reality**." These sensuous relations, "**all** the physical and intellectual senses," mediate our

being-with one another in our world. When they become estranged under capitalist modes of production, what they tend to confirm is the reality of the rule of our estrangement. They confirm that we feel as if are already dead. And again, for good reason. As Marx provocatively claims, perhaps *ad hominem*, “private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only **ours** when we have it, when it exists for us as capital.” And what’s worse, “private property conceives all these immediate realizations of possession only as **means of life**; and the life they serve is the **life of private property**, labour and capitalization” (MARX, 1992a, p. 351-352, Marx’s emphasis). As mentioned above, “the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living.” Capitalism produces our shared corpse.

But we are not dead. Under capitalist modes of production, we merely encounter each other, ourselves, and our world as some-deadened-thing, as Heidegger might suggest, as something “present at hand” (HEIDEGGER, 2008, p. 102-107). We feel merely estranged, deadened, as if we’re engaged in a present-progressive process of always-already resuscitating a corpse (self-care), or desecrating it (suicide). And again, for good reason. If capitalism refuses to avow the human activity of its twin processes of reification and fetishization, then it simultaneously sets in motion a preoccupation with our very humanity as a problem of our being such that our affects seek after a confirmation of the reality of our estrangement.

Modern suicide is a rehearsal. The suicidal “I” names, *ad hominem*, an “I” whose tendential function is to confirm our estrangement through another form of estrangement. In feeling the force of the absent cause in capitalism, we rehearse the bourgeois script by placing our bodies, misidentified as that *ad hominem* “I,” at the absent center of our estrangement—a misidentified I, however, whose suicide is capable of eliminating our suffering. In many bourgeois ways, we realize ourselves by negating ourselves. Suicide names one way: it estranges us from our estrangement. Or, as Marx never quite said, suicidality tends to follow a similar course as our estrangement under modern capitalism.

But if private property has made us “so stupid and one-sided,” what of the other side—the side that encounters our world-of-things, not as an ignorant bourgeois, but rather the side that encounters our world-of-things humanely?

### Fleur de Marie’s Mysterious Antitheses

...but then I would gaze at the flowers and the sun and say to myself: the river will always be there and I am not yet seventeen years old.

Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris*, quoted in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family*, 1845

Shortly after writing **Manuscripts of 1844**, Marx and Engels wrote and published **The Holy Family**. In it, Marx and Engels examine several writings of the Young Hegelians and argue that their approach to criticism reflected a mere ideological, subjectivist, philosophical system (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, p. xvi-xix). Like much of early Marx and Engels, written from their then developing fidelity to historical materialism, mixed with a fair share of *ad hominem* radicalism, it is a fun, albeit vertiginous read.

In chapter VIII, Marx and Engels criticize a work by Herr Szeliga, a pen name for F. Z. Zychlinski. He had written an article, *Eugène Sue: Die Geheimnisse von Paris*, which lauds Sue’s novel *Les Mystères de Paris*, itself a “sentimental social fantasy” that traces the moralistic adventures of Rudolph, “Prince of Geroldstein.” Disguised as a French worker, Rudolph takes under his protection both a working-class criminal, Chourineur and a prostitute, Marie. He attempts to reform each by way of some image of Christian piety (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, p. 687, footnote 20; p. 162). For those unfamiliar, I will save the detail, as I think it is fair to say that we can anticipate where Marx and Engels land. There is, however, a specific moment in their critique that I would like to highlight.

As Marx and Engels approach the character of Marie, rather than maintain their critique of Szeliga, or even their critique of Sue by proxy, they make clear that they want Marie to speak for

herself. In some ways they do. They provide several passages of her dialogue from the novel. In other ways they don't, as they intervene, offering their own theorizations about Marie's life activity. It's a rare moment of Marx's and Engels's literary criticism. Nonetheless, Marx and Engels insist, "we shall not follow Herr Szeliga in his further description of [Marie]." Rather, "we shall leave her the satisfaction [...] of constituting," they argue, "**the most decisive** antithesis to **everyone**, a mysterious antithesis" (Marx's and Engels's emphasis).<sup>17</sup> It is Marie's "mysterious antithesis," or rather, her mysterious antitheses that, I would like to argue, exhibit the surprisingly reparative value of suicidal activity under conditions of estrangement.

The first of Marie's antitheses is obvious. Her life's energy names one unit of social labor reified in the service of private capital accumulation. She has nothing but her labor to sell, a prostitute "in bondage to the proprietress of the criminals' tavern." And while Marie, speaking through and to the "I" that labors, at times "blames herself," Marx and Engels argue that Marie "considers her situation not as one she has freely created," but rather "as a fate she has not deserved." They frame her suffering as an effect of the "bad fortune" of her "inhuman surroundings" (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, pp. 168, 169-170).

But Marie herself insists, "I have never done any harm to anyone." Which is to say, despite laboring for the capitalist proprietress of the tavern, Marie, like all of us, exhibits a second antithesis. She reserves some energy apart from her reification. She has a reserve on that other side. As Marx and Engels write, "she

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<sup>17</sup> Marx and Engels quote Szeliga as a form of critique of Szeliga's article itself: "We shall not follow Herr Szeliga in his further description of Marguerite [Fleur de Marie]. We shall leave her the satisfaction, according to Herr Szeliga's prescription, of 'constituting **the most decisive** antithesis to **everyone**', a mysterious antithesis, as mysterious as the attributes of God" (1976, p. 168, Marx's and Engels's emphasis). Marx and Engels are saying that Fleur de Marie indeed illustrates an antithesis. But rather than the antithesis that Szeliga's sees (the change in Marie's trajectory from work in a brothel to work in a convent), Marx and Engels, I argue, see a mysterious antithesis take shape in Marie's suicidal ideation.

preserves a human nobleness of soul, a human unaffectedness and a human beauty that impress those around her, raise her to the level of a poetical flower of the criminal world and win for her the name of Fleur de Marie." No doubt, Fleur de Marie is estranged. Yet "in spite of her frailty," she "at once gives proof of vitality, energy, cheerfulness resilience of character—qualities which alone explain her human development in her **inhuman** situation" (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, p. 169, footnote; p. 168, Marx's and Engels's emphasis).

And she can "put up a fight." As evidence, Marx and Engels point out the ways in which "she does not appear as a defenceless lamb who surrenders without any resistance to overwhelming brutality." After being "ill-treated" by Chourineur, for instance, Fleur de Marie "defends herself with her scissors" (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, p. 168). To emphasize further the humanity that Marx and Engels observe, I quote at length. In reference to the "good in me" that Fleur de Marie acknowledges that she sees in herself, Marx and Engels write,

**Good** and **evil**, as Marie conceives them, are not the **moral abstractions** of good and evil. She is **good** because she has never caused **suffering** to anyone, she has always been **human** towards her inhuman surroundings [...] Her situation is **not good**, because it puts an unnatural constraint on her, because it is not the expression of her human impulses, not the fulfilment of her human desires; because it is full of torment and without joy. [...]

In **natural** surroundings, where the chains of bourgeois life fall away and she can freely manifest her own nature, Fleur de Marie bubbles over with love of life, with a wealth of feeling, with human joy at the beauty of nature; these show that her social position has only grazed the surface of her and is a mere misfortune, that she herself is neither good nor bad, but **human**. (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, pp. 169-170, Marx's and Engels's emphasis)

Marx's and Engels' repeated appeal to Fleur de Marie's humanity functions as reverberations of **Manuscripts of 1844**. The "unnatural constraint" Marie feels, the "torment" and lack of "joy" she suffers evince her estranged condition. Yet apart from her "I" that labors, Fleur de Marie maintains that reserve on the other side. For "her social position has only grazed the surface." Her "wealth of feeling," her affects, reveal that her social conditions, her "mere misfortune," names the effect of that aberrant mode of otherwise innocuous objectification from which she has become estranged. But she still maintains a capacity to bubble "over with love of life [...] with human joy at the beauty of nature." It is in her "**natural** surroundings" that she knows that "she herself is neither good nor bad, but **human**." And I would like to argue that despite her inhuman situation, Fleur de Marie retains what appears as a mysterious antithetical reserve, an affective affirmation amplified by the activity of her repeatedly suicidal past.

In reference, not to Szeliga, nor to Sue's novel itself, but rather to the character of Fleur de Marie herself, Marx and Engels illustrate her third antithesis, the surprising value of Fleur de Marie's lively suicidal activity, if only for a moment:

Let us accompany Fleur de Marie on her first outing with Rudolph.

"The consciousness of your terrible situation has probably often distressed you," Rudolph says, itching to moralise.

"Yes," she replies, "more than once I looked over the embankment of the Seine; but then I would gaze at the flowers and the sun and say to myself: the river will always be there and I am not yet seventeen years old. Who can say?" (MARX and ENGELS, 1976, p. 169)

Fleur de Marie apprehends value from within her world. Rivers are, *prima facie*, enchanting things. Yet her encounter with her river names a common practice among the common French throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Georges Minois points out, "drowning" had named one of the most common "means of

death” for suicidal women throughout modern French history. And what’s more, Minois continues, “the Paris statistics show” that “certain spots along the Seine were notorious for [such] drownings” (MINOIS, 1999, p. 280, 313). But for Fleur de Marie, this practice names something more than that which can be reflected back by dead data from the social sciences. For it is not once that she has “looked over the embankment of the Seine,” but “more than once.” She has engaged in suicidal activity as a lively practice—a rehearsal—a reoccurring affective encounter with her river, organized, informed, and set in motion, I argue, by her estrangement under capitalist modes of production. Yet her senses, as Marx would say, have become theoreticians in their immediate, suicidal praxis. And Fleur de Marie’s suicidal theoreticians have amplified her, setting in motion a seeking-after not only the confirmation of her “terrible situation,” as if she needs to be reminded, but a seeking-after an affirmation of their theory of the value of the most mundane, yet beautiful materiality, a theory of “the flowers and the sun”—an innocuously humane reflection of her being-in-the-world. And all Fleur de Marie can simply and humanely ask is, “Who can say?”

I like Fleur de Marie. And I think we all should like Fleur de Marie. She can teach us something. I think she can teach us that we can indeed feel valuable as producers and observers of value ought. What’s more, however, she can teach us that that value isn’t often made real or realized in an acknowledgement from within our world under capitalism, especially in the ways in which we ourselves indeed encounter value in it. Her oscillation between sensing “the good” in herself while avowing the absence of such acknowledgement from within her world, “Who can say?” names an intensity of those difficult moments that can’t often be expressed in words, or words that others understand, let alone hear. And, of course, as such, Fleur de Marie is suicidal.

Suicidal activity is best shared. And for those in our suicidal lot, I think that Fleur de Marie can teach us that what our suicidal activity sometimes asks after is both a confirmation and an affirmation that demands answers. Fleur de Marie asks

after a confirmation of the difficulties of our shared estrangement under capitalism and an affirmation of the possibility to imagine new forms of value-creation, not only reflected back to us from within our world, but an affirmation of our solicitude reinforced by affirmations from others. For she is asking us. I mean, she is not alone.

Modern literature is replete with representations of suicidal moments that invite crucial questions, namely, can we approach suicidal activity in non-fatalistic terms? Can we engage in and encounter suicidal activity in ways that might slow down its momentum under capitalist modes of production? Or better yet, can we see that suicidal activity may amplify our being-in-the-world, while asking after a sensuous affirmation of our collective potentiality such that we might remain in our worlds differently? Perhaps even change it?

“Who can say,” she innocently asks?

We can, Fleur de Marie!

We can!

The flowers and the sun are beautiful, and you are beautiful for pointing them out to us!

And if you can spare them...

...May we please borrow your scissors?

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