

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE DEAD: MARX'S VAMPIRES

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Abstract: This article aims to show the importance of the vampire metaphor to Marx's work. In so doing, it challenges previous attempts to explain Marx's use of the metaphor with reference to literary style, nineteenth-century gothic or Enlightenment rationalism. Instead, the article accepts the widespread view linking the vampire to capital, but argues that Marx's specific use of this link can be properly understood only in the context of his critique of political economy and, in particular, the political economy of the dead.

Towards the end of Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx employs one of his usual dramatic and rhetorical devices: 'If money comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,' he says, then 'capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt'.² The comment is a reminder of the extent to which the theme of blood and horror runs through the pages of *Capital*. According to Stanley Hyman, there are in *Capital* two forms of horror. The first concerns the bloody legislation against vagabondage, describing the way that agricultural peoples were driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds and then 'whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system'. The second concerns the horrors experienced by people in the colonies, 'the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population . . . the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins'.³ But to these we might add a third form of horror: the constant sucking of the blood of the Western working class by the bourgeois class. This form is nothing less than the horror of a property-owning class that appears to be vampire-like in its desire and ability to suck the life out of the working class.

There has in recent years been a mass of literature on the spectre or ghostly in Marx's work, heavily influenced by or written in response to Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. What has not been discussed at any length in this context has been Marx's use of the vampire metaphor.⁴ This is perhaps surprising,

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² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 926.

³ Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers* (New York, 1962), p. 145. The citations are from *Capital*, pp. 899 and 915.

⁴ Derrida, for example, subsumes the question of the vampire into the spectre. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the*

first, because of the obvious gothic connection between the ghost and the vampire — yet even the one sustained attempt to ‘theorize Gothic Marxism’ does not deal with the vampire⁵ — and, second, because the vampire metaphor plays a significant role in Marx’s work, a role perhaps even more significant than the ghostly or spectral. This article aims to show this significance, first by identifying the extent to which the vampire and associated metaphors run through Marx’s work, then by outlining some interpretations of Marx’s use of the metaphor, before pointing out their weaknesses. This will allow a move towards a fuller understanding of Marx’s vampire metaphor, by situating it in the very heart of Marx’s work: in his critique of political economy.

Marx’s Metaphor

Terrell Carver has suggested that Marx uses the vampire metaphor three times in *Capital*.⁶ Marx claims that ‘capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks’. He also comments that the prolongation of the working day into the night ‘only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour’; thus ‘the vampire will not let go “while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited”’.⁷ But if one also explores the text for comments that appear to *derive* from the vampire motif but fail to mention the vampire explicitly, one finds a wealth of additional material. Capital ‘sucks up the worker’s value-creating power’ and is dripping with blood.⁸ Lace-making institutions exploiting children are described as ‘blood-sucking’, while US capital is said to be financed by the ‘capitalized blood of children’.⁹ The appropriation of labour is described as the ‘life-blood of capitalism’, while the state is said to have here and there interposed itself ‘as a barrier to the transformation of children’s blood into capital’.¹⁰

If we take an even greater textual license with *Capital*, the motif appears even more apparent. In the chapter on the working day, Marx compares the historical development of the factory system with other historical forms of domination, such as Athenian aristocracy, the Norman barons, the American slave-owners and the feudal *corvée*. Regarding the latter, he notes that the *New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London, 1994), p. 155. The literature on the ghostly/spectral in Marx’s work is now too numerous to list.

⁵ Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley, 1993).

⁶ Terrell Carver, ‘Making Capital out of Vampires’, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 15 (June 1984); Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester, 1998), p. 14.

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, pp. 342, 367, 416. The citation within the last of these is from Engels’ article ‘The Ten Hours Bill’ (1850).

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, pp. 716, 926.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 598, 920.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 382, 1007.

legal mechanisms through which peasants performed forced labour on behalf of landowners could be stretched well beyond the stated number of days. The example he gives is of Wallachian peasants performing forced labour on behalf of the Wallachian boyars: 'For Moldavia the regulations are even stricter. "The 12 *corvée* days of the *Règlement organique*," cried a boyar, drunk with victory, "amount to 365 days in the year."' ¹¹ The source Marx cites for this quote is É. Regnault's *Histoire politique et sociale des principautés danubiennes* (1855). The 'Wallachian boyar' in the text turns out to be none other than Vlad the Impaler: Vlad Dracula. ¹²

If we extend the textual licence and situate *Capital* among other texts produced during its writing, we find even more connections. In the *Grundrisse* capital is described as 'constantly sucking in living labour as its soul, vampire-like', or as 'sucking its living soul out of labour'. ¹³ In the 'Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association', given while he was in the middle of writing *Capital*, Marx describes British industry as 'vampire-like', which 'could but live by sucking blood, and children's blood too'. ¹⁴ As Marx was putting the finishing touches to Volume 1 of *Capital*, he wrote to Engels that a number of industries were being 'called to order' in a report by the Children's Employment Commission: 'The fellows who were to be called to order, among them the big metal manufacturers, and especially the vampires of "domestic industry", maintained a cowardly silence.' ¹⁵ At one point Marx shifts from the vampire to the werewolf, though the implication is the same: 'So far, we have observed the drive towards the extension of the working day, and the werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour, in an area where capital's monstrous outrages . . . caused it at last to be bound by the chains of legal regulations.' ¹⁶

If one extends such a textual analysis to other major and minor works by Marx, it is clear that the vampire motif, if not the vampire himself, runs like a red thread through his work. In *The Class Struggles in France* he compares the National Assembly to 'a vampire living off the blood of the June insurgents'. ¹⁷ In *The Civil War in France* the agents of the French state, such as 'the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 348. Engels reiterates the point in *Anti-Dühring*, trans. Emile Burns (Moscow, 1947), p. 191.

¹² Christopher Frayling, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London, 1991), p. 84.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 646, 660.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, 'Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association' (1864), in *The First International and After*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 79.

¹⁵ Marx to Engels, 22 June 1867, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 42 (London, 1987), p. 383.

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p. 353.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850* (1850), in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 88.

notary, advocate, executor, and other judicial vampires', are described as 'blood-suckers'.¹⁸ In the *Eighteenth Brumaire* he comments that 'the bourgeois order . . . has become a vampire that sucks out its [the smallholding peasantry's] blood and brains and throws them into the alchemist's cauldron'.¹⁹ The Wallachian boyar also makes a reappearance in both the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France*.²⁰

The theme of the vampire had also been present in the work of both Marx and Engels throughout the 1840s. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, the sociological observations of which filtered through into Marx's *Capital*, Engels had already toyed with the idea of the 'vampire property-holding class'.²¹ In *The Holy Family* the two writers comment about a character of Eugene Sue's that 'he cannot possibly lead that kind of life without sucking the blood out of his little principality in Germany to the last drop like a vampire'.²² In his unfinished journalism as 'The Correspondent from the Mosel', Marx had planned to write five sections, the fourth (and never written) of which was to be on 'The Vampires of the Mosel Region',²³ and in an essay on the Prussian Constitution of 1849, Marx comments on 'the Christian-Germanic sovereign and his accomplices, the whole host of lay-about, parasites and vampires sucking the blood of the people'.²⁴

It is clear, then, that as a metaphor the vampire and its connotations play a key role in many of Marx's formulations. The question I wish to address here is: Why? More specifically, what does Marx mean when he describes capital as vampire-like? To do so, I begin with a range of possible answers to such questions and point to their limitations. This will take me to Franco Moretti's argument in a major essay on the topic, which I will use as a springboard into a fuller answer incorporating important aspects of Marx's critique of political economy.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (1871), in *The First International and After*, ed. Fernbach, p. 215. The 'First Draft' of the text also comments on this 'sucking' tendency (p. 249).

¹⁹ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. Fernbach, p. 242.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181; Marx, *Civil War in France*, p. 219.

²¹ Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) (London, 1969), p. 264. We have already noted Marx lifting this trope from Engels' essay on the English Ten Hours Bill. As well as the comment cited by Marx above, in that article Engels also describes the system as 'bloodsucking'. See 'The Ten Hours Question' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10 (London, 1978), pp. 271–2.

²² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism* (1845), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (London, 1975), p. 203.

²³ Karl Marx, 'Justification of the Correspondent from the Mosel', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (London, 1975), p. 334.

²⁴ Karl Marx, 'The New Prussian Constitution' (1849), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9 (London, 1977), p. 430.

Situating the Vampire

One interpretation of Marx's use of the vampire metaphor might be to suggest that, in and of itself, the metaphor is merely another literary device employed by Marx. As is well known, far from being the dry and dull economic tome some perceive it to be, *Capital* is, as with all of Marx's work, full of historical, philosophical and literary allusions. Robert Paul Wolff comments:

To read the opening chapters of *Capital* is to be plunged into an extraordinary literary world, quite unlike anything in the previous, or indeed subsequent, history of political economy. The text is rich in literary and historical allusions to the entire corpus of Western culture . . . Marx invokes religious images, Mephistophelean images, political images. He writes now mockingly and scornfully, now soberly and with proper professorial seriousness, now angrily and bitterly. He swings with baffling speed from the most abstruse metaphysical reflections to vividly sensual evocations of the sufferings and struggles of English workers against the oppression of their bosses. At one instant he is a polemicist, writing to the moment. At the next, he is a pedant, calling down authorities in six languages from twenty centuries to confirm his etymological tracings and analytical speculations.²⁵

Similarly, Marshall Berman builds his well-known reading of Marx's 'modernism' around the latter's 'luminous, incandescent prose' and 'brilliant images', while Stanley Hyman comments that 'we get closer to the essential nature of *Capital* if we deal with it, not as science, social science, or exhortation, but as imaginative literature'.²⁶ On this view, one might be inclined to argue that Marx's references to the vampire are yet another literary tool in his armoury — and nothing more. 'Philosophically the work is not melodrama; aesthetically it is . . . Marx has yielded to the almost irresistible aesthetic temptation to prefigure the revolution as drama.' In this sense '*Capital* is a dramatic poem, or possibly a dramatic epic . . . If we are not distracted by the superficial diffusion of the book, its elaborate and energetic logic and its accumulation of evidence, we see that its concealed structure is mythical.' As in all melodrama, the actors become dehumanized — they are dealt with as personifications of economic categories or, worse, they become other sorts of creatures — such as vampires.²⁷ Thus Marx's use of the vampire is merely one of his 'occult tropes', used because he recognized 'how crucial it was to give an imaginative account of things'.²⁸

²⁵ Robert Paul Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky: On the Literary Structure of 'Capital'* (Amherst, MA, 1988), p. 13.

²⁶ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, 1983), p. 91; Hyman, *Tangled Bank*, p. 133.

²⁷ Wylie Sypher, 'Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama', *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 10 (3) (1948), pp. 431–44, p. 430.

²⁸ Andrew Smith, 'Reading Wealth in Nigeria: Occult Capitalism and Marx's Vampires', *Historical Materialism*, 9 (2001), pp. 39–59, pp. 44, 47.

To this interpretation might be added a second one, which situates Marx's metaphor in the wider context of nineteenth-century gothic. We know that Marx enjoyed reading horror stories, and we know that the vampire was a popular literary form in the nineteenth century. While the best-known novel of the genre, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, was not published until 1897, after Marx's death, the vampire in general had had plenty of coverage prior to that. James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampire*, for example, serialized the year before the publication of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, stretched to 220 chapters over 868 pages.

Cultural and literary studies have come back to the meaning of the gothic in general and the vampire in particular time and again. Time and again, attention has focused on the vampire's alien features — its 'Otherness', in the *lingua franca* of contemporary theory. Donna Haraway, for example, writes that 'defined by their categorical ambiguity and troubling mobility, vampires do not rest easy (or easily) in the boxes labelled good and bad. Always transported and shifting, the vampire's native soil is more nutritious, and more *unheimlich*, than that.'²⁹ Like the monster in general, the vampire is the 'harbinger of category crisis', resisting easy categorization in the 'order of things'. As a form of monster, the vampire disrupts the usual rules of interaction, occupying an essentially fluid site where despite its otherness it cannot be entirely separated from nature and man. As simultaneously inside and outside, the monster disrupts the politics of identity and the security of borders.³⁰ The vampire is a harbinger of 'category crisis' because, again as with the monster in general, he or she represents a form of difference.

Within cultural studies many writers have connected this difference with the scapegoat, and thus with oppressed and marginalized groups. Following the connection between the monster and the scapegoat drawn by René Girard,³¹ the vampire has been interpreted as the figure of the Jew,³² a transgressive sexuality either in general³³ or in a particular form such as the homosexual,³⁴ and travellers of all sorts. In particular, it has been argued that

²⁹ D.J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Onco_Mouse™* (London, 1997), pp. 214–15.

³⁰ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 3–25; Margit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, 2002).

³¹ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (London, 1986), p. 33.

³² For example, Jules Zanger, 'A Sympathetic Vibration: Dracula and the Jews', *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920*, 34 (1) (1991), pp. 33–45; Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London, 1994), p. 22.

³³ Cynthia A. Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO, 2000), pp. 123–59.

³⁴ Richard Dyer, 'Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Homosexuality as Vampirism', in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. Susannah Radstone (London, 1988).

the vampire represents the terrifying 'otherness' of female sexuality. Tony Thorne points out that our modern perception of the vampire is distorted by the (male) influence of Count Dracula himself, but 'when in the eighteenth century the blood-sucker first made the transition from village ghoul to literary protagonist, via Imperial documents and salon gossip, it was as a *femme fatale*, a lady, that she was cast'. Until well into the nineteenth century, in the wake of John William Polidori's *Vampyre* (1819), the majority of vampires were female.³⁵ This gave ideological weight to those who fought against female sexual emancipation, for the political obsession with blood has 'been instrumental in turning any woman who exhibited even the slightest independent interest in sex into a vampire'.³⁶ More generally, the vampire appears to be identified with the oppressed and outlawed.

Yet while such answers may have an obvious appeal within, say, cultural analyses of film or popular literature, they do not quite fit the bill when it comes to Marx. As Wolff argues, literary style often has ontological presuppositions, and 'Marx's literary style constitutes a deliberate attempt to find the philosophically appropriate language for expressing the ontological structure of the social world'.³⁷ Much as *Capital* may be read as a work of high literary art, its dominant metaphors and ironic structure serve a deliberate philosophical and political purpose. The choice of metaphor is thus philosophically and politically important: through it, Marx aims to make a substantive point about the social world. Since the vampire is a parasite, Marx could have simply chosen the term 'parasite' or 'leech' or something similar; but he chose not to. Moreover, when he uses the vampire he is hardly using it as a gendered term or with reference to transgressive sexuality; nor, it must be added, does the vampire motif appear in his discussions of Judaism in 'On the Jewish Question'. Of the many points Marx tries to make about the social world, none of them can be read as a critique of 'Otherness'; Marx was hardly an existential or postmodern cultural theorist *avant le lettre*.

An alternative way into the subject might be to read Marx's use of the vampire metaphor in the context of the kind of writers we know Marx was familiar with who had also at some point concerned themselves with the vampire. On this score, Carver situates Marx's vampire metaphor in the longer history of interest in the vampire expressed by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers. He suggests that Marx's approach to the vampire 'was every bit as rationalist as one would expect, having its roots in the *philosophes* themselves'.³⁸ A fair amount of historical and literary evidence might be adduced

³⁵ Tony Thorne, *Children of the Night: Of Vampires and Vampirism* (London, 1999), pp. 43, 46, 231–3.

³⁶ Bram Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Culture* (New York, 1996), p. 91; also see Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago, 1995).

³⁷ Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*, pp. 20, 43, 78–9.

³⁸ Carver, 'Making Capital out of Vampires'; Carver, *Postmodern Marx*, pp. 16–18.

for this claim. The eighteenth century was indeed a period of unprecedented interest in the vampire. The century saw a large number of 'vampire epidemics': in Istria (1672), East Prussia (1710, 1721, 1750), Hungary (1725–30), Austrian Serbia (1725–32), Silesia (1755), Wallachia (1756) and Russia (1772).³⁹ The word 'vampyre' first entered the English language in the 1680s (not 1734 as the OED has it) and in the French in the 1690s (becoming a household word after 1746). It was a familiar word in scholarly debate in Germany by the 1720s.⁴⁰ Laurence Rickels estimates that between 1728 and the early 1840s some forty treatises on vampirism were researched and published at German and French universities.⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, then, the question of the vampire thus became an important issue for Enlightenment thinkers. As Christopher Frayling puts it, the age of reason was much perplexed by the question of vampirism.⁴²

In general, the *philosophes*' assumption was that since the vampire was beyond the bounds of possibility, the vampire itself was either a subject of no interest or, better still, a subject to be dismissed as a product of ignorant and unenlightened minds. Voltaire's entry for 'Vampires' in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) begins with a rhetorical and dismissive question: 'What! Is it in our eighteenth century that vampires exist? Is it after the reigns of Locke, Shaftesbury, Trenchard, and Collins? Is it under those of D'Alembert, Diderot, St. Lambert, and Duclos, that we believe in vampires?'⁴³ In the same vein, the two 'most eminent physicians' sent by Maria Theresa to ascertain the exact nature of the occurrences in Silesia in 1755 concluded that 'it was all the result of vain fears, superstitious beliefs, the dark, disturbed imagination, simplicity and ignorance of the people'.⁴⁴ In a slightly different vein, Rousseau concedes that in one sense vampires do indeed exist — in the minds of those who had attested to their existence — and that this existence is important because it raises questions concerning how one interprets the world and, more important, the kinds of authorities that verify such interpretations. In a letter to Christophe de Beaumont, the Archbishop of Paris, Rousseau observes that 'if there is in the world an attested history, it is just that of vampires. Nothing is lacking; depositions, certificates of notables, surgeons, curés and magistrates. The proof in law is utterly complete. Yet with all this, who actually believes in vampires? Will we all be condemned for

³⁹ Frayling, *Vampyres*, pp. 19, 27.

⁴⁰ Katharina M. Wilson, 'The History of the Word "Vampire"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46 (4) (1985), pp. 577–83.

⁴¹ Laurence A. Rickels, *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis, 1999), p. 15.

⁴² Frayling, *Vampyres*, p. 23.

⁴³ M. De Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, Vol. II (London, n.d.), p. 560.

⁴⁴ Cited in Franco Venturi, *Italy and the Enlightenment: Studies in a Comparative Century*, trans. Susan Corsi (London, 1972), pp. 123–4.

not believing in them?’⁴⁵ For Rousseau, vampires are ‘miraculous’ phenomena ‘attested’ to by all the major authorities, with the corollary that the same authorities will thus condemn us if we fail to accept the claims for the existence of vampires. In other words, belief in vampires is evidence of the way the institutions of authority are legitimized by superstitious and unenlightened views.

So one source of Marx’s vampire metaphor may well have been the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its main thinkers. But while the unprecedented eighteenth-century interest and Enlightenment concern with the vampire is likely to have influenced Marx — and is undoubtedly a more plausible explanation than the suggestion that Marx’s use of the vampire is linked to his use of images drawn from the pre-capitalist world⁴⁶ — as an answer to the question of why Marx is so interested in the vampire metaphor it is insufficient. Carver’s suggestion that in using the vampire metaphor Marx was ‘alluding to the arguments of the *philosophes*, Rousseau and Voltaire among others, that the true significance of . . . vampires and other popular superstitions was to bolster the sacred and secular authorities in society’,⁴⁷ does not seem to be borne out by the citations from Marx given above. When Marx uses the vampire metaphor, he seems to be far from ridiculing it as a superstitious belief. While he may not be suggesting that the vampire really exists, he uses it as a metaphor to capture something very real indeed, namely a particular relation between human beings. It is true that Marx sometimes makes reference to institutions of authority when using the metaphor. As the examples cited earlier show, he refers to the French National Assembly as a vampire living off the blood of the June insurgents, and to other agents of the French state as ‘blood-suckers’ or ‘judicial vampires’. But *pace* Rousseau, Marx is not suggesting that the vampire is *useful* to the authorities by bolstering their position of interpretive power. Rather, he is clearly suggesting that the authorities themselves are like vampires. Although Rousseau attempts to situate the vampire in the wider context of authority in society, his position and Marx’s are by no means the same. While it may be that ‘Rousseau may have been attracted to the vampire image because it offered a vivid means of symbolising modes of

⁴⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Lettre a C. De Beaumont’, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, IV (Paris, 1969), p. 987.

⁴⁶ This is a claim some have made following the work of Taussig. Smith, for example, claims that ‘Marx’s rhetorical fulcrum . . . relies on an imaginative juxtaposition with images drawn from the pre-capitalist world’ (Smith, ‘Reading Wealth in Nigeria’, p. 45). The argument follows Michael Taussig’s work on the occult tropes involved in the culture and resistance of the subaltern worker, in his *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980). But there is little evidence of the vampire as opposed to, say, the devil, in these tropes; nor is there any evidence that this was Marx’s source.

⁴⁷ Carver, ‘Making Capital out of Vampires’; *Postmodern Marx*, p. 18.

mutual dependence in society which were not benign',⁴⁸ it is not at all clear that he is doing with the vampire image what Marx was. His vision may have been of a 'master–slave dialectic, with teeth', but it does not appear to have the same implications as Marx's.

Now, there is in some Enlightenment thought a little of Marx's sense. It can be found, for example, in Voltaire's entry on vampires in his *Dictionary*. Voltaire comments that 'in both these cities [Paris and London] there were stock-jobbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces.' He adds that 'the true vampires are the churchmen, who eat at the expense of both kings and people'.⁴⁹ Similar comments can be found in other eighteenth-century writings. In England in the 1730s *The Craftsman* presented Walpole and the past and present directors of the South Sea Company as vampires sucking the blood of their country;⁵⁰ and during the 1750s rumours of a bloodsucking monarch circulated throughout Paris, remaining part of radical-popular folklore until the revolution of 1789.⁵¹ This gets us closer to Marx's position. Yet, as I shall now aim to show, it misses what is truly distinctive about Marx's position.

Living and Dead Labour

One standard interpretation of the vampire is to see him as representative of a feudal aristocrat. 'Vampires are always aristocrats', we are told.⁵² Likewise, Chris Baldick writes that Dracula 'turns . . . towards an older kind of Gothic novel in which the bourgeoisie flirtatiously replays its victory over the baronial despot: Dracula is feudalism's death warmed up'.⁵³ In contrast to this view, however, is the far more common view which holds that the vampire is in fact more representative of capital and a bourgeois class than land and the aristocracy. This view is most closely associated with Franco Moretti's essay

⁴⁸ Christopher Frayling and Robert Wokler, 'From the Orang-utan to the Vampire: Towards an Anthropology of Rousseau', in *Rousseau After 200 years: Proceedings of the Cambridge Bicentennial Colloquium*, ed. R.A. Leigh (Cambridge, 1982), p. 118; Frayling, *Vampyres*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, pp. 560–2.

⁵⁰ See Vincent Carretta, *The Snarling Muse: Verbal and Political Satire from Pope to Churchill* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 66.

⁵¹ Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (New York, 1998), pp. 134–5.

⁵² Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sodomachism, and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), p. 20.

⁵³ Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford, 1987), p. 148. It should be said that this view contradicts Baldick's earlier (pp. 128–31) and far more compelling argument concerning the vampire as representative of capital.

on the dialectic of fear. Situating his account in the context of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Moretti disregards the conventional account of the vampire as an aristocrat. Stoker's *Dracula*, for example, lacks servants, drives the carriage, cooks the meals, makes the beds and cleans the castle. He also lacks the aristocrat's conspicuous consumption in the form of food, clothing, stately homes, hunting, theatre-going, and so on. Moreover, the count knows that servants are unproductive workers. Far from being representative of the aristocratic class, *Dracula's* desire for blood is read by Moretti as a metaphor for capital's desire for accumulation. The more he gets, the stronger he becomes, and the weaker the living on whom he feeds become. Invoking Marx on capital as vampire, Moretti suggests that 'like capital, *Dracula* is impelled towards a continuous growth, an unlimited expansion of his domain: accumulation is inherent in his nature'. This vampire is thus 'capital that is not ashamed of itself'.⁵⁴

Moretti's essay has been hugely influential in developing a reading of the vampire as capital and thus capital as vampire. Haraway comments that 'the vampire is . . . the marauding figure of unnaturally breeding capital, which penetrates every whole being and sucks it dry in the lusty production and vastly unequal accumulation of wealth',⁵⁵ while Nicholas Rance notes that in novels such as Rymer's the metaphor of the vampire is used in precisely the same sense as in Marx — 'the Gothic metaphor . . . turns out to be merely a projection of the ruling capitalist economy'.⁵⁶ Ken Gelder comments:

the representation of capital or the capitalist as vampire was, then, common to both Marx and to popular fiction in the nineteenth century. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this representation mobilised vampire fiction at this time, to produce a striking figure *defined* by excess and unrestrained appetite.⁵⁷

Put simply, for many writers the vampire is 'a sanguinary capitalist'.⁵⁸

There is a great deal of mileage in Moretti's argument and, given the links Moretti makes with Marx, his argument has become the standard reading of the role of the metaphor in Marx's work. In the context of Marx's work it is clear that the vampire as capital is a far more compelling argument than the vampire as aristocrat, Jew, homosexual or some radical undefined 'Other'. Yet Moretti's argument does not quite paint the full picture. Such a picture, I

⁵⁴ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London, 1983), pp. 90, 91, 94. I ignore here Moretti's sub-theme concerning monopoly capital and nationalism, as it is irrelevant to my argument.

⁵⁵ Haraway, *Modest_Witness*, p. 215.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists* (Rutherford, 1991), p. 60.

⁵⁷ Gelder, *Reading the Vampire*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (London, 1993), p. 159.

suggest, can be created only by situating Marx's vampire metaphor in the context of his critique of political economy and, in particular, the political economy of the dead.⁵⁹

The way to understand Marx's vampire is less as a nineteenth-century cultural motif and more as an offshoot of Marx's preoccupation with the dead.

The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past. It cannot begin its own work until it has sloughed off all its superstitious regard for the past. Earlier revolutions have needed world-historical reminiscences to deaden their awareness of their own content. In order to arrive at its own content the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.⁶⁰

The idea that we must let the dead bury their dead is one Marx adopted from the Gospel of Matthew ('Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead" ' [8:22]), and was fond of repeating. When Ruge had written to him despairing of the lack of revolutionary movement in 1843, Marx replied, 'Your letter, my dear friend, is a fine elegy, a funeral song, that takes one's breath away; but there is absolutely nothing political about it.' He adds:

Nevertheless, you have infected me, your theme is still not exhausted, I want to add the finale, and when everything is at an end, give me your hand, so that we may begin again from the beginning. Let the dead bury their dead and mourn them. On the other hand, it is enviable to be the first to enter the new life alive; that is to be our lot.⁶¹

He repeats the point in the *The German Ideology*.⁶²

The phrase forms part of Marx's constant reminder that any revolutionary movement should not be weighed down with the past: as he and Engels put it in the *Manifesto*, whereas 'in bourgeois society . . . the past dominates the present', under communism 'the present dominates the past'.⁶³ But it also alerts us to the fact that the dead play a significant role in Marx's work. In the Preface to the first edition of *Capital* he comments that 'we suffer not only

⁵⁹ A longer version of the argument, in the context of Marx's distinctiveness on these issues compared to Burke and fascism, can be found in Mark Neocleous, *The Monstrous and the Dead* (Cardiff, 2004).

⁶⁰ Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 149.

⁶¹ Marx to Ruge, May 1843, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London, 1975), p. 134.

⁶² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (1846), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (London, 1976), p. 137. Likewise: 'The capitalist gentlemen will never want for fresh exploitable flesh and blood, and will let the dead bury their dead' — Karl Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital' (1849), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9 (London, 1977), p. 226.

⁶³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (London, 1976), p. 499.

from the living, but from the dead. *Le mort saisit le vif!* [the dead man clutches on to the living!].⁶⁴ His reference is to the ‘inherited evils’ that, alongside the ‘modern evils’, oppress us — archaic and outmoded modes of production with their accompanying anachronistic social and political relations. But it also suggests that one way to understand the vampire motif is through the role of the dead in Marx’s critique of political economy.

Fundamental to Marx’s critique of political economy is his understanding of the dual character of both the commodity and labour. Marx was at pains to show that the dual nature of labour — as necessary and surplus labour — was a key component of his argument. In a letter to Engels in August 1867 he comments that an understanding of the double nature of labour is one of ‘the best points in my book’.⁶⁵ We might take these comments to also refer to another dualism of labour: living and dead labour.

Dismissing the view that capital is something distinct from labour — a value-producing entity in its own right, for example — Marx argues that capital is nothing but accumulated labour. His distinction is thus between accumulated labour and labour *per se* or, as he often puts it, accumulated labour versus ‘living labour’. ‘What is the growth of accumulated capital? Growth of the power of accumulated labour over living labour’; ‘capital does not consist in accumulated labour serving living labour as a means for new production. It consists in living labour serving accumulated labour as a means for maintaining and multiplying the exchange value of the latter’.⁶⁶ But if the distinction is between accumulated and living labour, then it makes perfect sense to treat the former, capital, as ‘dead labour’. Hence ‘the rule of the capitalist over the worker is nothing but the rule of the independent conditions of labour over the worker . . . the rule of things over man, of dead labour over living’.⁶⁷ In capitalist production, then, ‘living labour appears merely as a means to realize objectified, dead labour, to penetrate it with an animating soul while losing its own soul to it’.⁶⁸ The appropriation by the capitalist of the worker’s productive powers is a means by which ‘living labour makes instrument and material in the production process into the body of its soul and thereby resurrects them from the dead’.⁶⁹ Inactive machinery is useless — dead — without the active force of living labour: ‘Iron rusts; wood rots . . . Living labour must seize on these things [and] change them from merely possible into real and effective use-values’. In other words, labour must ‘awaken them from the dead’.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p. 91.

⁶⁵ Marx to Engels, 24 August 1867, *Collected Works*, Vol. 42 (London, 1987), p. 407.

⁶⁶ Marx, ‘Wage Labour and Capital’, pp. 213, 215.

⁶⁷ Marx, *Capital*, pp. 342, 989–90.

⁶⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 461.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁷⁰ Marx, *Capital*, p. 289.

It is this distinction between 'living labour' and the 'dead' (that is, 'accumulated') labour embodied in capital that provides the initial aptness of the vampire image.⁷¹ But once this aptness is recognized, a host of connected readings follow. Because the production of surplus value relies on living labour working on dead labour, the length of the working day is of crucial political importance. Marx had already pointed out in 'Wage Labour and Capital' that 'capital does not *live* only on labour. A lord, at once aristocratic and barbarous, it drags with it into the grave the corpses of its slaves, whole catacombs of workers who perish in the crises.'⁷² In *Capital* this possibility of capital literally sucking the life out of the workers is fed into the paramount political question concerning the length of the working day. Capital, with its desire for endless and incessant accumulation, runs the risk of literally working the working class to death. 'By extending the working day, therefore, capitalist production . . . not only produces a deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal moral and physical conditions of development and activity, but also produces the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself.'⁷³ Thus the struggle for legal limits on the working day is nothing less than a struggle through which workers can be saved 'from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death'.⁷⁴

Given the political importance attached to the length of the working day, it is unsurprising to find that the vampire motif is one of the central tropes around which the chapter on the working day is structured. Indeed, the three explicit uses of the vampire metaphor in *Capital* all occur in the chapter on the working day. Marx opens the chapter by describing capital as dead labour, which 'vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour', returns to the point mid-way through the chapter by commenting on the way the 'vampire thirst for the living blood of labour' prolongs the working day into the night, and ends the chapter quoting Engels on the unwillingness of the vampire to let go while there remains a muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited. It is also in this chapter that the Wallachian boyar makes his appearance (as does the 'werewolf-like' hunger for surplus labour and the identification of the desire to transform children's blood into capital).

This argument also helps to shed a little more light on the question of alienation from Marx's earlier work and the related 'mystery' of commodity fetishism. For the sake of brevity, we can identify two aspects of Marx's arguments concerning alienation. On the one hand, he identifies the effects of capitalist production on the worker. Under capitalism 'the realization of labour appears as a *loss of reality* for the worker, objectification as *loss of and bondage to the*

⁷¹ Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow*, p. 129.

⁷² Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital', p. 228.

⁷³ Marx, *Capital*, p. 376.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

object, and appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*'.⁷⁵ In such a system human beings are alienated from the activity of labour, from the product and from other human beings and thereby also from themselves. This argument relies in part on Marx's related argument concerning the sensuous creature. In damaging human beings, capital damages them as sensuous creatures — feeling, experiencing, sensing creatures. 'To be *sensuous*, i.e. to be real, is to be an object of sense, a *sensuous* object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself, objects of one's sense perception. To be sensuous is to *suffer*.' At the same time: 'Man as an objective being is therefore a *suffering* being, and because he feels his suffering, he is a *passionate* being. Passion is man's essential power vigorously striving to obtain its object.' Passion is thus central to man's species-being.⁷⁶

Marx here reverses Max Stirner's comments on sensuousness. Marx cites Stirner as conceiving of sensuousness as a vampire: 'sensuousness, like a vampire, sucks all the marrow and blood from the life of man'.⁷⁷ But for Marx the reverse is true: sensuousness is the foundation of our species-being; it is the vampire-like capital that is the death of true sensuousness. Thus only with the supersession of private property will human sensuousness be able to come into its own.

The supersession of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its object has become a social, *human* object, made by man for man. The *senses* have therefore become *theoreticians* in their immediate praxis. They relate to the *thing* for its own sake, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, and vice-versa.⁷⁸

Only under communism will the human senses be able to be realized in the fullest sense, and man once more be able to *feel* like a genuinely *living* creature, as opposed to one ruled by the dead (capital). Only vampires (and necrophiliacs) find anything sensuous in the dead.

On the other hand, Marx's argument in the 1840s also concerns the capitalist and the role of capital. 'The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* and the greater will become that treasure which neither moths nor maggots can consume — your *capital*.' Thus although sensuous powers are

⁷⁵ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 324, emphasis in original.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390, emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ Cited in Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, p. 104.

⁷⁸ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 352.

alienated under the rule of capital, the capitalist is able to recuperate the estranged sensuality through the power of capital itself:

Everything which the political economist takes from you in terms of life and humanity, he restores to you in the form of *money* and *wealth*, and everything which you are unable to do, your money can do for you: it can eat, drink, go dancing, go to the theatre, it can appropriate art, learning, historical curiosities, political power, it can travel, it is *capable* of doing all these things for you.⁷⁹

As Terry Eagleton points out, capital here becomes a phantasmal body, a monster which stalks abroad while its master sleeps, consuming the pleasures the master forgoes. The more the capitalist forswears any sensuous delights, the more fulfilment he may reap second-hand, so to speak. Thus 'both capitalist and capital are images of the living dead'.⁸⁰

This argument in Marx's 'early works' becomes transformed in *Capital* into an account of commodity fetishism. While many writers have highlighted the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' that run through Marx's discussion in the section on the fetishism of the commodity and its secret, and have consistently pointed to the 'magical', 'spectral' and 'spiritual' dimensions to his argument, what is relevant here is the fact that the fetish in question concerns something Marx is describing as dead. Because capital is dead labour, the desire to live one's life through commodities is the desire to live one's life through the dead. What Marx is doing here is identifying nothing less than the 'necromancy that surrounds the products of labour' (a necromancy that 'vanishes as soon as we come to other forms of production', i.e. communism).⁸¹ The 'horror' of fetishism is of course that it conjures up 'fantastic' — because 'transcendent' and 'mysterious' — beings.⁸² But the horror also lies in the fact that these beings are conjured up out of the dead. On this basis we might say that the 'secret' of commodity fetishism is that it allows the commodity fetish to *partake of the realm of the dead*. The trick of fetishism is thus that it is the inorganic realm of the dead which nonetheless makes the dead appear alive.⁸³ The vampire metaphor is thus particularly apt in this context, for the metaphor is in part about the embodiment of the rule of the dead over the living.⁸⁴ The vampire is dead and yet not dead: he or she is 'undead' in the sense of being a 'dead' person who manages to live thanks to the sensuousness of the living. In being brought back to life in this way the

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁸⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990), p. 200.

⁸¹ Marx, *Capital*, p. 169, emphasis added.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 163–5.

⁸³ Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), p. 148.

⁸⁴ See here Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London, 1991), p. 221.

vampire/commodity comes to rule — through a powerful dialectic of fear and desire.

I have been arguing that Marx's use of the vampire metaphor has been hitherto either neglected or misunderstood. In one sense of course Marx was indeed employing a rhetorical literary device, one gleaned not from 'classic literature' as many of his allusions are, nor from any of the 'great thinkers' he so often refers to either directly or elliptically, but one which plays on one of the many popular if irrational beliefs of the time. But this was not *simply* a rhetorical device, for Marx uses it to illustrate one of the central dynamics of capitalist production — the distinction between living and dead labour, a distinction that picks up on a more general theme in his work: the desire to create a society founded on the *living* of full and creative lives rather than one founded on the *rule of the dead*. Writing for readers reared on and steeped in the central motifs of popular literature, Marx thus invoked one of its most powerful metaphors to force upon them a sense of the appalling nature of capital: its affinity with death. The vampire, as a 'monster', is of course connected to the root of that term: from *monstrare*, meaning 'to show forth', *monstra*, meaning to warn or show, *monstrum*, meaning 'that which reveals', or 'that which warns', and *monere*, meaning 'to warn'. The vampire as monster both *demonstrates* the capabilities of capital and acts as a *warning* about it.

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