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Class in Movement, Forming and Unforming

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Abstract: On the basis of observations on Marx's concept of class as a fluid and self-undoing formation, this essay considers the ways in which solidifications of class as an identity have failed to grasp the extent to which class is always in movement, both across time and within each moment of its existence. The implications of this stance are followed through in relation to contemporary fantasies of AI enabled deployment into production without limit, which argues that class is redeployed as a digital quality – but one that will not ever gain critical consciousness – or, alternatively, is, as amounts to the same thing, transcended. What is left behind and out in the vision? How might those made redundant, but still the source of wealth, in combination with nature, not stop, on account of this technical shift, being a class that is directed towards forming and deforming itself as class, even if it makes less – but does not become less subject to extraction – in pursuit of which it is directed to consume more?

Keywords: Movement, ferment, consciousness, critique, schooling

What is the class that labours? What was the working class - and is it still a class and does it work? Does it exist in mortal antagonism with its nemesis the ruling class? Bertolt Brecht was sure in the 1930s that there was something that arced from ancient times to his and it bore the name of working class, for it did the work that needed to be done, and in every period, it had been both the unacknowledged facilitator of history and its victim. In 1935, he wrote a poem titled 'Questions from a Worker Who Reads'. It transposed work, an everyday, continual activity, to the world of myth, ancient empires, the defeat at war of Philip II of Spain and the military victory of Frederick the Great. Brecht asked, rhetorically, through the voice of the worker, who was it who had made the materials, who carried out the socially reproductive labour, which underscored and enabled the power of rulers? What are the names of the people that were lost to history, and yet, in truth, made that history happen?

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Did the kings drag in the blocks of stone?
And Babylon, destroyed so many times.
Who built it up again and again? Of the houses
In Lima, gold-glittering, which housed the builders?¹

Brecht's worker asked where the stonemasons went the evening after finishing the Chinese wall and he queried who erected the triumphal

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¹ Brecht, 1988-2000, p. 409.

arches of Rome? The worker had many questions. Did the heroes of Ancient Greece win their battles alone? Who cooked for them? Who cried along with kings when fleets sunk under the sea?

Each page a victory
Who cooked the victory feast?
Every ten years a great man,
Who paid the expenses?

Brecht evoked the ancient world of Thebes and Rome, real places in which people worked and ate and fought and died. They were also home to the gods and the site of myths. Thebes was, according to legend, the birthplace of the mythical hero Hercules. Brecht's poem was written into his present, though. The worker who read and had questions about what he had read was developing a critical, communist frame of mind. From a knowledge of building, or cooking, of reproduction and social reproduction, questions arose about the handed-down, individualised heroic representations of the past. And the point was to make history class-consciously in the present.

Brecht's poem, which championed the questioning, self-educating worker, had little of the sensibility of George Orwell's rendition of the working-class attitude to education in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, from around the same time. Perhaps there is a class-ridden English contempt for workers expressed in Eton-educated Orwell's 1937 study of working class life:

The time was when I used to lament over quite imaginary pictures of lads of fourteen dragged protesting from their lessons and set to work at dismal jobs. It seemed to me dreadful that the doom of a 'job' should descend upon anyone at fourteen. Of course I know now that there is not one working-class boy in a thousand who does not pine for the day when he will leave school. He wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography. To the working class, the notion of staying at school till you are nearly grown-up seems merely contemptible and unmanly. The idea of a great big boy of eighteen, who ought to be bringing a pound a week home to his parents, going to school in a ridiculous uniform and even being caned for not doing his lessons! Just fancy a working-class boy of eighteen allowing himself to be caned! He is a man when the other is still a baby.²

To leave school was, in this account, to grow up, to be grown up, to earn money and avoid the teachers' beatings - even if there might be other

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² Orwell 2021, p. 80.

beatings awaiting, in the pubs, and certainly there would be humiliation in the workplace. Orwell articulates what he imagines to be the inner thoughts of the worker. Perhaps it was not in contradiction with Brecht's point about the questioning, learning worker, for Brecht did not argue that schooling could provide Marxist wisdom, rather that only self-education or socialist party education was meaningful to the worker. But how was the worker that Orwell imagined made complicit with a rejection of education? It happened through a glorification of the role of labourer, an identification of that power to make and shape with something greater, or godlike. To be a man was to be like a demigod, beating steel, hacking minerals in mine shafts, to build bridges and contribute to fiery life and glossy futures. So it seemed. To be a man was also to become an exploited member of a class, compelled exchange schooling for a minimum of training, and to work hard, get a wage and bear responsibility.

Orwell's vision of becoming a worker, which entails losing one's educational curiosity, and joining the ranks of a class that works and gains identity through its role as worker, was far from Marx's conception. In Marx's work, to be a member of a class is to be part of a tumult, to be in the flow of something protean, always in formation. Class's presence, the ideas attendant on and in classes, class's constitution are not fixed, horizons are unstable. Marx brings this out - as part of a necessary work of critique - in his marginalia to the Gotha Programme in 1872. Lassalle had announced in the Gotha Programme that 'The emancipation of labour must be the work of the working class, relative to which all other classes are only one reactionary mass'. Marx leaps in to the slogan to take apart the 'improvements' by Lassalle that added on the subclause 'relative to which all other classes are only one reactionary mass'. Marx's notes point back to the *Communist Manifesto*:

Of all the classes that stand face-to-face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.³

What modern industry produces is not only its commodity outputs, but also the maker of those outputs. The proletariat is a product of industry, as much as linen and coats. While the proletariat is the 'really revolutionary class', the bourgeois had been so. He observes how in the manifesto, issued in 1848, the bourgeoisie was recognised too as revolutionary in its actions, ripping down the structures of feudalism and tearing up, with its factory mode of production, the petty production modes of the lower middle classes. The bourgeoisie makes a world anew - one in which the proletariat is brought into being and will labour and make and unmake

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³ Marx and Engels 2017, p. 10.

itself, as it 'strives to strip off from production the capitalist character that the bourgeoisie seeks to perpetuate'. Everything is in movement, in this vision - the different classes exist in mutating relations to each other and the world - the Manifesto notes that the 'lower middle class' is becoming revolutionary 'in view of [its] impending transfer to the proletariat'.

From this point of view, therefore, it is again nonsense to say that it, together with the bourgeoisie, and with the feudal lords into the bargain, 'form only one reactionary mass' relative to the working class.

Has one proclaimed to the artisan, small manufacturers, etc., and peasants during the last elections: Relative to us, you, together with the bourgeoisie and feudal lords, form one reactionary mass?⁴

Marx's argument is that it is not that the non-working class mass is reactionary, rather it is the case that reactionaries perceive a single mass, a block immobilised and not open to revolutionary flow, to movement. If one concurs with Marx then there are implications for political alliances. At the very least, it undermines the 'horny handed sons of toil' myth, in relation to which one takes a pick - the proletariat as revolutionary agent of history or as matter for the reactionary block that is made available to fascism. For Marx there is no revolutionary part against the rest. There is only movement and that movement is also the movement in and through and between and across and into and out of classes - because to assert that there is such a thing as class, in Marx's sense, is to assert its tendency towards its own undoing and the blockage of that. 'All that is solid melts into air' is not only a cliché, but also a principle or guiding watchword. Everything - including class - melts and hardens and melts again over time.

In April 1856, Marx delivered a speech at a meeting to mark the fourth anniversary of the *People's Paper* at the Bell Hotel, the Strand, in London, and published it in that same journal. He observed:

The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents - small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. Noisily and confusedly they proclaimed the emancipation of the Proletarian, i.e. the secret of the nineteenth century, and of the revolution of that century.⁵

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4 Marx 2022.

5 Marx 1969, p. 500.

The limited revolution of the bourgeois only cracked the dry crust, but even that force was a borrowed one, a surplus of energy from the true historical force embodied in pools of volcanic liquidity that burst up and out from confinement in the under earth. This is the liquid force that should and must expand to carry through the revolution proper in the wake of 1848. The pressure produced in the process of emancipating the proletariat is a secret one- that is, no one can name it then, but it works away underground pushing upwards. The struggle between classes comes to seem like a struggle between the liquid, which is the oppressed classes, propelling historical change, and the crystal, which is the hard rock and metal of reaction that would obstruct any dissolution of the current state of things. Marx turns to the natural sciences to provide a metaphor for the invisible but forceful orientation that class struggle exerts:

But, although the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides.⁶

The force is not visible, not yet, and so is overlooked, even though its pressure builds. Marx records how more visible forces too, from technology and science - steam, electricity, and the self-acting mule - are 'dangerous' revolutionists, for they alter society, which is to say produce new social bonds. These come into relation with the classes that own and operate them and effect all manner of changes.

Marx's political movement, which is a formulated articulation of historical movement, is imagined through the metaphor of a geological movement. In the course of history, it appears diverted into a movement moving on behalf of the few. It has to be mass, that is must capture and envelop broader swathes of people, who see their interests in its furtherance. Mass movement is a geological term for the movement of surface materials, as occurs in rockslides, mudflows or slumps. This happens, for example, when water adds weight to soil and exerts pressure, pushing apart individual grains of soil. This movement might be prevented by certain measures. In the social world, too, movement can be, and is constantly blocked.

At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.⁷

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6 Marx 1969, p. 500.

7 Marx 1969, p. 500.

The antagonisms of capitalism work to stultify the flow of life into a solid block, which is a blockage, while foisting agental, conscious force onto the material forces of technology and machinery. Humans relinquish fluid movements and labile intelligence and subject themselves to the machines, which become lively. There is an antagonism between modern industry and science and modern misery and dissolution, the productive powers and the social relations of the epoch. New forces demand newly oriented people, indeed produces them, the workers, who are inventions of the epoch, just as are the machines and the insights of science. In combination, these newly constituted forms will make history flow differently, if negatively in this specific context. Marx expresses an optimistic view. The bourgeois revolution is insufficiently revolutionary, and indeed dissolves not the social conditions but, rather, the social binds of those who participate in it. The dialectic does not stop moving. History does not stop being historically, under conditions of contradiction.

That which is lively is also dead - so deep are the contradictions. This deadliness or strange liveliness can be tracked in Marx's and Engels' ideas of classes. Marx, in his analysis of revolutionary movements in France and the New World, in 1852, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, saw shadows. Of North America he wrote that, owing to the youthfulness of the nation, there was a different quality of existence, one which was too busy acting, building, eradicating, settling, to spend time dealing with the past – and so that past lingered like a pile of rubbish that no-one bothered to throw out. Specifically,

where, though classes already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in constant flux, where the modern means of production, instead of coinciding with a stagnant surplus population, rather compensate for the relative deficiency of heads and hands, and where, finally, the feverish, youthful movement of material production, which has to make a new world of its own, has neither time nor opportunity left for abolishing the old world of ghosts.⁸

Classes are fluid, fluxy, actively reproducing themselves and a 'new world' to inhabit. What they were, what baggage they dragged with them from Europe in the nineteenth century, settled as a residue but took on a deathly life of its own. Evidence of this, according to Marx and Engels, was that the USA became a place of proliferating spiritualist movements, table-knockers and aura photographers. But these were themselves remnants, part of an old world. Indeed, according to Friedrich Engels, in a letter to F.A. Sorge in 1886,

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8 Cited in Jessop, Bob and Charlie Malcolm-Brown 1999, p. 583.

the Americans are worlds behind in all theoretical things, and while they did not bring over any medieval institutions from Europe they did bring over masses of medieval traditions, religion, English common (feudal) law, superstition, spiritualism, in short every kind of imbecility which was not directly harmful to business and which is now very serviceable for making the masses stupid.⁹

One class, a business class, uses magic to delude other classes, who are denied a seat at the table of their governing rationality, a rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer will argue harbours its own mythic elements. Back in Europe, the ghosts of old Europe enter into a ghostly alliance to purge the new ghost – which is only a ghost from their point of view. From Marx's point of view, this communist rebellion is not that of a ghost but a gust of rationality and righteousness. Communism was, in Marx's poetics, the spectre that haunted Europe, in a fateful struggle of the dead undone, the bearers of endlessly dying labour, congealed as forms of values more important than themselves, and condemned to work against the vampiric undead who sucked the life from them as fast as they replenished it, as the metaphorical images of *Das Kapital* put it.

But things were different in the colonies. To be part of a class was to be only partly of that class and there were many modes of moving in and out of it. Marx wrote about this in *Capital*.

The absolute population here increases much more quickly than in the mother-country, because many labourers enter this world as ready-made adults, and yet the labour-market is always understocked. The law of supply and demand of labour falls to pieces. On the one hand, the old world constantly throws in capital, thirsting after exploitation and “abstinence”; on the other, the regular reproduction of the wage labourer as wage labourer comes into collision with impediments the most impertinent and in part invincible. What becomes of the production of wage-labourers, supernumerary in proportion to the accumulation of capital? The wage-worker of to-day is to-morrow an independent peasant, or artisan, working for himself. He vanishes from the labour-market, but not into the workhouse. This constant transformation of the wage-labourers into independent producers, who work for themselves instead of for capital, and enrich themselves instead of the capitalist gentry, reacts in its turn very perversely on the conditions of the labour-market. Not only does the degree of exploitation of the wage labourer remain indecently low. The wage labourer loses into the bargain, along with the relation of

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9 Cited in Klehr 1973), p. 321.

dependence, also the sentiment of dependence on the abstemious capitalist.¹⁰

To be of a class is specific historically and depends on local conditions. The colonised may not be subject to the same conditions of those in the colonisers' home country.

Classes existed, and still exist, fluidly. There may be a general truth to Marx and Engels' observation that the myriad of factions resolve over time into two factions: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But it will not mean that those on either side of the divide are confined to one or the other of that divide forever more. And in any case, there are still fringe phenomena. It may be the case that this or that figure crosses from one to the other, and that between the two great blocks is a tangle and a fraying and a confusion of declassed people or intermediate formations. Still today there are peasants or self-exploiting Etsy producers or petty landlords. But who possesses capital and who sells their labour power to another - this determines much, including one's ideas about what is right and what is wrong in the world and what is owed to you and what may be your interests. These things are under constant pressure and may change from day to day - but how you reproduce yourself socially and what power you have over the what and how and why and means and mode of production changes more slowly, if at all.

The various editions and prefaces of Marx's *Capital* were written in response to movement, to movement in the world that brought movement to Marx's ideas. Composing it in a time of retrenchment, some twenty years after the turbulent days of 1848, after a wave of revolutionary fervour had swept Europe and beyond, Marx retired from active political agitation into the British Museum Reading Room - a kind of holding operation of analysis in order to forward the cause intellectually, logically, ideologically. Marx subjected his own analysis to critique again after the events of the Paris Commune - when he undertook revisions of *Capital* in French and German, in the light of historical actions. Marx returned to *Capital*, and issued it in French in small pamphlets - a critique of political economy distributed, in French at least, in cheap accessible gobbets, not great tomes that demand to swallow vast tracts of time. Marx absorbs the lessons of the past to direct powers of critique, as occurs when he breaks into the Gotha Programme - and measures the class analysis of the Lassalleans in 1875 against the class analysis of the revolutionary situation of 1848. What he does in his critique of the Gotha Programme is a line by line refutation of thinking that has hardened into inflexibility and dogma - inaugurating a mode of political praxis that extends forwards through various objections in the margins and 'contradictory' approaches.

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¹⁰ Marx 1906: 842-843.

Lenin performs critique too when he annotates Hegel from September 1914 – the First World War has broken into the world of thought. Lenin studied the *Science of Logic*. Lenin's "Abstract of Hegel's Science of Logic" is 150 pages long – the commentary exceeds the object, like a good Romantic critic, completes and transforms what it apprehends. Notes from 1915 on other works by Hegel and on Hegel take up another 100 pages. And what are these notebooks? Long extracts in German from Hegel, interspersed with commentary, marginalia, and workings through of what the dialectic is or must be. While official Marxist-Leninism was little interested in the *Philosophical Notebooks* or Hegel, devoting little commentary to it, other traditions understood the significance of this. Henri Lefebvre noted, marginally himself, in his autobiography in 1959:

He did not read or study Hegel seriously until 1914-15. Also, if one considers it objectively, one notices a great difference in tone and content between the Notebooks on the Dialectic and Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. Lenin's thought becomes supple, alive ... in a word, dialectical. Lenin did not fully understand the dialectic until 1914, after the collapse of the International.¹¹

The metaphor here is of suppleness, of a litheness or aliveness. It is as if, in the dialectical act of contradicting, energy enters into thinking and into praxis. That is the power of the critique. It raises the question of movement – a shift, or shiftability, movement in thought and tactics. Lenin takes 'movement' back to the drawing board, insisting in *What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, in 1901, that 'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement'. The workers may move and the workers' movement form, but to make it revolutionary, to introduce the truly mobile into the movement, requires revolutionary theory, that is the intellectual impetus of the party.

But not only workers move. Volcanoes erupt. Stars move in fixed patterns. Trees sway in the breeze. This shift towards nature is one suggested in Marx – already there was the metaphor of revolution breaking through a dry crust. When he considers class struggle he draws on another analogy, that of fermentation. For Marx, fermentation is an ingredient of class struggle. Recognising the human as resource in a specific way for capital was the insight of Marx and he gave that human resource a name, which was labour power. Labour power is not the same as the work given, but is rather a conceptualisation of work, the capacity to work, which is then sold or freely given depending on the means of production, the social framework within which labour occurs. As Marx puts it,

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¹¹ Quoted in Anderson 1995, p. 216.

By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood as the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description.¹²

He continues:

Labour-power, however, becomes a reality only by its exercise; it sets itself in action only by working. But thereby a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, &c., is wasted, and these require to be restored.¹³

Extracted resources, taken or sold, or rather resources that have the capacity to be commodified or given away, are here described as mental and physical, thought, emotions, the power to lift or shift or craft. Under capitalism, the human resource that the capitalist buys is an energy that triggers other processes. Marx describes it by analogy to fermentation.

By the purchase of labour-power, the capitalist incorporates labour, as a living ferment, with the lifeless constituents of the product. From his point of view, the labour-process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased, i.e., of labour-power; but this consumption cannot be effected except by supplying the labour-power with the means of production. The labour-process is a process between things that the capitalist has purchased, things that have become his property. The product of this process belongs, therefore, to him, just as much as does the wine which is the product of a process of fermentation completed in his cellar.¹⁴

Labour power initiates a process as does fermentation. It is captured in order to bring about something else, a third term, a result that is bought along with the labour power that brought it into being. It is not the body of the worker that is bought. That is set free and in being unowned, in being sovereign to itself, it is left to find its own modes of restoration, so that its capacities can be topped up again, in order to be sold again. That is the self-reproduction of the working class. By the purchase of labour-power, the capitalist incorporates labour, as a living ferment, with the lifeless constituents of the product. From the capitalist's point of view, the labour-process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased, i.e., of labour-power; but this consumption

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¹² Marx 1906, p. 186.

¹³ Marx 1906, p. 190.

¹⁴ Marx 1906, p.206.

cannot be effected except by supplying the labour-power with the means of production. The labour-process is a process between things that the capitalist has purchased, things that have become his property. The product of this process belongs, therefore, to him, just as much as does the wine which is the product of a process of fermentation completed in his cellar.

Still that fermentation of labour power can escape from the confines of the cellar, according to Marx. Marx wrote: 'Anybody who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment.'¹⁵ Fermentation is a chemical process of breaking down yeasts, proteins or other microorganisms. Fermentation is a form of agitation and energy. Fermentation is the excess surplus labour appropriated by capital as if it were rightly so by nature, but it is also the ferment of a revolutionary class as it chaotically resists social oppression.

Is it not the case today that microbial agents figure as major players, indeed even usurpers of human agency, colonisers of human subjectivity. Other actors, or actants, slime, feisty yeast, fluidly intelligent bacteria, border phenomena, stuff from in-between realms, provide a dramaturgy of and for things and people, at a time when human life is life rebadged as holobiont, microbial rainforests, teeming sites of multiple lives, hodgepodge heterotopias. Is it time to shift humans away from centre stage and give the cosmos over to other lives, other beings that can shape and reshape it divergently? What if we recognised liquid life, fermenting acids, bacterial agents that grew like plants and made decisions as workers? Does that change how we understand class? Are there new working classes engaged in the production of artworks or data analysis through AI. No, because to be of a class is to be in relation to other classes and to be giving or taking as a social relation. What is not social can have no social relations - though undoubtedly exists within them, but not on their terms, but on the terms of those who deploy such technical aspects socially. AI and all that can be made and conceived by computing may be productive, but, outside the realms of fiction, it cannot reach self-consciousness, and argue for its own abolition on the basis of its understanding of its enmeshment in unjustly extractive social relations. It will not be the (Brechtian) AI who reads, though it might become the (Orwellian) one that strains at the leash to leave its training programmes and enter the world of exploitation, one that only in their wildest nightmares, backed by cinema, will revolt or refuse. It is the tech overlords who imagine that all the AI in the world works for them as a newly exploitable class. And they seek new exploitable subjects in the vast distance on Mars or in the near imperceptibility of the nano or pico or femtosphere.

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¹⁵ Marx and Engels 1990, p. 68.

Embodiment is currently reimagined, de-gendered, augmented, time-extended. Reproduction is conceived microbially, laterally, through cloning, IVF. Flesh, skin, milk can be grown in vitro in forms of genetic engineering, 'cellular agriculture', 'biofabrication' or 'laboratory cloning' (depending who is doing the marketing), offer ways to emancipate and transform, and to instrumentalise at an infinitesimal scale. DNA can be extracted from starter cells, inserted into yeast in vitro, and brewed away in large fermentation vats where it is put into action as something like a new working class, an ever-acting productive, generating agent of change within a mesh of machinery that appears to need no class management, no workers, no bosses. That is the dream - though the fantasy also includes the continued flow of profits from somewhere into private bank accounts. The redundant body of the worker is re-conceptualised as an arrangement of bacteria, viruses, eukaryotic cells in nonlinear coexistence, further combined with the bio-digital and its set of technologies as part of cybernetic capitalism.¹¹ It is to offer itself up to all manner of extractions (data or intellect, for example) - but none are conceived as the extraction of surplus value. In an age of the surveillance state and corporate data extraction, to become digital, or to be bodiless, seems to represent emancipatory freedoms - nobody can be compelled into a class position and exploited. Likewise, for those who want to disavow their flesh, and hivemind their intelligence onto some more robust substrate singularity seems like an attractive proposition. But what we really know is, within our lifetimes at the very least, to be without a body is quite simply to be dead. Some of the most virulently pursued forms of synthetics research are focused on preserving the bodies of the venture capitalists who are all too aware of this frailty, with their auto-reproductive desire to extend their own life forever by vampiric processes such as parabiosis: the transfusion of juvenile blood into ageing veins.¹² For the rest of us though, concerned as we might be about the ramifications of future science and the imperatives of state regulation- there is no more efficient and fast-acting way for a state to perpetrate ultra-violence on citizens, than the removal of access to an affordable health service. And that is a class issue and will remain so, as long as there are classes, which will exist as long as there is a form of capitalism and its attendant violence.

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