

# CANNIBALS AND ANIMALS OF *CAPITAL*: A COUNTERPOINT TO WILLIAM CLARE ROBERTS

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Working Paper

PhD Masterclass w/ William C. Roberts  
Aarhus University, June 2018

8,187 words

## 1. Introduction

“Everything is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power” Oscar Wilde supposedly says somewhere.<sup>2</sup> In a similar sense, we could say of Marx’s critique of political economy that *everything is capital, except capital, which is power*. This, at least, seems to be one of the main points of William Clare Roberts’ most excellent book, *Marx’s Inferno. The Political Theory of Capital*. In his book, Roberts traces how Marx’s exposé of capital is really an exposition of the forms of *domination* taken by capital, i.e. of power. Capital is a social relation, and as such, anything can be capital – it is not about what it is, but what we do with it. Formulated as fortune cookie wisdom: We use capital to dominate each other, but in the end, it is capital that dominates us. We are all under the hidden and impersonal domination of capital, but—and this is the second great point in Roberts’ book—we can do something about it; through collective action, we can establish a society free from domination where humans can truly flourish. The third and final point is that this entire exposé of capital as dominance and the way out of it is moulded by Marx’s constant interaction with other and often more prominent socialist thinkers of his time: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon,

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<sup>2</sup> The quote is usually attributed to Wilde, at least.

Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, etc. His arguments are almost always counterpoints to theirs. In the spirit of Marx, then, I will here offer a counterpoint to Roberts' story.

## 2. On Roberts' argument

These three main points of Roberts' book—that capital is impersonal dominance, that Marx constantly interacts with his fellow (or rival) socialists, and that *Capital* offers a positive theory of freedom from dominance—are all wrapped into the book's main narrative, which also serves as its main selling point: that Marx based the structure of *Capital* on the *Inferno* cantos of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Just like Dante, Marx fashions his exposé of capitalism as a descent, not into the actual, Christian Hell, but into the veritable hell of modern society – a 'socialist infernalism', to use Roberts' own expression.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Dante's book provides Marx with a structure for his own book, Roberts argues, in that *Capital* can be construed to be structured in line with the four main regions of Hell in *Inferno*, Upper Hell (*Capital*, chapters 1-3), Dis (chapters 4-11), Malebolge (chapters 12-25), and Cocytus (chapters 26-33).<sup>4</sup> According to Roberts, in the corresponding sections of *Capital* Marx describes facets of capitalist domination similar to the types of sins of their infernal counterparts. In the first section, capital dominates by incontinence, in the second by violence, in the third by fraud, and in the fourth by treachery. This is an intriguing notion, albeit one which, in my opinion, remains unfounded. While Roberts provides us with much circumstantial evidence (ranging from Marx's fondness of Dante through his revision of the number of chapters in the French edition of *Capital* to match the number of cantos in *Inferno*<sup>5</sup> and to pure speculation such as the following claim which is made with no kind of references to back it up: "In the 1850's ... [Marx] discovered Dante's *Inferno* and hit upon the idea that his critique of bourgeois political economy had to take the form of a descent into the modern Inferno"<sup>6</sup>), all of Roberts' evidence (referred to by him as the 'elements of the case') is, precisely, circumstantial at best. In the end, his claim rests entirely on the above

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<sup>3</sup> William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno. The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 40. Of course it could be said that it is the modern hell of capitalism that is the 'actual Hell', while the Christian one is imaginary, but that is neither here nor there.

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 26-27. Note that this structuring of the chapters of *Capital* only makes sense if one follows the first French edition and not either the first or the second German editions.

<sup>5</sup> "Perhaps it is a coincidence", Roberts notes (p. 26). Yes, perhaps it is.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 23.

mentioned analysis of the structure of *Capital*; if it is not true that the book is structured on these themes of incontinence, violence, fraud, and treachery, then the argument is naught. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case. While Roberts' exposition of *Capital* is in general brilliant and scholarly, he does in my opinion—for reasons that it would be out of our way to go into detail with here—ultimately fail to substantiate his claim. While he successfully interprets Marx's conception of capital as a form of dominance, he fails to demonstrate convincingly that this domination takes the forms he argues (incontinence, violence, fraud, treachery).

I want to suggest a different reading of the Hell motif in *Capital* instead. One which does not rest on spurious assumptions about Marx's literary preferences, but which instead takes into account his actual intellectual background, specifically his background as a *Young Hegelian*. Marx's background in the philosophical tradition of Young Hegelianism is, as far as I can see, scarcely even mentioned by Roberts. This is not surprising; Roberts' topic is *Capital* and in the standard narrative of Marx's intellectual development, he broke with the Young Hegelians 20 years prior to writing his seminal work.<sup>7</sup> However, this is in my opinion a false claim that has become a platitude in works on Marx. While I am aware that it is a controversial claim (maybe even on par with Roberts'), I believe Young Hegelian themes, motifs, and analyses to be present all over *Capital* – not least in the choice of the motif of a descent and in the descriptions of the hellish nature of capitalist production. This, I hope to show, becomes clear when one applies the prism of the Feuerbachian communism espoused by Marx, Engels, and Moses Hess in the mid-1840's.

### 3. Hess, Engels, Marx

Born in Bonn 1812, in the same Rhineland area as Marx and Engels, Moses Hess was a communist and a Jew. While such a reductionist description might bother modern sensibilities and seem to border on anti-semitism, in the case of Hess it is the most precise description of his life and work: Hess wrote both the first book-length communist tract in German (*The Holy History of Mankind*, 1837) and the first Zionist ditto (*Rome and Jerusalem*,

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<sup>7</sup> Roberts epitomises this tendency in a footnote to one of his only mentions of any connection with the Young Hegelians with the words “Marx's close ties to Bruno Bauer (later severed)” (Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 21). ‘Later severed’ – no more need be said!

1862). Between his second book (*The European Triarchy*, 1841) and *Rome and Jerusalem* was a break of more than 20 years in which Hess developed his special brand of communist thinking, not through full-length systematic works, but in a disparate and eclectic way through dozens of articles, pamphlets, etc.<sup>8</sup> Above all, these appeared in Young Hegelian organs such as the *Rheinische Zeitung* and the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* as well as in important Young Hegelian anthologies like Georg Herwegh's *Einundzwanzig Bogen aus der Schweiz* (1843). After having asserted an eclectic mix of Messianism, Spinozism, and Hegelianism in his youth, Hess's theoretical framework narrowed down to two major sources during this maturing period: radical French communism and the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach – especially the Feuerbachian concept of 'species-being' became important to Hess.<sup>9</sup> The most clear and concise formulation of Hess's brand of Feuerbachian communism is the 1845 essay "On the Essence of Money", which will therefore be our focus here. It also marks the clearest influence of Hess on Marx.<sup>10</sup> Originally written for Marx and Ruge's *Deutsch-Französischer Jahrbücher* but only published a year later in Hermann Püttmann's *Rheinische Jahrbücher für gesellschaftlichen Reform* (1845),<sup>11</sup> Hess's essay is a scathing indictment (as Carlebach notes: "Where Marx analyses, Hess preaches"<sup>12</sup>) of the 'huckstering world' (*Krämerwelt*) and 'money state' (*Geldstaat*) of capitalism, which he sees as the high-point of robbery, slavery, and particularist individualism.<sup>13</sup>

In his essay, Hess is preoccupied with the essence of man and how this essence is corrupted in modern industrial, i.e. capitalist society. His approach is inherently Feuerbachian (although he also differs from Feuerbach in key aspects) and centres on Feuerbach's key concept of species-being (*Gattungswesen*),<sup>14</sup> meaning

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<sup>8</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *Moses Hess: Prophet of Communism and Zionism*, Modern Jewish Masters vol. 1 (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1985), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Avineri, *Moses Hess*, 115 ff.

<sup>10</sup> The extent to which this essay influenced Marx is contended. McLellan claims that Marx downright copied from Hess (David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 155). Carlebach makes the case that the essay did not influence Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, but exerted a profound influence on his Paris manuscripts (Julius Carlebach, "The Problem of Moses Hess's Influence on the Young Marx", *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 18, no.1 (January 1973): 34-39). Avineri has no doubt that Hess influenced Marx (Avineri, *Moses Hess*, 115). Lademacher is more careful and gives primacy to Marx, but recognises the connection between them (Horst Lademacher, "Die politische und soziale Theorie bei Moses Heß", *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 42, no. 2 (1960): 229-230).

<sup>11</sup> Much speculation has been made as to why Marx (and Ruge) chose not to include Hess's essay in the single volume of the *D-FJ* published, since it seems that it was completed in time to have been included. See, e.g. Carlebach, "Hess and Marx", 30-31, or McLellan, *The Young Hegelians*, 152 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Carlebach, "Hess and Marx", 32.

<sup>13</sup> Avineri, *Moses Hess*, xy.

<sup>14</sup> Note here the double meaning of *Wesen* as both 'being' and 'essence' – a central theoretical point in itself. I follow convention here and translate it as 'species-being'.

realised being in the Hegelian sense of being that is in accordance with its essence. What, then, is man's essence with which he must be in accord in order to be a species-being and thus realised man? The answer is *sociality*. Man can live without community as little as he can live without air.<sup>15</sup> This sociality mainly takes the form of 'intercourse' (*Verkehr*) or "The mutual *exchange* of individual life-activity".<sup>16</sup> As such, Hess's human essence is something dynamic and processual. In this, he diverges from Feuerbach: to Feuerbach, human essence is given by nature; to Hess it is processually developed in history.<sup>17</sup> Feuerbach's man is *natural*, Hess's *historical*: "The *human* essence ... develops, as any essence, in the course of a *history* through many struggles and destructions".<sup>18</sup> As such, this communal species-being has not yet been realised: "we still live in its struggles".<sup>19</sup> Hess does not imagine some original, lost unity of man with his essence; on the contrary, the struggle of history is the result of the fact that "in the beginning they could only maintain themselves as isolated individuals".<sup>20</sup> Man's sociality is equal to his productive forces, and so "because man did not produce enough for all, the stronger robbed the weaker"<sup>21</sup> – when the productive forces were underdeveloped, so was man's sociality. Human essence is processual precisely because it is a historical progress *away* from this individuality and *toward* communality, a progress which becomes possible now because human productive forces have developed to the extent of excess; misery is now caused not by lack and shortage but by excess:

England penetrates into the most remote parts of the Earth in search of *consumers*; but the *whole Earth* is or soon will be too *small a market* for its products ... so that Malthusian theory ... is in actual fact the *opposite of truth*.<sup>22</sup>

However, instead of realising the potential for communal being which modern industry makes possible, the world is as individualistic as ever. In the course of history, man has come to place his species-being, his social nature, outside of himself in God, and instead the state of individual isolation was normalised; Christianity is

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<sup>15</sup> Moses Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", in *Sozialistische Aufsätze, 1841-1847*, ed. Theodor Zlocisti (Berlin: Welt-Verlag, 1921), 159-160. The English translations are my own or are modified from the uncredited English version found on the Marxist Internet Archive (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/hess/1845/essence-money.htm>). I have preserved Hess's original italics.

<sup>16</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 160.

<sup>17</sup> Avineri, *Moses Hess*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 161.

<sup>19</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 161.

<sup>20</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 162.

<sup>21</sup> Carlebach, "Hess and Marx", 32.

<sup>22</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 163-64.

“the logic of egoism”<sup>23</sup> and the theoretical image of the huckstering world.<sup>24</sup> Hess details an intimate connection between capitalism and Christianity, which we will not go into detail with here. It suffices to say that Christianity is to Hess the projection of human flourishing into an imagined, idealised afterlife and the normalisation of egoism, slavery, and human misery in this life. In many ways, Hess is here simply repeating Feuerbach’s theory of religious alienation: God is man’s own essence hypostasised into an external supreme being, which then in turn comes to dominate man.

Parallel to Hess’s characteristic of God and Christianity is his characteristic of *money*. This marks the ingenuity of Hess, as he is the first to apply Feuerbach’s idea of alienation to social conditions in this way.<sup>25</sup> Writes Hess,

What *God* is for *theoretical* life, *money* is for the *practical* life of the inverted world: the *externalised* [entäußerte] *capacity* of men, their *commercialised life-activity*. Money is *human value* expressed in numbers ... for human beings who buy and sell themselves are *slaves*. Money is the congealed blood and sweat of those wretched ones who themselves bring their inalienable property, their only capacity, their life-activity itself to the market in order to exchange it for this *caput mortuum* called *capital* and thus to live *cannibalistically* off their *own flesh*. And we are all these wretched scum! We can emancipate ourselves *theoretically* from the *inverted world-consciousness* as much as we like, but so long as we do not also remove ourselves *practically* from the *inverted world* we are forced to, as the saying goes, howl with the wolves. Yes, we *must* continually *alienate* [veräußern] our essence, our life, our only free life-activity, if we are to eke out our *miserable existence*. We continually *buy* our *individual existence* with the *loss of our freedom*.<sup>26</sup>

As this quote shows, miserable life under capitalism—or the rule of money—to Hess is identical with a loss of humanity. This loss is not only metaphorical, but ontological.<sup>27</sup> Man under capitalism is not species-man, but ‘animal-man’ (*Tiermensch*);<sup>28</sup> it is not a coincidental choice of metaphor, then, that we must ‘howl with the wolves’ – on the contrary, men are reduced to *Raubtiere*, beasts of prey, and animal metaphors and imagery are rampant throughout Hess’s text. Another example:

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<sup>23</sup> Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Carlebach, “Hess and Marx”, 32.

<sup>25</sup> McLellan, *The Young Hegelians*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, 166.

<sup>27</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, “Engels and the Invention of the Catastrophist Conception of the Industrial Revolution”, in *The New Hegelians. Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 207.

<sup>28</sup> Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, 183.

In the money state [*Geldstaate*] ... reigns, as has already been said, a poetry-less freedom of beasts of prey based on the *equality of death*. In the face of money, *kings* are no longer entitled to conquer, because they, the *lions* of the animal-men, have here just as little right as the sinister *priests* still have a right to refresh themselves with the smell of cadavers [*Leichenduff*] because they are its *hyenas*.<sup>29</sup>

Life under capitalism is a life of unfreedom, it is slavery, an ontological un-reality: man is not man, only beast.

The solution to this is the establishment of freedom through communality, i.e. communism: "After these [our forces and faculties] had developed we will only mutually ruin ourselves if we do not pass on to communism".<sup>30</sup>

Communism, then, is the realisation of man as species-man because it is the realisation of sociality in history.

As Gareth Stedman Jones has convincingly argued, Engels takes over this conception of alienated life in capitalism from Hess. He had famously been 'converted' by Hess to communism on his way to England in 1844, and in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Engels is thus preoccupied with demonstrating this ontological loss of humanity empirically.<sup>31</sup> This becomes evident in the chapter called "Results", where Engels describes animalistic levels of drunkenness, obscene sexual behaviour (including homosexuality, incest, and even paedophilia), neglect of family duties, debauchery, rampant crime, contempt for public morals, and so on. He writes:

Next to intemperance in the enjoyment of intoxicating liquors, one of the principal faults of English working-men is sexual licence. But this, too, follows with relentless logic, with inevitable necessity out of the position of a class left to itself, with no means of making fitting use of its freedom. The bourgeoisie has left the working-class only these two pleasures ... When people are placed under conditions which appeal to the brute only, what remains to them but to rebel or to succumb to utter brutality?<sup>32</sup>

In another part of the book, describing the living conditions of Manchester's working classes, he tells the reader:

What physical and moral atmosphere reigns in these holes I need not state. Each of these houses is a focus of crime, the scene of deeds against which human nature revolts, which would perhaps never have been executed but for this forced centralisation of vice ... That in these filthy holes a ragged, ill-fed population alone can dwell is a safe conclusion, and such is the fact.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 183.

<sup>30</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 186.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 207.

<sup>32</sup> Engels, *The Condition*, 425-426.

<sup>33</sup> Engels, *The Condition*, 366.

Similar to Hess's animal imagery, Engels describes the living-quarters of the workers as 'pig sties' and describes how one man had made a living in an actual cow's stable.<sup>34</sup> While shocking, these descriptions of the animalistic, 'brutish' behaviour of the English working classes did not much surprise the English or European elites; Edwin Chadwick, for example, had already made similar sociological observations about the condition of the English working classes, and they had been described in multiple other reports throughout the 1830's and 40's. What was truly shocking was Engels's styling of these immoral conditions as the natural consequence, if not in fact the true, inner essence of English industrial society itself, especially in the chapters on Manchester.<sup>35</sup>

Engels's description takes the form of a *descent*, both literal and metaphorical: at the same time as Engels descends from the polished façades of bourgeois Manchester into its squalid slums, he is also descending into the heart of industrial England and capitalism as such; it is a decidedly Hegelian move from appearance to essence, suggesting "not merely unfamiliar contiguity but also unsettling inner interdependence".<sup>36</sup> Engels emphasises how Manchester is built so that the bourgeoisie can move undisturbed along the posh high streets from their homes to "their places of business without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left."<sup>37</sup> As such, Manchester is the living physical manifestation of the discrepant relationship between appearance and essence which characterises Hegelian unreality (*Unwirklichkeit*), and which was so important to the Young Hegelians. On its surface-appearance, it is beautiful and thriving, but underneath lies its true essence of squalor, misery, and inhumanity. It is, in Hess's words, a *Schein- und Lügenwelt*. Hess writes:

The world of shopkeepers [*Krämerwelt*] is the *practical* world of illusion and lies [*Schein- und Lügenwelt*]. – Under the appearance [*Scheine*] of absolute independence, absolute want; under the appearance of the most lively intercourse, the most deadly separation of every man from all of his fellow men; under the appearance of an inviolable property guaranteed to everyone their capacity is taken from them in reality; under the appearance of the most total freedom [*der allgemeinsten Freiheit*], the most total servitude.<sup>38</sup>

In the vein of this Hegelian appearance-essence duality, Engels sets up a similarly Hegelian redemption story for the working class, again akin to the story told by Hess. Beginning in an antediluvian stage with the innocence of

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<sup>34</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 209.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 201.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 206.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 201; Engels, *The Condition*, 348.

<sup>38</sup> Hess, "Über das Geldwesen", 180-181.



the pre-industrial textile workers (who are happy but stupefied), these workers are then dragged into the historical process by the industrial revolution. They become dispossessed and are forced into the cities and into poverty and misery. The industrial revolution is the cataclysmic event that pulls them out of un-history and into history's stream. Catapulted into history by this event, the dispossessed workers are degraded and dehumanised, but this expropriation of their lives at the same times lays the foundation for the formation of the proletariat. This new class, in the third stage, begins to show primitive signs of resistance in the only beastly way they know how: "rob, plunder, murder and burn!"<sup>39</sup> In the fourth and final stage, the proletariat reaches self-consciousness as a class and is able to organise proper forms of class struggle against the dominance of capital, mainly through trade-unions and various political organisations.<sup>40</sup> This story is not only redemptive-Messianic in nature, but also closely mirrors the Hegel's motif of appropriation and re-appropriation in his productivity theory as can be found in *The Phenomenology*.<sup>41</sup> Like Engels's regenerative story of the proletariat, Hegel's theory falls in four stages: appropriation, objectification, alienation, and re-appropriation. The first moment consists in the first contact of self-consciousness with the domain of appearance, which it stupidly and indiscriminately consumes (the workers living in original harmony, consuming nature). The second moment is the objectification, self-consciousness 'loosing' itself in its externalisation understood as the negation of the original appropriation of the world of appearances (by the cataclysmic event of the industrial revolution the workers are forced into the world which they were before only one-sidedly devouring). Third, the moment of alienation – self-consciousness is split in an internal and an external moment, an essence and an appearance, the subjective and the objective; it is 'beside itself' (the workers are existing only in their inhumanity; as they are split between their communal nature and their unfree existence, so the capitalist world itself is split between essence and appearance). But this third moment of alienation is also what makes possible the fourth moment of re-appropriation: self-consciousness finds itself again, essence and appearance becomes one in the subject-object (the working class gains consciousness as a class, 'the Proletariat', and launches a collective attack on capital until they the achieve final

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<sup>39</sup> Engels, *The Condition*, 386.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 208-209; Engels, *The Condition*, 307-342.

<sup>41</sup> I take the following short presentation on of Hegel's productivity theory from Norman Levine, "Marx's First Appropriation of Hegel", *Critique* 33, no. 1 (2005): 138-140.

victory of communism through the abolition of competition and private property).<sup>42</sup> In other words: in order to fit into the regenerative narrative of the Hegelian motif of appropriation and re-appropriation, it is necessary that Engels describe Manchester as a *dehumanising, living Hell on Earth*.<sup>43</sup>

That Marx also took over this Feuerbachian idea of communism from Hess is without question. When he did it, however, is contested, as noted above. As also previously mentioned, McLellan thinks that Marx downright copied from Hess's "On the Essence of Money" for his own analysis of money in "On the Jewish Question", while Carlebach denies this (though he admits the influence of Hess's essay on Marx's Paris writings). Carlebach provides convincing, albeit inconclusive, historical evidence that Marx probably did not read Hess's essay before he wrote at least the lion's share of his own. I will not go into this debate here, except to say that the similarities in both themes, analysis, imagery, and composition are so striking that if it is truly not the case that either one or the other knew of the other one's essay before writing his own, then the only possible explanation is the *Weltgeist* working through them both simultaneously... To side-step the *Weltgeist* and the question of whether Hess influenced "On the Jewish Question" or not, my focus here will be on the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, the so-called *Paris Manuscripts*. The influence is also most pronounced in these writings.

The Feuerbachian motif is served to us in the final pages of the manuscripts, in the section on Hegel's philosophy. Marx writes:

The real, active orientation of man to himself as a species-being, or his manifestation as a real species-being (i.e., as a human being), is only possible if he really brings out all his species-powers—something which in turn is only possible through the co-operative action of all of mankind, only as the result of history—and treats these powers as objects: and this, to begin with, is again only possible in the form of estrangement.<sup>44</sup>

Here we have the motif of Engels's account from above, which Marx neatly summarises thus: "the self-creation of man as a process ... objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this

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<sup>42</sup> "This procedure", Jones writes, "was repeated in *The Communist Manifesto* and henceforth became a standard feature of Marxian characterisations of the working class" (Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 219).

<sup>43</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 218.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 333. I have modified the corrections according to the German edition (in *Marx-Engels Werke*, Ergänzungsband 1, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968).

alienation”.<sup>45</sup> Also similar to Hess and Engels’s accounts, Marx conceives of this (necessary) alienation as a (likewise necessary) loss of humanity under capitalist production: “But political economy knows the worker only as a working animal – as a beast reduced to the strictest bodily needs”<sup>46</sup> and,

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.<sup>47</sup>

This second quote is, of course, from the most famous treatment by Marx of this phenomenon: the manuscript on “Estranged Labour”. Marx’s notion of estrangement or alienation in this text is quintessentially Feuerbachian, but like Hess before him, Marx applies this Feuerbachian notion of alienation to the social conditions of life under capitalism.<sup>48</sup> Alienation is the *Entäusserung*, or externalisation, of the species-being of man into something outside of him which then comes to dominate him. Just as social intercourse was for Hess man’s species-being, for Marx it is “labour, *life activity, productive life*”.<sup>49</sup> What is more, species-man is *conscious* of his work as his species-activity, just as for Feuerbach true man is the man that takes himself as his object, i.e. is conscious of his species.<sup>50</sup> What estranged labour is, is precisely automatic, *unconscious* labour (the worker as a machine) and as such it ceases to be free life-activity and becomes instead *necessary activity*. This estranged productive activity leads to the estrangement of the worker from his product:

This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer ...

It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object ... Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not ...

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<sup>45</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 332-333.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 242.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 274-275.

<sup>48</sup> This, among other things, should perhaps lead us to question whether Marx is not here specifically a ‘Hessian’, rather than ‘simply’ a Feuerbachian.

<sup>49</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 276 f. Note here the connection with the Hegelian motif of appropriation and re-appropriation as a theory of *productivity* (which Marx also mentions in connection with the quote already given above).

<sup>50</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 2011), 37.

Thus the more the worker by his labour *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of *means of life* ...

The height of this slavery is that it is only as a *worker* that he can maintain himself as a *physical subject*, and that it is only as a *physical subject* that he is a worker ...<sup>51</sup>

We could go on. The heart of the matter is this: “So much does labour’s realisation appear as loss of reality that the worker is derealised to the point of starving to death.”<sup>52</sup> Here, Marx is evidently echoing Hess’s “wretched ones” bringing “their life-activity itself to the market in order to exchange it for this *caput mortuum* called *capital* and thus to live *cannibalistically* off their *own flesh*.”<sup>53</sup> Is this not precisely Marx’s estranged worker? Is the estranged product—which the worker produces with necessity, but which lauds over him forever out of his reach—“the life which he has conferred to the object”<sup>54</sup> like Eve was fashioned from Adam’s rib not exactly also a ‘flesh of my flesh’ (Gen. 2:23)? Finally, allow me to repeat this quote from Hess:

Under the appearance of absolute independence, absolute want; under the appearance of the most lively intercourse, the most deadly separation of every man from all of his fellow men; under the appearance of an inviolable property guaranteed to everyone their capacity is taken from them in reality; under the appearance of the most total freedom, the most total servitude.<sup>55</sup>

Now, compare with Marx:

It is true that labour produces wonderful things for the rich – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back to a barbarous type of labour, and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence – but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, we find a clear connection between the dehumanising structures of modern industrial society, i.e. capitalism, as described by Hess in his Feuerbachian vision of communism, through Engels’s philosophically motivated empirical depiction of the ontological loss of humanity in industrial Manchester through a descent beneath the glossy appearances and to Marx’s description of the estranged labourer as a cretin, a machine, and an

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<sup>51</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 272-273.

<sup>52</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 272.

<sup>53</sup> Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, 166.

<sup>54</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 272.

<sup>55</sup> Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, 180-181.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 273.

animal separated under capitalism from his life-activity and estranged from his species-being. Like Hess's before him, Marx's estranged worker is a wretched cannibal. Thus, in *Capital*:

There is no natural obstacle absolutely preventing one man from lifting himself from the burden of the labour necessary to maintain his own existence, and imposing it on another, just as there is no unconquerable natural obstacle to the consumption of the flesh of one man by another.<sup>57</sup>

And, Marx informs us in a footnote, “according to recent calculations” there are, anno 1867, about 4,000,000 non-metaphorical cannibals still left in the world. Therefore, it is to the cannibals of *Capital* that we now turn.

#### 4. The social Hell of *Capital*

Above, we saw how Marx and Engels take over a Feuerbachian notion of communism from Moses Hess where species-being plays a central role, and where alienation from species-being gives rise to an ontological loss of humanity that drives men into metaphorical cannibalism. Men are, quite literally, made into beasts. In the following, I will briefly attempt to show how Marx repeats these themes in *Capital*, and how *Capital* also describes an ontological loss of humanity under the impersonal domination of capital. First, I will give an example of this relationship. Then, I will—in light of Engels and contra to Roberts' fourfold division of *Capital*—describe the transition from the exchange sphere to the sphere of production as a transition from appearance to essence. Finally, I will give examples of first how, like in the text on “Estranged Labour”, the worker's production of commodities is at the same time a destruction of his own life, and second how this takes the form of a dehumanising reduction of the workers into animals, supporting my claim that it is indeed an ontological loss of humanity.

In *Marx's Inferno*, Roberts gives convincing arguments for seeing capital as essentially a social relation of domination and *Capital* as an exposé of the different forms that this relation takes.<sup>58</sup> This is most explicit in both Roberts' and Marx's chapters on the sphere of exchange and the market. The part of *Capital* most marked by descriptions of the wretchedness of the working class, however, is the chapter on the length of the working

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 647.

<sup>58</sup> Most pronounced in the chapter on fetishism (Marx, *Capital*, 82 ff.), but one need only take a look at the entry for ‘domination’ in the book's index to be convinced that it is also a general theme.

day.<sup>59</sup> In this very historical and descriptive chapter, Marx provides the reader with countless examples of the lengths capital will go to in order to extract the extra penny from the worker, especially with regard to overworking him. However, the disregard for the health and well-being of the workers extend to all aspects of their daily life. Marx's colourful descriptions of this squalor leaves nothing much to imagination and strongly resembles Engels's ditto in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* some 20 years earlier (which he also gives reference to several times throughout the chapter). In one memorable passage, Marx describes the adulterated bread eaten by the workers by saying that "Englishmen, with their good command of the Bible, knew well enough that man ... is destined to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow", but, he adds, "they did not know that he had to eat daily in his bread a certain quantity of human perspiration mixed with the discharge of abscesses, cobwebs, dead cockroaches and putrid German yeast, not to mention alum, sand and other agreeable mineral ingredients".<sup>60</sup> This total disregard for the health of the worker comes from the fact that "experience generally shows to the capitalist ... a constant excess of population"<sup>61</sup>, and Marx continues:

Capital, which has such 'good reasons' for denying the sufferings of the legions of workers surrounding it, allows its actual movement to be determined as much and as little by the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the dearth into the sun ... Capital therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so.<sup>62</sup>

But, Marx says, this is not the fault of the individual capitalist, it does not depend on his individual will or whether he is good or bad. Rather, under free competition this behaviour is caused by the "immanent laws of capitalist production", which "confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him". There is thus a clear connection between the degrading treatment of workers and the impersonal dominance of capital. Like in Engels's book, which Marx had obviously read and references throughout *Capital*, this degradation takes place beneath the surface. As Gareth Stedman Jones argues, *Capital* can also be seen as relying on the juxtaposition of appearance with essence.<sup>63</sup> Just as Engels moves from the beautiful and seemingly civilised high

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<sup>59</sup> Though chapter 15 also provides many such examples.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 359.

<sup>61</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 380.

<sup>62</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 381.

<sup>63</sup> Jones, "Engels and the Industrial Revolution", 206.

streets of Manchester into the slums of the working class quarters in order to reveal the mystery (*Geheimnis*) of industrial England, so Marx moves from the equal and fair exchange process and into the unequal sphere of production; here, there is ‘No admittance except on business’, and the capitalist sure means business:

When we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities ... a certain change takes place, *or so it appears*, in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to the market and now has nothing else to expect but – a tanning.<sup>64</sup>

Apart from the magnificent prose and the clear reference to the degradation of the worker into beast, Marx here also clearly distinguishes between essence and appearance in the transition from exchange to the production process. It only *appears* that there is a change in *dramatis personae* – in reality, this was the secret of exchange all along. What we are about to be told is thus the true essence of everything we have learned until now. The apparently equal exchange of commodities hides an unequal process of production as its true content and precondition. From the formally equal act of transaction constituted by the exchange of money for labour power arises the unequal relation of dominance in production. The apparently free labourer becomes unfree as soon as the move is made from exchange to production; in Hess’s words: “under the appearance of the most total freedom, the most total servitude.”<sup>65</sup> This is the true ‘descent’ in *Capital*, that from the apparent freedom in the sphere of exchange and into the true and degraded slavery of the sphere of production. Roberts obscures this by artificially creating a break between parts one and two and treating parts two and three (between which this actual descent ‘beneath’ the appearances actually takes place) together. For Roberts, it therefore becomes the transition from part one to two that is the crucial one:

In *Capital*, as in the *Inferno*, the realm of anarchic desire proves difficult to leave ... Marx must also transgress a boundary at the end of part one and take his readers where, he claims, previous authors has not.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 280. My italics. As we shall soon see, the metaphor of skinning hides is common with Marx.

<sup>65</sup> Hess, “Über das Geldwesen”, 181.

<sup>66</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 104-105.

But in part two we are in reality still in the world of appearances, as the transition from equal and fair exchange (freedom) into unequal and unfair production (un-freedom) has not yet been made. Roberts mentions the problem himself, without recognising it as such: Marx spends all of chapter five “running his reader up against the same roadblock”,<sup>67</sup> which is precisely the fact that in the exchange relation commodities are exchanged fairly and on an equal basis. Marx solves this in chapter six, Roberts says, by introducing the special commodity of labour power, and—Roberts quotes Marx—since “the consumption of labour-power ... takes place outside the market or the sphere of circulation”,<sup>68</sup> we then naturally enter into the sphere of production, no admittance except etc., etc., and we are there, smoothly, effortlessly. Roberts, however, overlooks or ignores two crucial aspects of this transition. First, the above quoted clear statement by Marx at the end of part two that a change takes place. Second, and more importantly, the fact that the buying and selling of labour power, like that any other commodity, happens under the assumption of free and equal individuals, which production does not:

He [the possessor of labour power] and the owner of money meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities, with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both therefore are equal in the eyes of the law.<sup>69</sup>

This is crucial for the understanding of surplus-value, which Marx undertakes to explain in part three as the first component in the ‘secret’ of capitalist production, and is crucial for Marx’s argument against the moralising socialists of his time (as Roberts clearly recognises): the worker, in selling his labour power, is *not* cheated, *no* act of unfairness or crime is committed against him, and he is *not* a victim of fraud in this transaction. On the contrary, it is precisely *because of* the very fact that the worker is paid the fair value of his work that the capitalist is then able to extract surplus-value from his labour. Surplus-value is ‘surplus’ precisely because it is extra to the nominal value: the worker produces *more* value than his work is *actually* worth. There is thus a qualitative difference between the selling of labour power, which happens equally and freely such as it appears, and the consumption of this labour power in the production process, which contrary to how it appears happens as an act of exploitation. Roberts’ insistence that the buying and selling of labour power in chapter six be treated together with the analysis of surplus value in part three (after Marx has clearly marked this break between appearances)

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<sup>67</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 105.

<sup>68</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 106; Marx, *Capital*, 279.

<sup>69</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 271.



rather than together with the exchange of commodities in general in part one, which is qualitatively similar, obscures this fact, which again ultimately undermines Roberts' fourfold structure of a descent. The descent, then, is not a descent through four layers of Hell, but a descent beneath the surface-appearance of freedom into the depths of unfreedom. This does not mean though, that capitalism is not a social hell.

As the worker is dragged from the sphere of exchange into the sphere of production, he simultaneously drags his own hide to be skinned and tanned.<sup>70</sup> He does this himself, because he is forced to do so – he only *appeared* free in the sphere of exchange, while in reality he was already acting out of necessity (“Why the free worker confronts him in the sphere of circulation is a question which does not interest the owner of money”<sup>71</sup>). He must do it in order to preserve his life, but instead, by throwing himself into capitalist production, he destroys it. Already in the Paris manuscripts, Marx tells us that “The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size”,<sup>72</sup> and further on “Thus the more the worker by his labour *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of *means of life*”.<sup>73</sup> But now, in *Capital*, Marx shows that the life of the individual worker to capital is nothing; he can die for all it matters, there are plenty more where he came from. Capital, famously, is a vampire, and as a vampire it will suck the worker dry until nothing is left but the drained husk:

It must be acknowledged that our worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it. In the market, as owner of the commodity ‘labour-power’, he stood face to face with other owners of commodities... The contract by which he sold his labour-power to the capitalist proved in black and white ... that he was free ... But when the transaction was concluded, it was discovered that he was no ‘free agent’ ... that in fact the vampire will not let go ‘while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited’.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 280.

<sup>71</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 273.

<sup>72</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 271-272.

<sup>73</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, 273. To be fair, Marx also makes the statement here (quoted above) that the worker “loses reality to the point of ... death”.

<sup>74</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 415-416. Marx is quoting Engels, “Die englische Zehnstundenbill”.

This destruction of the worker's life appears both concretely (he is worked to death) and as the ontological loss of humanity. The thing 'sucked dry' by the vampire of capital is precisely the worker's *life-activity*, labour, that which makes him a species-being. He therefore becomes an animal.

The worker, brought from the marketplace and into capitalist production like an animal brought to the abattoir, is not the only one slaughtered for his hide. Marx likens children to silk-worms, saying that "This [shortening the working day] did not, however, prevent them ... from spinning silk for 10 hours a day out of the blood of little children", and, he continues, now likening the children to cattle, "The children were quite simply slaughtered for the sake of their delicate fingers, just as horned cattle are slaughtered in southern Russia for their hides and their fat".<sup>75</sup> Children are not the only ones likened to cattle; also the worker proper is transformed by the division of labour in manufacture "into a crippled monstrosity" as he is used only for one facet of his creative power, "just as in the states of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow".<sup>76</sup> Marx quotes Postlethwayt to say that English workers are "hard-driven animals"<sup>77</sup> and Dr Simon to say that the living quarters of the workers "In its highest degrees... almost necessarily involves such negation of all delicacy, such unclean confusion of bodies and bodily functions, such exposure of animal and sexual nakedness, *as is rather bestial than human*".<sup>78</sup> (In the same place, as a matter of fact, he quotes Dr Hunter to say that "It is not too much to say that life in parts of London and Newcastle is infernal"<sup>79</sup>). The agricultural worker Marx names explicitly as an animal and says that "of all the animals kept by the farmer, the labourer ... was thenceforth the most oppressed, the worst nourished, the most brutally treated".<sup>80</sup> All this to say: While in the concrete act of production the worker becomes a cannibal who eats his own flesh, in the social totality of capitalist production, the cannibal becomes an animal.

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<sup>75</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 406.

<sup>76</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 481.

<sup>77</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 386.

<sup>78</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 812-813.

<sup>79</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 813.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 830.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have seen how Moses Hess employs a Feuerbachian understanding of communism to describe the dehumanisation of man in industrial society. We then saw how Engels and Marx both took over this conception of the dehumanising structures of capitalism, and how it brings about not just a metaphorical but an ontological loss of humanity. Finally, we saw how these themes also unfolded in *Capital*, and how the cannibals of estranged labour became the animals of capitalist production. This also spelled some trouble for Roberts, at least in our analysis. The question now remains: What of the ‘socialist infernalism’ and the myth of social Hell? While all of the metaphors of dehumanisation found in the works of Hess, Engels and Marx (both in the Paris manuscripts and in *Capital*) do not speak explicitly of capitalism as ‘hell’, they do denounce the same meaning as Roberts gives to this expression. The hellish element of the ‘social hell’ is precisely that it is a wretched existence for the poor: “The social Hell was polyvalent ... Of all these senses [of the expression], that of the misery of the poor and wretched was the most appropriated”.<sup>81</sup> Assuming, then, that the socialist ‘myth’<sup>82</sup> of a social hell is appropriated by Marx (and I think that Roberts is right to say that it is), it makes sense that he would appropriate it in this, its commonest meaning. And it also makes sense that he would express not through some secret and esoteric structure based on 14th century poetry, but through the his own philosophical preconditions in the philosophy of his day.

### *Some points for discussion/further development*

- General redrafting to give a better presentation of the argument(s) and a clearer common thread – this is the first and only draft, so there is bound to be issues with the presentation!
- Relating the discussion of ontological loss of humanity in *Capital* to wider discussions in the literature about alienation in the mature Marx in general and *Capital* specifically
- Roberts’ analysis of primitive accumulation in *Capital* is that Marx is arguing against the dominant socialist myth of the emergence of capitalism from a form of robbery (p. 193 ff.); if correct, what is the significance of this for Marx’s appropriation of Hess’s theory which rests precisely on such an analysis?

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<sup>81</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 34.

<sup>82</sup> For Roberts’ specific use of the term ‘myth’ in this regard, see *Marx’s Inferno*, 32-33.

- Clearer discussion of productivity as species-life and life-activity in the section on Marx's "Estranged Labour" in order to relate this to Hess/Feuerbach
- I am here obviously ignoring (mostly out of lack of space for a discussion of it) Roberts' remarks that Marx also uses the hell-motif to describe the science of political economy itself (see p. 42-44); this is, however, an extremely interesting discussion, which pertains to the relationship between Marx's two sources of data for his book: the facts about the real world and the theories about those facts by the political economists
- In the part on *Capital* I wanted to also include a section on moral degradation (to echo Engels), but I cut it issues with space

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