Desire

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December 1, 2021

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Satisfying Wants

On the opening page of the first section and chapter of *Capital, Vol. 1* Karl Marx writes:

> A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence or indirectly as means of production.[1] (Marx, 1967: 43)

This statement is accompanied by a footnote citing the economist Nicolas Barbon proclaiming that 'desire implies want, it is the appetite of the mind, and as natural as hunger to the body' (Marx, 1967: 43).[2] Marx may not have held that desire is natural or ahistorical, as Barbon implies, but in *Capital* the content and specificity of human desire is not his concern; it 'makes no difference'. What would it take to include desire in his analysis, to ask where desires 'spring from', to insist that they do make a difference or to explore how they could become different?

In his *Companion to Marx's Capital* David Harvey repeatedly uses a trio of words – 'wants, needs or desires' – to capture what use-values satisfy in humans (Harvey, 2010: 16, 22, 25, 129, 327). In *Das Kapital* Marx tends to use the German word *Bedürfnis*, which the two major English translations generally render as 'want' rather than 'need' (although *Bedürfnis* implies both).[3] However, it is less easy to draw neat distinctions between the three words Harvey chooses than it might seem, especially in the context of Marx's arguments, which are so keen to push the complicated and complicating question of human motivations and passions aside. 'Want' is more neutral-sounding than 'desire': it implies a more tepid, less passionate kind of feeling; it is also less natural-sounding than 'need'. According to Giorgio Agamben, 'desire' is 'tied to imagination, insatiable and boundless' whereas 'need', its inverse, is 'tied to corporeal reality, measurable and theoretically able to be satisfied' (1993: 26). But Marx perceives that even those wants that appear necessary for survival are also historical and cultural, suggesting that the realms Agamben outlines are not as distinct as he claims. Even seemingly 'natural wants', Marx says, 'such as food, clothing, fuel, and housing', change not only according to climate or geographical location but also according to social context: 'the number and extent of his so-called necessary wants, as also the modes

[1] In the Ben Fowkes translation 'wants' is translated as 'needs' and 'fancy' is translated as 'the imagination', which perhaps better captures the double character of the commodity, that is both material and supersensible (Marx, 1990: 1).

[2] In German Barbon uses the word *Verlangen*.

[3] Marx does not tend to use the words *Begehren* (desire) or *Wunsch* (wish).

of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development' (1967: 168).[4] The limits of satiability are not fixed or eternal; even the stomach is partly governed by fancy. As Theodor Adorno observes in his 'Theses on Need' ['*Thesen über Bedürfnis*']: 'need is a social category' (2017: 102). Distinguishing biological needs from social ones or outlining needs positively is almost impossible: 'existing needs are themselves, in their present form, produced by class society' (Adorno, 2017: 103). With this in mind I will begin by following Harvey in considering want, need and desire together, as intertwined if not interchangeable terms, when considering Marx's discussions of use-value in *Capital*.

Unlike exchange value, which abstracts from the material properties of objects, use-value is related to the properties of objects themselves but only insofar as people care about those properties. Exchange value extinguishes the qualitative differences between use-values and transforms them into quantities. Iron, corn, diamonds, blacking, silk, gold, wheat, linen, coats, bibles – Marx sometimes implies that the qualitative differences between the use-values he discusses are self-evident or inhere in the things themselves, but ultimately use-value is determined by the relations of people *to* things. People want, need or desire use-values due to their qualitative properties, but there can be any number of reasons for wanting, needing or desiring something. Some things might have customary uses (to borrow Marx's example, coats are customarily used for keeping warm), but use-value is not identical to most common-sense definitions of utility and is thus far more capacious than this kind of example might superficially suggest. To make the coat a use-value it doesn't matter what someone does with it once they have it or what they want it for in the first place but simply that they want it.

While it might be empirically the case that some yards of linen are not a coat, when Marx declares that 'coats are not exchanged for coats' as if this were a self-evident fact, we can see the limits of his occasional practice of casually implying an equation of use-value with the material properties of objects (Marx, 1967: 49). Marx's point is simply that there is no reason for someone to exchange something for the exact same thing, but someone might want to exchange a coat for another coat, not only because there are qualitative, material differences between coats themselves – green coats, blue coats, felt coats, velvet coats, trench coats, pea coats, coats with golden trim, coats with floral linings, etc. – but because people might want a different coat to the one they already have for any number of subjective reasons, ranging from the eminently practical to the frankly peculiar: to keep warm, to look fashionable, to wear as a costume in a play, to add to their collection of antique clothing, because this particular coat that is otherwise identical to the one they already own once belonged to their favourite celebrity or former lover, etc. Later, Marx gives the example of a weaver who chooses

[4] Gayle Rubin similarly describes Marx's understanding of need as combining biological, geographical and cultural factors: 'beer is necessary for the reproduction of the English working class, and wine necessary for the French' (Rubin, 2011: 37).

to exchange their linen for a bible for purposes of 'edification' (Marx, 1967: 107), but this specific example of a use for the bible could be substituted for any other; it *makes no difference* what the weaver wants, needs or desires the bible *for* to make the bible a use-value – all that matters is that the weaver wants, needs or desires it. To reiterate: although use-value is subjective rather than objective and is determined by the wants, needs or desires of people, for the purposes of his arguments in *Capital* Marx is only concerned with whether someone wants, needs or desires to exchange something for something else. 'Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects' (Marx, 1967: 87) – in *Capital* Marx's ventriloquized commodities say more than the people who may be interested in them as use-values. What is the *content* of that human interest? Use-value is presented by Marx as 'plain, homely, bodily' (Marx, 1967: 54). 'There is nothing mysterious' about a commodity considered solely in relation to its use, he declares (Marx, 1967: 76). For Marx, value is weird and ethereal whereas use-value is coarse and material: 'The mystical character of commodities does not ... originate in their use-value' (Marx, 1967: 77). Marx demonstrates that value (socially necessary labour time) lies hidden behind exchange value, but human wants, needs and desires also lie hidden behind use-value. Use-values take varied forms, which are dissolved in exchange value, but the forms of want, need and desire that dictate whether they will be exchanged for other use-values are even more varied.

Money, Marx writes, is a 'radical leveller' that 'does away with all distinctions', yet in *Capital* the 'qualitative difference between commodities ... extinguished in money' has a counterpart in his analysis which extinguishes the qualitative differences between wants, needs and desires and effectively excludes them as factors in his analysis of capitalist accumulation (Marx, 1967: 132). Returning to the opening page of *Capital*, Marx declares that 'to discover the uses of things is the work of history' (Marx, 1967: 43). Again he cites Barbon, refuting the economist's statement that things are intrinsically useful by noting that magnets only *became* useful to people once their polarity was discovered. Yet this example implies that use-values inhere in things rather than being dependent on the historically shifting wants, needs and desires of people who not only discover uses for things but also create them. The question remains, therefore, to what extent wants, needs and desires are shaped or determined by history and, more specifically, by living under capitalism in its different stages or phases. To cite György Lukács's famous extension of Marx's analysis of the commodity form in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), under capitalism 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing' (Lukács, 1923). The logic of exchange value extends to social relations so that human subjects confront one another as static, autonomous objects: isolated, compartmentalized, equivalent, thing-like. For Lukács, formal abstraction pervades social life. This implies that people's qualitative desires themselves appear as being as interchangeable as use-values expressed as quantifiable exchange values, an implication pushed further by Adorno, who was more pessimistic than Lukács about the capacity of the proletariat to resist the brutal logic of abstraction.

The status of history here remains ambiguous, however. Is desire something distorted by capitalism that can be excavated or recovered or is it something inseparable from it that can only be sublated or remade? Can desires formed by existing social relations only reproduce those social relations or can they envisage a world beyond them? How would abolishing the commodity form transform desire, meaning both the relations of people to things and the relations between people? If needs were met would desires be obsolete? Adorno implies that this question is impossible to answer: 'If production were immediately, unconditionally and unrestrictedly reorganised according to the satisfaction of needs – even and especially those produced by capitalism – then the needs themselves would be decisively transformed' (Adorno, 2017: 103). This chapter is not an attempt to provide an answer to these questions, nor does it attempt to give an exhaustive or definitive account of Marxist understandings of desire. Instead, by beginning by noting desire's effective absence from the pages of *Capital* I hope to foreground desire's ambiguous and somewhat troubling (or at least troublesome) status within the Marxist tradition, before exploring some scattered examples of attempts to conceptualize desire in more explicit terms than Marx himself articulated.

Desirable Commodities

Descriptions of people's desires do occasionally appear on the pages of *Capital*, but the desiring people imagined are usually bourgeois and their desires are usually for increased profit and power. Marx speaks of their 'love of lucre' and in a section on hoarding describes the 'passionate desire' to stockpile money, picturing avaricious capitalists captivated by gold, by value in its 'glittering incarnation' (Marx, 1967: 215, 130). The hoarder 'makes a sacrifice of the lusts of the flesh to his gold fetish' (Marx, 1967: 133); commodity fetishism begets sexual fetishism and displaces sensuality. Later, he refers to the 'cupidity of mill-owners' whose 'were-wolf's hunger for surplus value' is like a fiendish companion to the 'vampire thirst' of capital for living labour (Marx, 1967: 233, 245). He speaks with pithy disdain of the hypocritical capitalist who may be a sanctimonious 'model citizen, perhaps a Member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals', but notes by way of a visceral metaphor that the heart which 'seems to throb' in the capitalist's breast is not their own but the heart of the worker whose labour power they are intent on exploiting (Marx, 1967: 255). This is a slight twist on a metaphor that appears a few pages earlier: 'a man's heart is a wonderful thing, especially when carried in the purse' (Marx, 1967: 219). The capitalist's purse drips with the blood of the worker's still-beating heart. The desires of the worker are subordinated to and circumscribed by those of the capitalist, whose own libidinal energies are channelled through and satisfied by the market. When discussing workers' consumption in *Capital* Marx's emphasis is on subsistence, on the capitalist's motivation to pay wages which cover only the bare minimum necessary for the reproduction of labour power (with the usual caveat that the perceived minimum is culturally and

historically variable) (Marx, 1967: 536–8). The worker in *Capital* is generally presented in their role as a seller of their labour power rather than as a buyer of commodities. However, in *Grundrisse* he acknowledges that although the capitalist may want his own workers to be abstemious, workers employed by others 'stand towards him as consumers. In spite of all "pious" speeches he therefore searches for means to spur them on to consumption, to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter etc' (Marx, 1993: 287).

Capital was published in 1867. Soon after, due to shifts in capitalist development and modes of production, more emphasis began to be placed on the relationships between production, consumption and emotional life; new charms and corresponding new desires proliferated. Capitalists began to harness, shape and direct desire in more elaborate, explicit and sophisticated ways than Marx had envisaged. Advertising executives emerged as theoreticians of desire, masters of seduction, obsessed with manufacturing new needs to enable the proliferation of new commodities. America blazed the trail in the development of consumer capitalism, as William R. Leach discusses in *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*:

> The United States was the first country in the world to have an economy devoted to mass production, and it was the first to create the mass consumer institutions and the mass consumer enticements that rose up in tandem to market and sell the mass-produced goods. (Leach, 1993: 11–12)

The generation of surplus value and extraction of value was tied to the generation and extraction of surplus desire. Leach traces the enmeshed organizations and institutions involved in this process – from government agencies to corporations, from labour unions to universities – but also highlights the extent to which realizing these new economic models relied on aesthetic, sexual and psychological theories. These theories were historically specific, but they tended to assume desire itself was eternal, something to be tapped into and profited from rather than something to produce or invent.

Kevin Floyd provides a succinct gloss of the history of capital accumulation and the management of crisis in *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (2009). The early twentieth century, Floyd explains, saw an 'acceleration of demand inducement' (2009: 51). In the USA, Fordism enabled a coordination of production and consumption, securing the longest boom in the history of capitalism in the country (lasting from the early 1950s to the late 1960s). This precipitated the extension of the commodity relation to ever more spheres of existence, shifting the emphasis from norms of production to norms of consumption, which in turn participated in 'a normalization of social life operating increasingly at the moment of consumption' (Floyd, 2009: 51).[5] As the theorist of regulation Howard Braverman, whose arguments Floyd engages with, writes in *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* (1974):

[5] Floyd also draws on Aglietta (2015).

> So enterprising is capital that even where the effort is made by one or another section of the population to find a way to nature, sport, or art through personal activity and amateur or "underground" innovation, these activities are rapidly incorporated into the market so far as is possible. (Braverman, 1974: 193)

Leach's emphasis is on the technologies and forums developed to market products and the flourishing of new techniques of display (in spaces like the department store which emerged in the late nineteenth century) whereas Floyd and Braverman also discuss the commodification of services and activities that led to the reification of the most intimate spheres of daily life. Work time and leisure time became increasingly experientially distinct at precisely the moment production and consumption were coordinated, the latter as much governed by the exigencies of capitalism as the former. The repetitive, routine, rhythmic qualities of industrial labour found a compensatory counterpart in proliferating, commodified leisure activities, the enforced tedium of the former set in contrast to the fun and frivolity of the latter.

For Floyd, these processes extended to sex and sexuality. He declares that 'the reification of sexual desire ... emerges from within capital's structural volatility' (2009: 55) and observes that this emergence was contemporaneous with the popularizing of psychoanalysis in America. Adam Curtis presents a crass version of this argument in the 2002 documentary *The Century of the Self,* which makes much of the fact that Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays played a major role in the burgeoning the American advertising industry. Floyd is more careful in his positioning of psychoanalysis within the history of capitalism; he insists on historicizing the advertising industry's relation to commodity production, which he then connects to the emergence and popularization of a particular conceptualization of both sexuality and temporality.[6] According to Floyd, psychoanalysis proposed a vision of sexual desire with a temporality distinct from social life while simultaneously proposing that desire determined social life. At a moment when changes in the division of labour were taking place and in which 'personal life is epistemologically disciplined by exchange value', sexual urges and drives were detached from bodily capacities and ascribed an abstract, reified temporality (Floyd, 2009: 55).

Floyd reads psychoanalysis symptomatically, but in the period he is analysing Herbert Marcuse proposed an unorthodox reading of Freud that he claimed might serve as an *antidote* to capitalism. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955) Marcuse argues that Freud was mistaken to claim that the instincts he described were universal and unchangeable rather than specific to a particular, repressive form of social and economic organization. Repression, according to Marcuse, is socially enforced and historical rather than a biological necessity. He proposes that a form of non-repressive sublimation would be possible in a non-repressive society. He reassures his readers that this would not

[6] Floyd discusses Bernays on page 49.

result in a society of 'sex maniacs' as it would see the libido not released but transformed, leading to an 'eroticization of the entire personality' (Marcuse, 1955: 201). This proposition, however, sounds suspiciously like a de-eroticization of the entire personality. Unlike the communist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who saw unrestrained orgiastic forms of sexual explosion, exploration and expression as a root to freedom,[7] Marcuse presents them as side effects of repressive societies; wild orgies only erupt when people's libidinal energies are socially constrained and they prove no threat to the constraining society (Marcuse, 1955: 202; 1991: 80–1). In a non-repressive society pleasure would be lasting rather than fleeting, and sexual forms of gratification would therefore become less urgent. Marcuse insists that Freud's vision of humanity is only applicable to capitalism or what he calls, in a book that generally avoids references to Marx or overtly Marxist terminology, the 'administered life', but he nonetheless still implies that there is some kind of ideal, essential, whole humanity that preceded this and could be recaptured; repression is historical, but the instincts remain eternal yet retain none of the inherent destructiveness Freud ascribes to them.

In *Eros and Civilization* mass media replaces the family as the primary site through which ideological messages are transmitted and reproduced, but in *One-Dimensional Man* (first published in 1964) consumerism becomes more central to Marcuse's vision of the administered society. He lampoons the insidious role played by products in 'indoctrinating' people into an acceptance of the status quo (Marcuse, 1991: 14). For Marcuse, liberation 'depends on the consciousness of servitude', but the path to this consciousness is blocked by the internalization of false desires and the creation of illusory new needs, which 'have become the individual's own' (1991: 9). People feel superficially satisfied by things that are repressing them: 'liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination' (1991: 9). Marcuse wants to claim that it is possible to separate true needs from false ones but also recognizes that attempting to do so leads to an impasse: 'how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?' (Marcuse, 1991: 9). Nonetheless he does seem to locate some kind of truth in a romanticized vision of a past, pre-technological world in which he claims libidinal satisfaction was not sought only in sex. In this un-alienated time, he says, bread was kneaded by human hands rather than made in a factory. Not only does Marcuse seem to see industrialization as more pernicious than capitalism, but he also fails to consider the kind of gender relations he is implicitly affirming by claiming the past might be any less oppressive than the present – who is baking the bread in Marcuse's imagined pre-industrial society? Unusually, given the overt and explicit gendering of consumption and the explicit techniques developed to position women as consumers from the late nineteenth century onwards, gender does not figure prominently in Marcuse's depiction of the 'adminis-

[7] See, in particular, Reich's early writings, completed before his emigration to the USA and contained in the collection *Sex-Pol: Essays, 1929–1934* (2014).

tered society'; everyone's a dupe.[8] A more dialectical account would acknowledge the positive aspects of the technological developments unleashed by capitalism and explore the potential role they might play in the reconfiguration of gender roles, sexualities and desires under a different mode of production. After all, there is no going back.

Sex Appeal of the Inorganic

'The modern advertisement shows ... to what extent the attractions of the woman and those of the commodity can be merged', Walter Benjamin remarks in a fragment of *The Arcades Project*, his posthumously published fragmentary collection of materials pertaining to 'Paris, Capital of the 19th Century', which he worked on between 1927 and 1940, and which charts an emerging consumer culture (Benjamin, 1999: 345). Sexuality, he says, is mobilized by capitalism. Women in *The Arcades Project* are not simply depicted as consumers of commodities or as those whose idealized and sexualized images are deployed to make commodities more attractive to buyers: Benjamin perceives that the commodity form is far more pervasive. Desire is produced and shaped by capitalism; it is not some pre-existing natural reservoir. Under capitalism woman and commodity merge because social relations are governed by the commodity form. Women become *like* commodities, resembling the similarly attired mannequins staring blankly out of the city's show windows (Benjamin, 1999: 78); static and object-like, often deathly, their sexual allure is enhanced by make-up and glittering accoutrements. Commodity fetishism participates in encouraging forms of sexual fetishism which fixate on inanimate objects and inorganic materials; fashion is aligned with death. Benjamin cites fashions for precious jewels, dresses like gold mines, crystal hats and glass shoes. He quotes a male poet that seeks to bind a woman to him with braids of rubies and ropes of pearls, and claims a poem by Charles Baudelaire describing a woman made of 'precious minerals' provides an image of the fetish, which he elsewhere defines as the 'sex appeal of the inorganic' (Benjamin, 1999: 327).[9] For Benjamin, 'Under the dominion of the commodity fetish, the sex appeal of the woman is more or less tinged with the appeal of the commodity' (1999: 345). The sparkling and dazzling objects that line

[8] Floyd draws on Richard Ohmann's *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of the Century* (1996) in which Ohmann observes that although commodities were marketed to people of both genders and that ideals of attractiveness were pedalled to men, 'then as now, the erotic was primarily a feminine category' (1996; 202). There is a vast scholarly literature on the gendering of consumption. See, for example, Gruber Garvey (1996). The gendered implications of Marcuse's arguments are not very explicit whereas many Marxist critiques of capitalism have been combined with a disdain for mass culture and consumerism, which has often, in practice, involved directing explicit disdain at women. I discuss this phenomenon, with an emphasis on the misogyny displayed by many male writers on the left in the interwar years, in Proctor (2015). This is not only a historical phenomenon, however – for a recent example of the tendency, see Tiquun (2012).

[9] See also Benjamin (1999: 8, 19). An earlier draft referred to the 'sex appeal of the commodity' (1999: 864).

the arcades and litter the pages of *The Arcades Projects* may seem distinctively attractive, but for Benjamin these coruscating things are all equally dead, exchangeable and thus indistinguishable: 'Diamond / steel and gold dissolve into one light' (Benjamin, 1999: 327). As commodities, products of abstract labour, the qualitative differences between things dissolve.

Sex sells; sex is also sold. Benjamin's discussions of the gendering and sexualization of commodities is bound up with his obsession with the figure of the Parisian prostitute, who is central to his arguments in *The Arcades Project*. According to Esther Leslie, the prostitute for Benjamin is not an exceptional figure but an exemplary one, the analysis of whom sheds light on capitalist social relations generally, and specifically on the entanglement of capitalism and desire: 'as dialectical image the prostitute synthesizes the exploitative labour of sales and marketing and the commodity as exchange-value, in that she is salesgirl and commodity, "seller and sold", in one' (Leslie, 2006: 106).[10] Benjamin aligns the prostitute, who hides her identity and daubs herself in mask-like make-up, with a mass-produced object. This likeness, he says, finds a correlate at a later historical moment in music hall revues, in vogue at the time he was writing, in which identically clad women performed geometrically precise synchronized dance routines, a phenomenon that had already been analysed by Benjamin's friend Siegfried Kracauer in 'The Mass Ornament' (1927) (Benjamin, 1999: 346; Kracauer, 1995). According to Benjamin, 'Love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity' (Benjamin, 1999: 375, 511), echoing a phrase he uses in a later 'Convolute' of *The Arcades Project*: 'Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself' (Benjamin, 1999: 448).

Leslie is keen to defend Benjamin against liberal feminist critics who have read his discussions of the twinkling arcades as paeans to consumerism and his discussions of the figure of the prostitute as denigrations of women. His analysis, she stresses, is intended as an indictment of the commodity form and of the exploitative economic system under which the Parisian prostitute (and everyone else) lives. Often, however, Benjamin's discussions of the prostitute slip into metaphor, as when he cites Baudelaire's consideration of the 'prostitution of the commodity's soul' (Benjamin, 2006: 32).[11] Indeed, Benjamin explicitly states that the 'prostitute does not sell her labour power' (Benjamin, 1999: 348). He seems to view her less as an archetypal worker than as a literal embodiment of Marx's personified, mystical commodity. The intoxicating lure of the commodity is replicated in the prostitute, who is similarly conceptualized as a thing with a soul. But the sex worker is a worker and not a commodity. Benjamin gestures towards a contradiction in his analysis when he imagines a time when workers

[10] According to Leslie, Benjamin chooses the prostitute and the mannequin 'as model figures, emissaries of a whole system of exploitation, reification, alienation. Like the flâneur, and yet more socialized, more representative, these women stand in for every person in commodity-producing society' (Leslie, 2006: 101). There is a large feminist literature on the figure of the sex worker in *The Arcades Project*: see, for example, Buck-Morss (1986) and Schlossman (2004).

[11] In this essay he talks about an 'empathy with inorganic things' (Benjamin, 2006: 32).

might confront their own labour power as a commodity, but the masculine pronouns here suggest that he does not have the figure of the prostitute in mind:

> The more conscious he becomes of his mode of existence, the mode imposed on him by the system of production, the more he proletarianizes himself, the more he will be gripped by the chilly breath of the commodity economy, and the less he will feel like empathizing with commodities. (Benjamin, 2006: 33)

He attempts to imagine a time when solidarity between people might overthrow empathy with things, but until such a time as the working class can seize power it will, he says, seek an uneasy enjoyment of existing society 'derived from a presentiment of its own determination as a class' (Benjamin, 2006: 34). Unlike Marcuse, Benjamin is not derisive of workers' desires for commodities, perceiving that they are not based in delusion but function as an attempt to make life more bearable in the present moment, in the meantime, until grander desires can be fulfilled in the future (when people can be liberated from exploitative work *and* enjoy fun activities and sparkling things). The prostitute returns at the end of this paragraph, where Benjamin suggests that workers in the contradictory position of passing time until a revolutionary opportunity arises while being aware of the horrors of their current social existence find 'charm even in damaged and decaying goods', which reflect the decaying qualities of bourgeois, capitalist society, citing a Baudelaire poem about a courtesan whose heart is described as being '"bruised like a peach"' (Benjamin, 2006: 34). Here the proletariat is put in the position of the client/john and the prostitute in the position of the commodity, but this sets up a false distinction between these two subjects who *both* sell their labour power, whose bruised hearts *both* beat in the wallet of the person to whom their labour power is sold (to return to Marx's metaphor).

The expansion of sexual commerce is part of the economic shifts and expansion of consumption Floyd traces in *The Reification of Desire*. Maya Andrea Gonzalez and Cassandra Troyan reflect on a contemporary iteration of sex work in their analysis of 'The Girlfriend Experience', which involves rich, often married men seeking a 'ready-made companion' in exchange for gifts and money (Gonzalez and Troyan, 2016).[12] Unlike Benjamin, who ambiguously treats the Parisian prostitute as an object of exchange rather than a seller of her labour power, they position the 'sugar baby' as a worker who offers 'a standpoint on the contemporary predicament of abject subjects' (Gonzalez and Troyan, 2016). In 'The Girlfriend Experience' the services being sold are intimacy or authenticity in addition to sex, a counterfeit version of a genuine romance: 'The imperative to enjoy authentic sexual enjoyment is to desire authenticity more than sex itself' (Gonzalez and Troyan, 2016). Gonzalez and Troyan emphasize

[12] I focus on this article alone here, but its arguments are broadly in the Marxist-feminist tradition associated with Wages for Housework (and groups like Wages Due Lesbians and the English Collective of Prostitutes), who campaigned against the criminalization of prostitution (Martin, 2012).

that the disavowal of the relationship's basis in exchange is key to the encounter, which must convincingly simulate an authentic bond between sugar daddy and sugar baby. The sugar baby only succeeds in her role through the creation of a 'fantasy of reciprocity' in which her waged status goes unacknowledged, producing what they call 'disavowed intimacy' (premised on disavowed payment): 'Commodifying experience requires an imaginary re-enactment of mutual freedom at the site of asymmetrical power and drudgery' (Gonzalez and Troyan, 2016).

For Marx commodity fetishism is premised on the disavowal of production, and the disavowal of exchange in this encounter has a similar function for Gonzalez and Troyan: the commodity is labour power but its status as a commodity must be disavowed at the same time it is performed (rather than subsequently). The disavowal of exchange thus allows for the labour being performed to seem spontaneous and voluntary: 'Work that appears in the form of pure enjoyment suggests that payment is supplementary or indifferent to desire, when in fact it is the cause' (Gonzalez and Troyan, 2016). This is a slightly different process to what Benjamin refers to as the 'dialectical function of money in prostitution' which 'buys pleasure and, at the same time, becomes the expression of shame' (Benjamin, 1999: 492). Gonzalez and Troyan argue that the fact the relationship is premised on exchange is a source of shame or at least an impediment to pleasure for the client, whereas for Benjamin, through the logic of abstraction, money functions to distance the customer from the guilt he attaches to the purchase: 'The shame-reddened wound on the body of society secretes money and closes up. It forms a metallic scab' (Benjamin, 1999: 492). Gonzalez and Troyan's analysis goes further by suggesting that under existing social relations a metallic scab is preferable to a bloody one, that the heart of the waged girlfriend may be more impervious to bruising, or more capable of inflicting bruises on the body of society, than that of the unwaged one:

When love and care are exploited under the conditions of erasure, to continue to labour is to continue to struggle ... To assert payment for that which is assumed to be free is to say that her body belongs to no one but herself – or to nobody but herself and the body of struggle. (Gonzalez and Troyan, 2016)

Rather than a metaphor for the 'commodity's soul' (Benjamin, 2006: 32), the sugar baby comes to occupy the same 'space for passing time' as the revolutionary workers described by Benjamin: damaged enjoyment pending revolution (Benjamin, 2006: 34).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with male clients of (predominantly but not exclusively female) commercial sex workers in San Francisco's Bay Area in the late 1990s, Elizabeth Bernstein found that 'for many sexual clients, the market is experienced as enhancing and facilitating desired forms of non-domestic sexual activity' (Bernstein, 2001: 389). Bernstein lauds the role of sex work in 'disembedding ... the (male) individual from the sex-romance nexus of the privatized nuclear family' (Bernstein, 2001: 399). She is dismissive of the 'platitudinous view that sexuality has been "commodified" – and by implication diminished – like everything else in late capitalism' (Bernstein, 2001: 398). Bernstein's criticism seems to imply that those who

protest to the commodity form would therefore validate a return to some supposedly more natural or genuine form of romantic encounter and hence uphold oppressive, normative family values and sexual mores. However, Gonzalez and Troyan analyse the labour involved in 'The Girlfriend Experience' to shed light not only on other forms of sex work but also on other forms of service work[13] and, crucially, on the kinds of unwaged, affective labour demanded by unremunerated romantic relationships (particularly heterosexual ones). They depict the gestures performed and emotions expressed in the realm of work as existing in a kind of feedback loop with those outside it. Indeed, the boundaries separating these realms from one another are increasingly porous and ill defined, a porosity they argue, Bernstein's notion of 'bounded intimacy' fails to apprehend. The counterfeit authenticity and feigned intimacy demanded by the particular form of waged work they are analysing does not stand in contrast to some pure, unmediated or genuine form of human interaction outside of it but highlights the impossibility of any such relations within the existing state of things. Similarly, for Leslie the revolutionary dimension of Benjamin's discussions of 'women in crisis' in *The Arcades Project* is that they expose the artificiality of hegemonic gender relations, including the notions that sex should be reproductive, families should be nuclear and women should be confined to the private sphere:

> In detailing modern women's affinity for the anatural and the commodied, Benjamin is not caught up in a romantic nostalgia for a lost naturalness. His aim is to validate, out of the wreckage, the explicit shift of women into the realm of history and culture, recognizing the enormity of its social and political implications. It is the revolutionary chance for salvation. Benjamin is not a moralist, providing positive images, but a purveyor of a negativity with an explosive charge. (Leslie, 2006: 102)

The female figures he discusses participate in the 'detonation of nature': victims of the brutal exploitations of capitalist modernity but also the potential future beneficiaries and agents of a technologized communist future in which their roles would not be prescribed by biological notions (which were themselves cultural and historical all along). Like gender, desire is not natural or eternal. In contrast to Marcuse, who insists that lovemaking in a meadow is preferable to lovemaking in a car whose 'mechanized environment' serves to block libidinal flows, Benjamin (like Leslie, and Gonzalez and Troyan) refuses to validate a supposedly natural, lost realm (Marcuse, 1991: 77). Technologies and forms of sexual encounter beyond some mawkish ideal of 'genuine' romance are not the problem: capitalism is. Indeed, meadows are not external to capitalism; their enclosure and transformation into private property was key to its development, as Marx makes clear in Chapter 27 of *Capital*. Artificial, historically produced and thus transformable, desire is not something to be recovered or dug up

[13] Here they draw on Arlie Hochschild's analysis of the emotional labour demanded of flight attendants (and other service workers) (Hochschild, 1983).

from beneath the debris of capitalist modernity but something to be reached by passing through and beyond capitalism in a process of dialectical sublation. In contrast to these communist theorists who discern a revolutionary 'explosive charge' in the figures rendered abject by capitalism, Bernstein's dismissal of Marxist analyses of sex work has more in common with theorists who have sought to see desire as immanent to capitalism.

Libidinal Investments

Writing in the early 1970s, in the aftermath of May 1968 and on the cusp of a new crisis of capitalism, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, rejected not only the traditional psychoanalytic Oedipal triad (mummy–daddy–me) but also pushed against orthodox Marxism, working within and against both traditions. Desire is central to their analysis, which understands people as 'desiring machines' (*machines désirantes*), interconnected, porous and entangled machinic organisms or organic machines – not one id but many. Society and the desiring machines inhabiting and constituting it are animated by flows of libidinal desire. Deleuze and Guattari castigate the Oedipal triangle of traditional psychoanalysis for being too reductive, for repressing the wild pluralities of desire, which can be understood as sexual only insofar as 'sexuality is everywhere' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2011: 322). Marcuse's ideal non-repressive society would see a dispersal of libido whereas Deleuze and Guattari insist libido is already dispersed; they claim the erotic reality of capitalism is repressed rather than libido itself. Moreover, their vision of libidinal diffusion retains an intensity, dynamism and explosivity that Marcuse argues would be diminished if it were spread across a non-repressed society. For Marcuse, sexuality everywhere would mean less actual sex, whereas Deleuze and Guattari seem to say actual sex is already everywhere but not recognized as such. Again and again they insist that they are not being figurative:

> The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on. And there is no need to resort to metaphors, any more than for the libido to go by way of metamorphoses. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2011: 322)

Marx described a hoarder substituting sexual pleasure with the pleasure of stockpiling money, whereas in *Anti-Oedipus* there are no such substitutions because the stockpiling of money *is* a sexual pleasure. They are at pains to point out that it is not enough to observe that capital flows and is interrupted *like* libido or that the unconscious produces desire *like* a factory: a 'simple parallelism' should not be drawn between 'capitalist social production and desiring-production, or between the flows of money-capital and the shit-flows of desire', as this implies that desiring machines are

external to capitalism whereas 'desiring machines are in social machines and nowhere else' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2011: 332). Though many Marxists reacted with sneering hostility to *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari insisted that their proposals were revolutionary.[14] The text provides a foundational definition of what would become known as 'accelerationism', proposing that speeding up existing processes of capitalist accumulation was preferable to a withdrawal from them.

In *Libidinal Economy* (1974) Jean-François Lyotard pushes aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's arguments further and, in the process, seems to dispense with their proclaimed left-wing political allegiances altogether. He later described it as his 'evil book' (Noys, 2014: 12). In a section entitled 'The Desire Named Marx' he proclaims that 'desire underlies capitalism' (Lyotard, 2004: 104); capitalism pulsates with libidinal intensities and is propelled by affective flows. He decries non-alienation as a fantasy, mistakenly located in a past or future pictured as whole and unmutilated (a critique that could certainly be levelled at Marcuse). He reads *Capital* as though it were structured by Marx's own conflicting desires, caught between wholeness and mutilation, remarking that Marx was unable to finish it, that its resolution (read: orgasm) was constantly postponed. In an infamous passage for which he was denounced by many on the left he proposes that industrial workers, far from having no other choice than to work, took masochistic enjoyment in becoming 'slave to the machine, fucker fucked by it, eight hours, twelve hours, a day, year after year' (Lyotard, 2004: 109). Lyotard evidently anticipated and even seems to relish the idea of the opprobrium these lines would provoke – 'hang on tight and spit on me' – evincing his own masochistic enjoyment in indulging in this grotesque image of the gratifications of exploitative and exhausting labour of a kind he never had to perform:

> they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of the organic body which was indeed imposed on them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolution of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity of the suburbs and the pubs in the morning and evening. (Lyotard, 2004: 109–10)

Unlike in Marcuse, consumerism is not presented as having the mollifying function of making production more bearable, and unlike in Benjamin it is not seen as a temporary and necessarily partial pleasure en route to revolution. For Lyotard, the enjoyment found in capitalist society is not presented as false or distorted; even its most seemingly unpleasant aspects (work as well as leisure) can be a source of perverse *jouissance*. In *Malign Velocities*, a critique of accelerationism, Benjamin Noys discusses the unfolding of arguments and counter-arguments across *Anti-Oedipus*, *Libidinal Economy* and Jean Baudriallard's *Symbolic Exchange or Death* (1976), concluding that:

[14] For a useful overview of the reception of *Anti-Oedipus*, see Herzog (2016).

> The result is that each intensifies a politics of radical immanence, of immersion in capital to the point where any way to distinguish a radical strategy from the strategy of capital seems to disappear completely. (Noys, 2014: 13)

Revelling in, surrendering to and pushing to heighten or intensify the libidinal exigencies of capital is proposed as a mode of overthrowing it, but the arguments prove unconvincing and the human costs such a process would entail – which would presumably be less acutely felt by white male university professors in France than by other people – are not acknowledged.

In *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (2000) Rosemary Hennessy criticizes the ways in which *Anti-Oedipus* has been lauded by many contemporary queer theorists as a 'monumental explanation of the materiality of desire under capitalism'.[15] The appeal of their work for theorists of sexuality, she claims, lays in its proposition that desire is disruptive and untethered from prescriptive (i.e. heteronormative or cisnormative) relations between sexual subjects and sexual objects. But according to Hennessy, what such analyses miss is that desire for Deleuze and Guattari is a kind of transhistorical substance: 'desire is historically invariant matter' (2000: 70). Here a proximity to Freudian psychoanalysis and Marcuse's preference for lovemaking in meadows over cars is apparent: Deleuze and Guattari may dispense with the Oedipus complex but they maintain that human existence has a primal substrate.[16] Hennessy argues that this approach 'glorifies desire' and obscures the extent to which the desiring subject is formed by history, specifically by different phases of capitalist development:

> Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that capitalism liberates the flows of desire from the clutches of an oedipalizing culture, but it does so under social conditions that continually reterritorialize the desires it unleashes in order to accrue surplus value. As they see it, desire is revolutionary and capable of demolishing social social form. But unfortunately and predictably, the alternative it aims for is not social justice but the 'body without organs' – the undifferentiated subject of self-enjoyment. (Hennessy, 2000: 71)

Desire has a privileged status in their account as that which drives history, and the desiring subject takes the place of the proletariat as the primary agent of historical

[15] Her primary example here is Elizabeth Grosz, but she also mentions Guy Hocquenghem.

[16] Hennessy's claims bear comparison with the argument advanced by Amia Srinivasan in her 2018 essay 'Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?'. Srinivasan confronts the implicit assumption, commonplace in contemporary feminist accounts of sex, that desire is external to or prior to the social, identifying a 'convergence, however unintentional, between sex positivity and liberalism in their shared reluctance to interrogate the formation of our desires'. She asks whether we should really just accept 'as a given' that desire exists outside of history, concluding that although the conscious redirection of personal desire might seem impossible, 'the very idea of fixed sexual preference is political, not metaphysical' (Srinivasan, 2018).

change, but the historical constitution of desire itself is strangely external to these processes. Although Deleuze and Guattari constantly invoke capitalism, Hennessy argues that their account detaches desire from historical and material production, 'the structures of exploitation on which capitalist production depends have completely disappeared' (2000: 71). For Hennessy, the challenge is to recognize that desire does not precede the social or economic, and thus cannot be disentangled or considered in isolation from its historical articulation. Indeed, dehistoricizing desire can participate in naturalizing existing social relations, even if Deleuze and Guattari want to claim the opposite. She goes so far as to observe an 'ideological affiliation' between queer theorists who celebrate *Anti-Oedipus* with 'naturalized notions of identity and difference emanating from Madison Avenue and Wall Street' (Hennessy, 2000: 68). That desire cannot be separated from capitalism and class relations does not, however, lead Hennessy to affirm a position closer to Lyotard's or to dismiss 'desire and pleasure as bourgeois inventions irrelevant to material analysis', as many Marxists have done historically (Hennessy, 2000: 69). Instead, analysing the historical specificity of desire and its constitutive relation to capitalism might form part of a historical struggle to transform the oppressive world in which people live and want and love and need.

The Desire for Liberation

Wendy Brown contends that 'Marxism proved unable to address critical issues of need, desire, and identity formation in late modernity' (2001: 19). She describes the fracturing of social movements, rise of apathy and a proliferation of micro-causes post-1989 as being related to 'the loss of a clear object of political desire' (2001: 29). What would that obscure object be?

A few pages into Chapter 7, 'The Labour-Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value', Marx admits that his discussion has thus far reduced labour to its 'simple elementary factors' and hence treated it in a transhistorical sense (as the metabolic relationship between humanity and nature), with no consideration of the different conditions under which labour processes may be performed or the experiences of the people performing or directing them:

> As the taste of Porridge does not tell you who grew the oats, no more does this simple process tell you of itself what are the social conditions under which it is taking place, whether under the slave-owner's brutal lash, or the anxious eye of the capitalist, whether Cincinnatus carries it on in tilling his modest farm or a savage in killing wild animals with stones. (Marx, 1967: 179)

He does, however, go on to discuss labour processes within a capitalist mode of production specifically, and he subsequently discusses the social conditions under which labour processes take place. The 'Working Day' chapter, in particular, attends in detail

to the experiences and sufferings of factory workers in Britain. The same cannot be said for his discussion of needs, wants and desires in relation to use-values; Marx is interested in who grew the oats rather than in who eats them or why they might want, need or desire to do so. Yet his discussions of labour do pertain to desire. Workers sell their labour power as a commodity, but the suffering Marx details points negatively to a desire not to be compelled to do so. For Lukács, the proletariat becomes aware that it is selling its labour power as a commodity and through this consciousness can challenge 'the fetish character of every commodity' (Lukács, 1923). *Capital* is primarily concerned with labour performed under the 'anxious eye of the capitalist', but I want to conclude with a consideration of labour performed 'under the slave-owner's brutal lash'.

In his discussion of the fetish character of commodities, Marx imagines a commodity who speaks, but he is only capable of imagining this speaking commodity 'subjunctively' (Moten, 2003: 8). Indeed, the supposed impossibility of the commodity's speech is central to his argument regarding the value that inheres – hidden and necessarily silent – in it. But as Fred Moten points out, commodities *do* speak: 'Marx's counterfactual ... is broken by a commodity and by the trace of a subjectivity structure born in objection that he neither realizes nor anticipates' (2003:13). The enslaved person is a commodity who not only speaks but shrieks and screams: 'The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist' (Moten, 2003: 1). As C. L. R. James writes in *The Black Jacobins*, slaves may have been traded as commodities but they remained 'quite invincibly human beings', a fact 'which explains the unusual spectacle of property-owners apparently careless of preserving their property' (1989: 11–12). Human beings resist. Moten suggests that the commodity's 'secret' was never fully kept. He reads Frederick Douglass' descriptions of his enslaved Aunt Hester's screams of resistance to her master's brutal beatings as a theory of value; the speaking commodity phonically interrupts the abstracting logics of exchange. Douglass and Marx were contemporaries and Moten reads *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) alongside Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, proposing that Aunt Hester's scream anticipates and enacts Marx's theoretical descriptions of communism as a 'discovery procedure':

> Just as CLR James could assert – by way of a kind of magic that seems impossible but whose reality is something to which every worker might surreptitiously attest – that socialism is already in place on the shop floor, so can one assert, by way of Aunt Hester and the theoretical catalysis she enacts, that communism-in-(the resistance to) slavery is the discovery procedure for communism out of slavery's outside. (Moten, 2003: 252)[17]

The screaming commodity registers the non-identity between desire and exchange value (even if she remains a use-value in the eyes of the brutal slave-owner). Brown

[17] Moten does not cite James here but I assume this is a reference to the arguments made in James and Lee (1974, originally published in 1958).

implies that the supposedly lost object of political desire is some kind of distant hermetic society located in an abstract future, positively, if vaguely defined, whereas I have attempted to foreground theories that assert that the future can only be sought negatively, 'in the degraded present' (Moten, 2003: 8).

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Desire
December 1, 2021

The SAGE Handbook of Marxism. <sk.sagepub.com>