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Marx on capital, clothing and fashion. Culture Matters ,

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Culture Matters

Analysts have observed a particular affinity between fashion and the capitalist mode of production in its various manifestations – both are dependent on change and the production of newness to propagate their own existence. Fashion stimulates consumption, which is why Werner Sombart declared it ‘capitalism’s favourite child’¹ Nicholas Barbon proposed a mutual relation between fashion and economy in 1690:

In some places, it is fixt and certain; as all over Asia, and in Spain; but in France, England, and other places, the Dress alters; Fashion or the alteration of Dress, is a great Promoter of Trade, because it occasions the Expence of Cloaths, before the Old ones are worn out: It is the Spirit and Life of Trade; It makes a Circulation, and gives a Value by Turns, to all sorts of Commodities; keeps the great Body of Trade in Motion; it is an Invention to Dress a Man, as if he lived in a perpetual Spring; he never sees the Autum of his Cloaths.²

Marx was a reader of Barbon, and cited him at the start of *Capital* in relation to ‘wants of the mind’. The capitalist mode of production and consumption is one in which constant novelty, change, dissolution is at work. This is how Marx and Engels characterised it, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and one of their most quoted lines acknowledges this: ‘All that is solid melts into air’. Capitalism needs constant novelty, if only to keep sales buoyant, for its cellular unit is the commodity. Fashion delivers novelty, or better, epitomises this constant churn, this production and consumption.

In a broader sense, the notion of *mode* appears in Marx’s identification of modes of production, which are successive epochs of technical and social arrangement, which alter the organisation of production and consumption. These modes have something of fashion’s logic about them, if fashion is taken to be the current or latest way, against which all else is considered outmoded. The German word for these successive ways of producing does not use ‘Mode’, unlike the standard English translation, but rather ‘Produktionsweise’, which is linked etymologically to ‘wissen’, knowledge.

¹ Sombart, ‘Wirtschaft und Mode’, Bergmann, Wiesbaden, 1902.

² N. Barbon, ‘A Discourse of Trade’.

The resources available in Marx to explore the dialectic of fashion as something produced and consumed have seldom been employed. One exception is the work of Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold who explored the development of the fashion industry in *The World of Consumption* (1993), emphasising the peculiarities of fashion, in a context in which all commodities have their own specificities. The core of the argument is that fashion has been a highly segmented industry from the start, because of the varying needs and capacities of consumers – which is arguably its very *raison d’être* – and so, at least in its early days, was not typically mass produced as other commodities might be. Fashion was established as cottage industries, supplying rapidly changing and localised demands, attuned to class, gender and other factors, which meant that some clothes could be mass produced using templates and a high division of labour, while others relied on individual cutting, sewing and finishing by hand. Fine and Leopold’s production-led analysis of fashion used Marx’s categories to explore a system of fashion production, though it did little to explain the desires bound up in fashion consumption and the specific contents of fashion, the ways in which needs and longing are also produced or met within the system, and how these are stimulated by the impression of antiquating objects and improved or singular novelties, which promise the buyer added capacities.

It is possible to locate direct statements about the fashion industry in Marx, and these are wholly negative. Fashion’s pattern of seasonal and also arbitrary change appears to be aligned with the breakneck pace and sudden readjustments of industrial capitalist production, which *Capital* indicts with the following words: ‘The murderous, meaningless caprices of fashion’, which lead to the employing and dismissing workers at whim, and are linked to the general ‘anarchy’ of capitalist production. Marx mentions ‘the season’ with its ‘sudden placing of large orders that have to be executed in the shortest possible time.’³ This intensifies with the development of railways and telegraphs. Marx quotes a manufacturer on purchasers who travel fortnightly from Glasgow, Manchester, and Edinburgh to the wholesale warehouses supplied by his factory. Instead of buying from stock as before, they give small orders requiring immediate execution: ‘Years ago we were always able to work in the slack times, so as to meet demand of the next season, but now no-one can say beforehand what will be the demand then.’⁴ Employment and livelihood are dependent on fashion’s vagaries. The irony is that those employed for the season are producing luxury materials, working with silk, for example, while the workers are dressed in rags, cloths that have been clothes for so long they

³ Marx *Capital*, 1906, p. 523

⁴ Marx, *ibid.*

barely hang together.

All clothes, even fashion, become rags in time and as such come to play another role in the Marxist presentation. Marx and Engels called the poorest class the *lumpenproletariat*; *lumpen* means cloth rags. These are the most dissolute of society, slipped out of the ranks of the working class and potentially organisable for reaction, or anyone who will buy them off with sausages.⁵

The textile industry inaugurates the factory system of exploitation (curlicues of etymology mean that the German word for factory – *Fabrik* – is the English word for woven or otherwise processed cloth - fabric.). The significance, alongside steam power and iron founding, of textile manufacture and processing in the first Industrial Revolution - automated cotton, worsted and yarn spinning, the building of factories - is testament to the central role within industrial capitalism of cloth manufacture, prerequisite for the emergence of fashion. Engels knew the textile industry well, as his father was a cotton manufacturer. In the cotton mills of mid-nineteenth century Britain, men, women, and children laboured cheaply, six days a week, spinning materials harvested by slaves in the US.⁶ In the silk mills child labour was even more grinding: ten-hour shifts and exemption from otherwise compulsory education. The need for a light touch when working with delicately textured silk was apparently only acquired by early introduction to this work.⁷ Marx details how, in 1850, the Factory Acts attempted to restrict some of the worst practices, but certain trades were excluded from the legislation. Dye and bleach works came under the provision of the act only in 1860, lace and stocking manufactures in 1861. The 1860 act decreed that, for dye and bleach works, the working-day should be twelve hours long from August 1861, and from August 1862, ten hours, which worked out at ten and a half hours on weekdays, and seven and a half on Saturdays. Manufacturers campaigned to get calenderers and finishers excused from this shortening of the working day. During that day, whatever its length, working conditions were harsh. Girls in the bleaching drying-rooms were subjected to scorching temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. They were jammed together, around fifteen bodies, in a tiny room by a hot stove, drying linen and cambric and working late into the night, day after day. Phthisis, bronchitis, irregularity of uterine functions, hysteria in its most aggravated forms and rheumatism were

⁵ Marx, 18th Brumaire

⁶ Marx 1906, pp. 484–5.

⁷ Marx 1906, p. 321

common complaints, according to a report in 1862, though, Marx notes, ‘capital, in its representations to parliament, had painted them as rubicund and healthy, in the manner of Rubens’.⁸

The various tricks of the textile industry provide good material for Marx and Engels to underscore the malevolent practices of capitalist industry. In *Capital*, volume 3, Marx observes how the use of waste, for example, in the wool industry, makes substandard materials that generate more profits over time, because of their inferior quality. He begins with two quotations from factory inspectors:

‘It was once the common practice to decry the preparation of waste and woollen rags for re-manufacture, but the prejudice has entirely subsided as regards the shoddy trade, which has become an important branch of the woollen trade of Yorkshire, and doubtless the cotton waste trade will be recognised in the same manner as supplying an admitted want. Thirty years since, woollen rags, *i.e.*, pieces of cloth, old clothes, etc., of nothing but wool, would average about £4 4s. per ton in price: within the last few years they have become worth £44 per ton, and the demand for them has so increased that means have been found for utilising the rags of fabrics of cotton and wool mixed by destroying the cotton and leaving the wool intact, and now thousands of operatives are engaged in the manufacture of shoddy, from which the consumer has greatly benefited in being able to purchase cloth of a fair and average quality at a very moderate price.’ (Reports of Insp. of Fact., Oct. 1863, p. 107.) By the end of 1862 the rejuvenated shoddy made up as much as one-third of the entire consumption of wool in English industry. (Reports of Insp. of Fact., October 1862, p. 81.)

Marx comments wryly on this, bringing out the ways in which this works to the advantage of the sellers of commodities:

The ‘big benefit’ for the ‘consumer’ is that his shoddy clothes wear out in just one-third of the previous time and turn threadbare in one-sixth of this time. The English silk industry moved along the same downward path. The consumption of

⁸ Marx, *Capital*.

genuine raw silk decreased somewhat between 1839 and 1862, while that of silk waste doubled. Improved machinery helped to manufacture a silk useful for many purposes from this otherwise rather worthless stuff.

Technology, cheapening of production, markets directed towards utility rather than luxury all come to bear on the production of cloth, and on fashion. Until the mass production of cheap fashionable clothing develops in the late twentieth century, it is the case that the wealthy can afford fashion, which is handmade and of good quality materials, and they can afford to change at will the contents of their wardrobe; while the poor only have clothes, sometimes handed down.

Clothing is not only fashionable. It is also a socially produced universal need and, as such, it participates in the dialectic of production and consumption. Production has meaning only once the object is consumed, by subjects. In *Grundrisse*, Marx lays out the dialectic of production and consumption with specific reference to clothing.

Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. For example, a garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; ... thus the product, unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, becomes, a product only through consumption. Only by decomposing the product does consumption give the product the finishing touch; for the product is production not as objectified activity, but rather only as object for the active subject; (2) because consumption creates the need for new production, that is it creates the ideal, internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition. Consumption creates the motive for production; it also creates the object which is active in production as its determinant aim.⁹

More than one dialectical tendency is at work: the direct change of one thing, production, into its opposite, consumption; the dependency of one thing on another – production and consumption are co-dependent, as each is each others' means and mediation; furthermore, in use something that is merely an inert commodity becomes a use value, a real object, a garment

⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*.

proper. Through this same use, it disintegrates and negates itself. This stimulates more production. More generally, the dialectic exemplified here in relation to the wearing of a garment lays out the schema whereby production creating itself as consumption engages in a process in which alienated living labour is remade as dead accumulated labour or capital in an endless cycle of production.

A garment is yet again close at hand when Marx outlines the fundamental elements of capitalist system in the opening pages of *Capital*. Here a coat and linen are used to work through the value form of the commodity, with its qualifications as equivalent, relative, use and exchange.

Clothing is a historical necessity. Fashion, for Marx, though, by contrast, is associated with the class stratifications of the capitalist mode of production. Emblematic of class, it is deployed by Marx metaphorically. Discussing the first French Republic, he notes how it ‘was only a new evening dress for the old bourgeois society.’¹⁰ Fashion is dissimulation, a disguise that changes the surface, but not the underlying situation. The next generation of power-mongers, French politicians establishing modern bourgeois society from 1789 until 1814, did likewise, according to Marx, copying the copiers, shrouding themselves in ‘the austere classical traditions of the Roman Republic’, in ‘Roman costume’ and ‘Roman slogans’.¹¹ These are ‘self-deceptions’ necessary to hide from themselves the limited bourgeois content of their struggles and to maintain their enthusiasm at the high level appropriate to great historical tragedy’.¹² Costume is suspect, donned to cloak. Any original materiality is obscured, as it becomes a cipher, not something produced in the great factories of the world and consumed in all its corners. What is tragic production becomes farcical simulation. The criticism of fashion’s deceptiveness through surface is replicated in the thesis of capitalist manipulation of needs and desires, whereby a populace, conceived as consumers, is appealed to through the sensuous aesthetics of commodities.

¹⁰ Marx 1992, p. 48

¹¹ Marx 1992, p. 147

¹² Marx 1992, p. 148