

## The Aesthetic Science of the Commune [book review]

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Beverley Best:

*The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx's Capital*

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In Beverley Best's opinion, Karl Marx's *Capital* "is *not* a study of capitalist society, it is a book about how to think the material conditions of what might come after."<sup>1</sup> In her reading, she emphasizes that what makes Marx's concept of capital *dialectical*, is that it grasps capital from the standpoint of its overcoming. She dubs this the "utopian/dialectical movement" of capital. In what follows, I will highlight how Best's study of *Capital* Volume III demonstrates that what is often considered to be the most esoteric element of Marx—his theory of value—is in fact the key to reconstituting the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Best, I will show, reveals the figurative—counter-intuitive, post-capitalist—possibilities that are built into the movement of value. It is through what she calls "the perceptual physics of capital" that we are able to discern what remains formless, invisible, and impossible in our current situation.

For Best,

What Marx calls "science" is a work of conception—analysis and imagination, speculative thinking or cognitive mapping—that reveals what is hidden, that links essence and appearance, social content and social form: "All science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence"; as it is, without a conception of their dynamic, "their inner connections remain hidden, *even though they are comprehensible to the popular mind.*" (326, Best's emphasis)

Capital generates appearances in the world that are objective, "not in the mind, which is why we might call it a perceptual physics rather than a mode of conception, even as it generates appearances that are registered in, and mediated by, the embodied consciousness of its bearers" (326). But the world of capitalist

appearances is topsy-turvy; they revolve around an “invisible centre of gravity”; namely, surplus-value (138). This spectral objectivity thus requires a science adequate not only to the capitalist mode of production, but also to the material conditions of its overcoming. And Marx’s science can do both. The science of value is, Best argues, “popular work.” “It can be the work of philosophers, but it is not their preserve” (326). It can be the work of artists, because why not.

The third volume of *Capital* intimates a collective project that grasps the perceptual physics of capital from the perspective of its overcoming—what Best understands as the new science of the “as-yet-unrealized commune” (340). It is a decidedly aesthetic science that works on capital understood as a representational problem that contains its own solution in the form of a “higher,” social, communal mode of production called communism.<sup>2</sup> According to Best, the movement of capital embodies an aesthetic experience that involves both mind and body. Building further on the claim she worked out earlier in *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy* (2010), she emphasizes once more that *Capital* is not only an analytical but also an aesthetic project that synthesizes abstract thought and embodied sensation. Throughout her work, what she demonstrates—to borrow the words of Fredric Jameson—is that Marx’s science “recalls us to our bodies much as [it] recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers.”<sup>3</sup> It’s worth noting that the commune emerges, as Kristin Ross has pointed out, as the overcoming of the division between manual and artistic labor.<sup>4</sup>

What makes capital unique is that its determining force—that is, the value relation—is invisible. The social physics of value is such that it *disappears* precisely when it determines “what it is possible to imagine, do, and make collectively” (5). It is this, she argues, following Jameson, that makes capital an aesthetic problem. The defining feature of this mode of determinism, she says, “is that *it appears not to be one*” (5).

*The Automatic Fetish* should be seen as a form of “mapping” in that it takes up Jameson’s call for “cognitive maps” that represent the capitalist totality from the standpoint of its overcoming—a call that was a postmodern recasting of Georg Lukács’s standpoint of the proletariat, which I will return to later.<sup>5</sup> Jameson made it clear that this standpoint of the proletariat—history’s “identical subject/object”—always-already entailed a cognitive-aesthetic point of view. Hence his call for “an aesthetics of cognitive mapping.”<sup>6</sup> Best, however, also wants to clarify Jameson’s call in relation to the Marxian science of value, or what she calls the “science of the commune” (vi). This “science of the commune” bears on “the question of how to imagine, never mind carry out, the conditions (i.e., the collective doing) that will transform land into a *collective* form of wealth in kind [...] as a movement *through* capital’s unrealized historical

potentialities for the socialization of agriculture production” (321). This raises the question of how artistic research could contribute to such a project. What I want to suggest is that the science of the commune is, in the words of Marina Vishmidt, a speculative praxis “oriented toward reality from the standpoint of its transformation.”<sup>7</sup>

First, let us turn to a pivotal passage in *Capital* III:

The contradiction between the social power into which capital has developed and the private power of the individual capitalists over these social conditions [...] also contains the solution to this situation, in that it simultaneously raises the conditions of production into general, communal, social conditions.<sup>8</sup>

And Best’s reading of it:

Throughout *Capital* III, Marx scatters speculative deductions (like the one emphasized above) that depict the necessary movement of capital’s social content as driving straight through capital’s formation of private power, and out the other side. [...] the image of Marx’s speculative deductions is consistent: the transition from capital to post-capital will not be a matter of replacing a capitalist mode of production with an alternative associated mode of production but, rather, of activating the virtual, if not-yet-actualized, dimensions of capital itself. (129)

Few people today feel that capitalism “unwittingly creates the material conditions for a higher form of production,” that is to say, collective human flourishing, as Marx has it in *Capital* III.<sup>9</sup> On the face of it, Marx’s speculative deductions—those moments in *Capital* when he considers the transition to communism—would appear to be instances of what G. A. Cohen in his reconstruction of Marx calls the “fettering thesis.”<sup>10</sup> In his essay “The Belly of the Revolution,” Jasper Bernes defines this “fettering thesis” as the idea that “the technological forces that capitalism employs in its quest for productivity-driven profit are the foundation upon which an emancipated humanity will erect its new dwelling.”<sup>11</sup> We might think of this as Marx’s “modernism,” or what Best calls “the unreconstructed Marx.” Throughout *The Automatic Fetish*, she argues that “the form of surplus abstract/socialized labour”—the value form—has the power to “drive straight through capital’s formation of private power, and out the other side” (129). This dynamic of *Capital* might strike contemporary readers as the most out of joint. But the dialectic is always untimely. The reason why Best foregrounds the dialectical power of abstraction/socialization is because she subscribes to the view that it holds the key to communism. She makes us pause and reconsider Marx’s speculative deductions. The question Best seems to ask is whether the above passage might not be a moment of Marx’s *inverted teleology*? That is to say, whether Marx’s speculative deductions, which are not

to be mistaken for forms of historical narration, are dialectically reversible, such that communism can be used to highlight elements of capitalism, just as capitalism can be used to highlight elements of communism. As Bernes puts it in *The Future of Revolution* (a book which also argues that *Capital* “is not only the adequate representation of the capitalist mode of production but [also] an outline in negative of its overcoming by communism”): “in order to illuminate some features of capitalism, Marx finds that he must, in fact, compare it with a fictitious communism.”<sup>12</sup>

Best, in presenting Marx to us “unreconstructed”—that is, in presenting us with a reading of Marx based on the premise that “an alternative associated mode of production” entails “activating the virtual, if not-yet-actualized, dimensions of capital itself”—imbues *Capital* with a new, untimely dialectical valence, such that the concept of *capital* becomes, precisely because of the “productive force determinism”<sup>13</sup> of Marx’s argument, a dialectical/utopian thought-experiment for thinking the unthinkable; namely, the transition from capitalism to communism. It is a utopian/dialectical reading of capital’s social forms that learns from Jameson, for whom the dialectic was always a utopian and future-oriented thought-experiment, a thinking that “revives long-dormant parts of the mind, organs of political and historical and social imagination which have virtually atrophied for lack of use, muscles of praxis we have long since ceased exercising, revolutionary gestures we have long lost the habit of performing, even subliminally.”<sup>14</sup>

The goal of utopia as “method,” says Jameson, is “to change the valences or phenomena which so far exist only in our own present; and experimentally to declare positive things which are clearly negative in our own world.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as Best notes, “Marx challenges today’s imagination” (129). Her reading of Marx “unreconstructed” challenges not only common sense, but also critical reconstructions of Marx “sans proletariat” (to borrow a phrase from Neil Larsen) such as those advanced, for example, in *Werkkritik* (“value-critique”) or Moishe Postone’s seminal *Time, Labour, and Social Domination* (1993).<sup>16</sup> (Best, however, does not enter into a polemics with any of these alternative reconstructions.) She writes:

One of the present obstacles with respect to conceptualizing an exit from a capitalist mode of production is a proletariat deeply stratified around degrees of social vulnerability and exposure to risk, deprivation, and death—a subalternization of access to a portion of social wealth, expressed in wage hierarchies (including the absolute expulsion from the wage) that index long histories of technologies of power and subjugation that we capture in the categories of race, Indigeneity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, property, citizenship, and so on. (130–31)

Yet, she also insists that “this fragmentation of the proletariat is capital’s surface story, the movement of capital ‘in the world as it actually is.’ There is another story: the inversion of this one, equally objective, if the immaterial mirror of the first” (131). For Best, the power of abstraction—what Marx calls “science”—is that it is able to perform just such a utopian/dialectical reversal: by revealing, through the inversion of fragmentation and atomization, a universal dynamic and inner connection built into the very concept of capital itself. She calls this inversion “the portal,” which involves using utopia as a “method.” The function and power of abstraction, according to her, “introduces logical grounds for solidarity across stratification, across all agents of production, whether they are engaged by capital directly or not, and across the multitude of hierarchized differentiated identities” (331). The dialectic of the concept of capital means that capital’s logic of association can serve a dual purpose: separation and (potentially) its very opposite. Best is tacitly injecting a utopian/dialectical valence into what the dystopian realism of the Endnotes collective calls the “unity-in-separation” that organizes life in a capitalist society. They put it like this in their “L.A. Theses”:

class consciousness, today, can only be the consciousness of capital [...]. In capitalism, that which separates them [proletarians] is also what unites them: the market is both their atomization and their interdependence. It is the consciousness of capital as our unity-in-separation that allows us to posit from within existing conditions—even if only as a photographic negative—humanity’s capacity for communism.<sup>17</sup>

What Best’s Marxian utopology does is turn the standpoint of the proletariat into a speculative deduction that follows from the science of the as-yet-unrealized commune. She inverts the logic of Endnote’s “unity-in-separation” and posits a “negative universality” or “fundamental universality of the separated” (132). It’s a move that makes her embrace the standpoint of the proletariat as the negation of the negation of capital; that is, as the concept of “struggle, unified and planetary at the level of its concept” (133). It is this that makes her one of the most exciting dialecticians writing today.

What Best wants to emphasize is that it is precisely *through* the concept of capital that we can invert the fragmentation and segmentation of proletarians today, and posit a “unity of interest in the overcoming of separation” (132). She continues: “The idea that capital posits a negative universality—a spectral equality—between each bearer of the collective subject of the proletariat, in their essential separation from the means of production, immediately appears as an outrageous and negligent suggestion” (132). Best insists, on the contrary, that the *power* of abstraction—which is needed to grasp the standpoint of the proletariat—is exactly that it is able to “conceptualize across difference

and stratification” (132). The point of the dialectical analysis, she states, is “to imagine the unimaginable articulation of contemporary struggles in their historical and material specificity as a unified anti-capitalist mobilization” (132). What the “perceptual physics of capital” allows us to see is how different struggles are related to the invisible social content of capital. That is to say, value can help us articulate and see the inner connections between different struggles and movements—and even allow us to break on through to the other side.

At every turn, Best shows us that “*Capital* III is a book about social surplus as a portal to another ‘higher form’ of society, one that represents the transition, famously, from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom” (340). The concept of abstract social surplus is enormously important for understanding the role of art and aesthetics. Through what Best calls the “perceptual physics of capital”—that is, through the logic of inversion—art can help illuminate the immanent social physics of the realm of freedom. And what could be more outrageous than suggesting that art might still play a role in the construction of a collective subjectivity, in the expansion of human social needs, and in opening up a “portal to another ‘non-existent but non-fictional’, higher because intentional, form of social modality” (131). The idea that there is some hidden social content immanent to the physics of capital which could be inverted to reveal an alternative course of *modernization* constitutes the very essence of modernism. But perhaps we need modernism, or what Best refers to as the utopian dialectic of capital, in order to reawaken the imagination of possible and alternate futures of collective life on this planet. Marx’s *Capital* III, with Best’s help, gets us to see that value remains the invisible center of gravity behind contemporary modes of dispossession.

*The Automatic Fetish* wagers that it is possible to seize the concept of capital and wield it for coordinating and composing a “higher because intentional, form of social modality.” Best is very clear that “each part of *Capital* III takes a distinct step in the elaboration of capital as a mode of socialized production truncated by the strictures of private property” (223). Many Marxists will take issue with this vision of communism as simply the lifting of the “strictures of private property.” Very well then. It behooves us to sharpen our contradictions against this “fettering thesis” (if that is indeed what it is). The function of the concept of capital is that it allows us to perceive social forms of domination from the standpoint of their overcoming. Dialectical determinism is therapy against despair. And as Endnotes once put it, “it is only in wrestling with the limit that proletarians will formalise the question, to which revolution is the answer.”<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

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- 1 Beverley Best, *The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx's Capital* (Verso, 2024), 341; hereafter, page numbers are given in text.
- 2 As the late Marx argues in his letter to Vera Zasulich, such a "higher" mode of production would make possible the full regeneration and flourishing of the Russian commune (or *mir*).
- 3 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 308.
- 4 See, in particular, her *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015).
- 5 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (MIT Press, 1971).
- 6 See his essay "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Illinois University Press, 1988), 347–57.
- 7 See Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill, 2018), 26.
- 8 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (Penguin, 1981), 373.
- 9 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 368.
- 10 G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 326–41.
- 11 Jasper Bernes, "The Belly of the Revolution: Agriculture, Energy, and the Future of Communism," in *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, ed. Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti (MCM', 2018), 331.
- 12 Jasper Bernes, *The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising* (Verso, 2025), 87. In this book, Bernes reads Marx in a way that complements Best. He writes: "From the science of value, we can develop a critical science fiction of value, tracing out the course a revolution must take by delineating certain logical points of failure, certain guardrails" (95). Where—or if—they may diverge lies, likely, in the different valences they place on the question of technology in Marx and in the future of communism.
- 13 For a critical analysis of "productive force determinism," see Søren Mau's *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of Economic Power* (Verso, 2023), 51–55.
- 14 Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (Verso, 2009), 434.
- 15 Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 434.
- 16 See Neil Larsen's "Lukács sans Proletariat" in *George Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, ed. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (Bloomsbury, 2011), 81–101.
- 17 "L.A. Theses," *Endnotes*, December 2015, <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/endnotes-la-theses>.
- 18 Endnotes, "Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture," *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes* (2013): 248.