

Mediations

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Editors' Note

This issue commences with Fredric Jameson's "A New Reading of *Capital*." As Jameson is at pains to point out, this new reading is not precisely a literary reading, but nor is it overtly concerned with the propositional truth of the major discoveries of the first volume of *Capital* or their applicability to contemporary phenomena. Rather, it considers *Capital* as a representational project. Why is it necessary to represent capital as a totality? What strategies are entailed in this decision? Most importantly, what consequences follow from this very basic Marxian starting point? If Marxism is indeed Marxism, and not just another garden-variety socialism, then presumably this decision is fateful for Marxism as a whole and not just for Volume I of *Capital*. Jameson argues — startlingly, but in a way that will organize this issue of *Mediations* — that Marxism as such doesn't have a political theory; not only doesn't *think*, but must not think politics systematically. The implication seems to be that any attempt to think politics systematically will leave questions of the economic totality to one side; the attempt to think the economic totality systematically, on the other hand, will render politics a matter of opportunism, "in the good Macchiavellian sense of the word." And indeed, in the light of this assertion so many contemporary attempts to formulate a properly Left theory of politics dwindle into an array of better mousetraps — nationally standardized innovations, since the Americans have one, the Italians have another, the French are lucky enough to have three or perhaps four models to choose from. But in the end, they all leave the one thing intact — capital — that a genuine Left would have to confront.

The title of Anna Kornbluh's essay "On Marx's Victorian Novel" flirts with the appearance of just the kind of "literary" reading of *Capital* that Jameson rules out of bounds at the outset. Indeed, the logically initial move is the gathering up of tropes that run through the book — first personification, but later metalepsis assumes center stage — and one could be forgiven for imagining that one can guess the kind of textual unraveling that will follow. On the contrary, it soon becomes clear that something much more profound is at stake. For personification, to take the simpler example, is not only a feature of *Capital*, but of capitalism itself, and nowhere more so than when actual persons are involved. It would be a mistake to see the capitalist as the

conscious agent of capital; rather the capitalist is, as capitalist, capitalism personified. The trope does not isolate the text from its substance but rather provides a point of absolute identity with it. Metalepsis, the insertion of a substitutional figure within another substitutional figure, produces a species of trope whose governing logic is not uniform, where a logical inconsistency is constitutive of the meaning of the trope. But this logical inconsistency is not the sign of a Marxian catachresis; rather, the operation of capitalism itself involves a metalepsis, a fundamental inconsistency that must constantly be overleapt. The final lesson of Hegel's *Logic*, a lesson that has been by and large rejected by contemporary reason, is that the syllogistic figures produced in the *Logic* do not represent the world or model it, but rather are actually present in it. Kornbluh may rescue that thesis by radicalizing it; it is not only the logical figures, but the rhetorical ones whose being is as much material as linguistic: a thesis that could be as fateful for Jamesonian allegory as it is for Marxian metalepsis.

Roland Boer's "Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered" recalls Meyer Shapiro's response to Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art, where Shapiro demonstrates through archival evidence that the Van Gogh "peasant shoes" Heidegger saw were not in fact peasant shoes, but the shoes of the painter's Parisian roommate. On one hand, both essays "miss," take place at a different level than, the objects of their critiques: surely Heidegger's theory of art doesn't hinge on who owned a pair of shoes; surely the idea of a Marxian eschatology (of which, as we all know but should still be astonished by, there are Left as well as Right versions) doesn't hinge on whom Marx studied Isaiah under at college. But of course both positions are deliberately ingenuous; by scouring the landscape and failing to find what others found so easily, they demonstrate, without thematizing it, the fantasy structure that infects the objects of their critiques. Boer reminds us that there is in fact no shortage of messianic socialisms, including the socialism Marx and Engels first came into contact with and opposed. No doubt Marxism contains multitudes; but a specific difference of Marxism among the possible socialisms is its indifference to eschatology.

At this point we turn away from a direct consideration of Marx, but the issue at the heart of the remaining articles — the politics of the emphasis on politics as opposed to the rethinking of economic systems — is very much the one initially articulated by Jameson. In Reiichi Miura's "What Kind of Revolution Do You Want," this distinction assumes the form of the distinction between a politics of singularity and an older politics it supplants, which goes unnamed but would presumably include both Marxism and traditional liberalism or redistributive social democracy. Miura's initial move is to identify the politics of singularity — which is at the same time precisely what Jameson identifies as the emergence of a new multiplicity — with the aesthetics of punk. The paradoxes of punk — an aesthetic identity based on the refusal of an aesthetic identity, or in other words, an identity based on singularity — when carried to their conclusions, turn out to imply the politics of singularity: which, Miura argues, is both a critique and a radicalization of the logic of the politics of identity. So

here, once again, the attempt to think a new politics leaves us thinking (or rather not thinking) the same old economic system. Biopolitical singularity, in its commitment to the desiring subject, subscribes to the same paradigm as neoliberalism. True, its named objective is opposed to the ends of neoliberalism. "So, probably, the true problem is whether or not our essential desire is for neoliberalism: an assertion hard to refute"; or at least, hard to refute at the level of a politics which has centered on the realization of singularities. Miura leaves it unsaid that at the level of the economic, that confusion is, for us, rather less plausible.

We conclude with an interview by Alexei Penzin, of the Russian collective Chto Delat / What Is To Be Done?, with Paolo Virno, intellectually close kin with the direct targets of Miura's critique. (The interview was originally commissioned for *Manifesta Journal*, Issue #8, "Collective Curating," which we take the opportunity here to thank for their permission to reprint). Of course, Virno's thinking is far more grounded in the economic and in Marx than his reception in the English-speaking world would sometimes suggest. Indeed — coming full circle — it hinges on the assumption of a sea change in the value produced by collective labor: what Marx described, as Jameson reminds us, as labor's "free gift to capital." Penzin presses Virno on several issues of direct relevance to the fissures opened up by Jameson and Miura, tending to center on the question of the relation between cooperation and virtuosity, the many and the one, the multitude and singularity. Penzin ends with the question — traditional, but more urgent every day — of organization: if what some have claimed to be missing from the theory of the multitude is a mode of organization adequate both to the notion of singularity and to the massive powers to be opposed, then, Penzin asks, where might we look for the soviets of the multitude?

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Particularly attentive readers may have noticed that the *Wertkritik* dossier, which was featured on our preview page for the previous issue, has been replaced by a forthcoming special issue, *Marx or Spinoza*. The *Wertkritik* translation project has not been abandoned; on the contrary, it has expanded into a double issue, and is expected to come out as *Mediations* 26.1-2, which should be available in Fall 2011. Even more attentive readers may notice subtle design improvements in both the print and online editions.

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Two of the essays in this issue were originally presented in early forms at the MLG's Institute on Culture and Society. This year's Institute will take place June 20-24 on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Details and a call for papers can be found on the MLG web site: mlg.eserver.org.

Nicholas Brown, for the *Mediations* editors.