

Rhetorical Citizenship beyond the Frontiers of Capitalism: *Marx Reloaded* and the Dueling Myths of the Commodity and the Common

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The problem of the left hasn't been our adherence to a Marxist critique of capitalism. It's that we have lost sight of the communist horizon.

Jodi Dean, 2012

Rhetoric and capitalism share strikingly similar myths of origin. Rhetoric, we are told, emerged in Greek city-states where citizens who deliberated in the *polis* needed to be skilled orators.¹ The fate of rhetoric subsequently waxed and waned with the fate of democracy – thriving in the classical Greek age, suffocating during the Roman Empire, and reappearing, along with so many other things, during the Renaissance. Theorists from Karl Marx (1990) to Giovanni Arrighi (1994) note that capitalism's nascent form begins in the same Italian city-states that ushered in rhetoric's rebirth. Capitalism does not, of course, reach its full development until it becomes culturally and discursively tethered, like rhetoric, to the democratic myth. Important to this process, according to historian Peter Burke (1990), is the movement of Renaissance humanism from Italy, through northern Europe, into the Netherlands, and culminating in the British Isles, where capitalism, rhetoric, and democracy acquire their particularly modern appearance. Thus, by the early modern period, the democratic political system so connected to rhetoric also

¹ Historians of classical rhetoric, including such renowned scholars as George Kennedy (1994), James Murphy (2013), as well as David Timmerman and Edward Schiappa (2010), work from the commonplace that rhetorical training emerges with and is unique to democratic states. This myth is challenged by Jacques Rancière (2004), who argues that people without property who are treated as part of the *polis* have what amounts to a fictitious freedom.

attached itself to capitalism. English and Scottish enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith propagated a theory of liberty simultaneously embedded in the democratic state and the market economy. Noting this crucial linkage, Deirdre McCloskey (2006; 2010) recently embarked on what is surely her magnum opus – a four-volume rhetorical history of capitalism that assesses its triumph through a revaluation of bourgeois identity. Yet this chapter suggests that those domains that McCloskey skillfully ties together, rhetoric and economics, were joined already by the history of myth-making. Indeed, the story of freedom, liberty and citizenship that connects deliberative political participation to market economies is the origin myth shared by both rhetoric and capitalism.

Myth, as Roland Barthes (1972) long ago contended, operates through a semantic doubling in order to further ruling class ideology. As theorized by Barthes, a myth functions through a signification that works twice. For example, capitalism and rhetoric do not simply refer to a specific economic configuration and a form of persuasion, but also reference democracy and its attendant virtues. This additional signification functions on behalf of class interests, transforming capitalism and its representatives from economic actors into defenders of freedom. Kenneth Burke (1961) identified the same kind of function in words he called “god-terms” (p. 2). He suggests that these highly charged words contain multiple referents within the single term; they house, that is, a diversity of meanings. No doubt some concepts fall beyond the reach of god-terms, but the vast majority can be subsumed within them. Burke (1966) later elaborates on the relationship between language and myth by discussing what he calls a “terministic screen” or a framework for reflecting one selection of reality and deflecting other possible selections. According to this theory, the terms we use to describe reality “necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another” (p. 50). Myths are, for Burke, different frames for understanding the same reality. Each frame highlights some things and downplays others. Rather than understanding this semantic work as a particular subset of language practices, Burke comes to appreciate myth as the means by which one meaning, as opposed to another, bubbles to the surface and animates our way of life. So conceived, myth necessitates the notion that language constitutes the world in which we live by virtue of its framing metaphor.

The persuasive function of metaphors, especially within an historical narrative, is not missed by early economists, most of whom received rhe-

torical training as part of their formal education. Adam Smith, for instance, explains metaphors as rhetorically crafted language. Before the publication of his famous *Wealth of Nations* he gave public lectures on rhetoric in which he discussed such things as the use of metaphor. His *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (2001) define a metaphor as an allusion between one thing and another. But such an allusion works on its audience, he says, only if “it gives the due strength of expression to the object described and at the same time does this in a more striking and interesting manner” (p. 29). Metaphors bring an object or idea to life by giving it a particularly remarkable and, consequently, enduring character. The extraordinary quality shared by capitalism and rhetoric is the supposedly unfailing democratic nature of each. As a founding metaphor or terministic screen, democracy makes capitalism and rhetoric untouchable for all those committed to such things as freedom and equality. In other words, to espouse communism or to suggest the limits of rhetoric is, because of their mutual democratic frame, to welcome tyranny and propaganda. This conclusion is mythical in the sense that it functions through rhetorically delimited metaphors and not in the sense of being false or unreal. Thus, like all great metaphors, the myth connecting rhetoric, capitalism, and democracy requires constant propagation.

To take a relatively recent example, the fall of state communism at the end of the twentieth century offered a rhetorical opportunity to reinforce this mythical triple helix of freedom. Among the most memorable claims during this period of post-cold war elation was Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis. In contrast to a Marxist teleology forecasting communism as the final stage of human social organization wherein class struggle is erased, Fukuyama (1989) cites capitalism, or liberal democracy, as the culmination of ideological struggle. During the 1990s this triumphalist rhetoric burgeoned into a “Washington Consensus” purportedly capable of managing all economic and political challenges across the globe. The mismatch between what this discourse on liberal democracy claimed and the environmental, social, and individual destruction for many of the world’s citizens, however, did not escape notice among rhetoricians of globalization. Wendy Hesford’s (2011) recent *Spectacular Rhetorics* addresses the human rights violations attendant in this stage of history, and Kendall Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes’s (2011) edited volume *Global Memoryscapes* challenges a unified global narrative with a collection of complex, networked, and diversified memories from around the globe. Even more recently, Rebecca Dingo and J. Scott Blake’s

(2012) collection *The Megarhetorics of Global Development* examines and critiques the specific rhetorical strategies used by governments and corporations to facilitate capitalist agendas. Further adding to this body of work, Jennifer Wingard's (2012) *Branded Bodies, Rhetoric, and the Neoliberal Nation-State* explores how economic neoliberalism has constricted the rhetoric of political media, limiting the available range of information within the narrow framework of economic triumphalism. These important rhetorical critiques participate in the ongoing struggle to define our dominant social myth – do we articulate the world through the framework of capitalist individualism or do we frame it through the lens of a more social-oriented collectivism? Just as the myth of a triumphant knot among rhetoric, capitalism, and democracy seems to be permanently secured, it begins to loosen, unravel, and require diligent tightening.

A claim to the natural intersections among these spheres of social practice remains especially tenuous in our post-2008 world of global economic disarray. The counterclaim that communism may be more aligned with democratic citizenship than capitalism is by no means new, and yet it has garnered renewed strength of late. In just the last few years Verso has published nearly a dozen titles in its new Pocket Communism series that invites authors to pose contemporary versions of what Alain Badiou (2010) calls the “communist hypothesis” or the exploration of ethical social organizations (98).² Even though this series engages the possibility of communism, other efforts reject the feasibility of a working communist state. For instance, the University of Chicago, the intellectual home of neoliberal economic thought, runs a series, through its Seagull Books, titled *What Was Communism?* Framed in the past tense, the series basically chronicles the failures of communism with titles that focus on particular states and work from the assumption that communism, a well-intended idea, cannot hold up its promise of equality and freedom. Still, the series editor, Tariq Ali (2009), comes to much the same conclusion as does Slavoj Žižek (2009) in his *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*: the future of democracy exists as some blend of free marketism and socialism. This argument, although logically defensible, fails

² Further illustrative of this communist revival is a recent conference “On the Idea of Communism” held by The University of London’s Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities. The conference organizers anticipated fewer than 200 participants but had to accommodate an audience of 1200 people.

to garner much political strength because it asks us to envision the future through two different frameworks, a task that runs contrary to the polarized world we occupy.

The production of knowledge about political economic possibilities tends to represent and therefore reproduce a bifurcated world view. The Chicago book series leans toward capitalism and balances the Verso series which leans toward communism. Recent film documentaries exhibit a similarly political dichotomization on the question of capitalism's virtues. Offering something like an updated version of Milton Friedman's hugely successful *Free to Choose*, PBS's 2002 production of *Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* claims to provide the public with a better understanding of globalization, world trade, and economic development. The three part series, based on a book of the same name by Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, declares global capitalism the winner in the battle between free and controlled markets. In contrast, Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), while it tends to eulogize the good old days of monopoly capitalism when U.S. factories mass produced domestic goods and workers were paid an increasingly livable wage, critiques the more ruthless stage of global capitalism. Despite their apparent opposition, these films squabble over what amounts to different versions of market economies. Adhering to the rhetorical mythology that connects democracy with capitalism, they both assume that democracy cannot be enacted within communism.

Taking an entirely different perspective, Jason Barker's *Marx Reloaded* poses this opposition between capitalism and communism in terms made famous by the blockbuster film *The Matrix*. The film suggests that a choice exists between a blue pill that will induce blissful ignorance and a red pill that will reveal the painful truth of reality. These pills function as metaphors for the elaborate configuration of things, ideas, and processes that fall under the umbrella of democracy. What becomes clear from the documentary, especially the segments on production and consumption, is that ideological adherence to private property in the form of commodities delivers the blissful inoculation of the blue pill while an ideological investment in something called the common yields the reality of the red pill, though suspiciously without its delivery pains. I explore this film more closely to suggest that the commodity and the common are decisive metaphors – ones upon which entire fantasy structures emerge – for the production of two different versions of democratic citizenship. Before doing so, however, I provide a brief overview of the commodity

and the common as competing metaphors through which to understand not only economics, but also social, political, and cultural relations.

Marx used the commodity to introduce his critique of capital because he believed that a single item produced through the division of wage labor represents, or bears the traces of, the entire economic system of capitalism. As he famously asserted in the much debated first chapter of *Capital*, the key to our understanding “begins with the analysis of the commodity” (p. 126). In his conception, a commodity produced by wage labor contains the value of the products transformed into the new product, the value of the labor paid to the worker in wages, and the value of the labor not paid to the worker or what he calls surplus value. This surplus value is simultaneously the mark of exploited labor and the source of profit. In Burkean terms, the metaphorical value of the commodity stems from framing it as the source of individual wealth and deflecting the collective labor also contained in it. Thus, if we take account of the rhetorical nature of the community, we can see additionally that the entire belief system of capitalism begins with an identification of property with owners and not with producers. To identify an item with the producers requires a notion of the common.

I believe such reidentification is the key to realigning democracy within the communist horizon. This horizon – distanced in space and time and yet setting the agenda for a path toward it – represents, as Jodi Dean (2012) explains it, faith “that collective determination of collective conditions is possible” (16). That is to say, a mythology or terministic screen of the common will reorganize language around an understanding that life is collectively produced and can be collectively regulated.

The commons, in a traditional sense, denotes the commonly held means of production in the precapitalist era. The destruction of the commons (through such state mechanisms as the British Enclosure Acts) separated individuals from the means of providing for themselves and subsequently forced them into wage labor. This version of the commons as the precondition for capitalism is undermined by Michael Perelman, who argues that primitive accumulation – the process of privatizing such commons – plays an ongoing role in capitalism.³ Capitalism must intervene into self-

³ The notion that “primitive accumulation” functions on an ongoing basis is evidenced by the global land grab in which rich countries buy up and privatize resources – both property and indigenous knowledge – in the global south. See, for instance, “Outsourcing’s Third Wave.”

sufficiency of all sorts (homespun health remedies, sustainable farming, or shared cultural texts, for instance) so that it can turn communal knowledge and products into commodities. To expand the capitalist marketplace requires the continuous process of commodifying previously non-commodified items, which requires government intervention to mandate and regulate this endless social restructuring. Just as surely as this is an economic and political process it is also a rhetorical process: people must believe in the commodity and its world in order to assent to its ruling order.

Because this continuous appropriation of common resources is not limited to land, air, and water but includes socially produced products, knowledges, and practices, theorists have turned to the common, in the singular, to signify both our natural resources as well as our invented resources. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for instance, contend that the “common is not only the earth we share but also the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships, and so forth” (2009, p. 350). The common produces things, but it also produces social relations, lifestyles, and agentive subjects, all of which, according to Hardt and Negri, create value. Commodities put this collectively produced value in the hands of individuals and thus delimit its use value. To combat this problem, David Harvey argues that the “collective laboring that is now productive of value must ground collective, not individual, property rights” (p. 105). Recall that in Marx’s configuration, collective labor, in its exploited form, produces the value, invisible and yet present, within the commodity that creates profit for the capitalist.⁴ Harvey extends this theory by suggesting that we leverage the common value within the commodity to fuel a democratic transformation beyond the frontiers of capitalism – one in which wealth is socially accessible rather than privatized. A mythology of the common, contrary to a mythology of the commodity, emphasizes the collective labor constituting products. These two metaphors for understanding the division of contemporary labor practices, both outlined in *Marx Reloaded*, provide different discursive platforms on which to build a democratic myth pegged either to a capitalist or to a communist horizon.

Written and directed by Jason Barker, *Marx Reloaded* explores the relevance of Marxist theory to the contemporary political economy. It includes

⁴ Marx claims that commodities are merely “the visible incarnation, the social chrysalis state, of all human labour” (p. 159).

interviews by scholars at the forefront of reviving and revising Marxism as well as leading economists and financial advisors who dismiss such ideas. All of this is structured through a four-part animation sequence which follows Marx through the matrix of his own thinking, beginning with the commodity and ending with the common. Using the global financial crisis of 2008 as the historical event from which to launch its revaluation, the film asks, “Have we been living in a dream? Is the capitalist world about to be unmasked as an ideological illusion and replaced by the communist system we thought was gone for good?” Although this framing represents capitalism as an imagined world opposed to the possibility of a communist reality, the prevailing metaphors – the commodity and the common – indicate that both pills offer a mythology and are thus two rhetorical sides of the same proverbial coin. Consequently, the film determines the political task as less oriented toward the overthrow of capitalism and more directed toward what Jason Read (2010) calls “the actualisation or manifestation of the common” (p. 121). Before we can create this new democratic imagination, we first must understand the common in relationship to the commodity.

According to the documentary, the commodity is the single most important metaphor for the entire mythology of capitalism. The narrator explains, in a voice parodying Marx, that “in order to grasp capitalism’s true power and hold over us, we must delve into the strange and mystical world of the commodity.” This section of the film is signaled by an animated shot of an industrial street with smoke floating up from a manhole cover. The figure of Karl Marx falls through the manhole and, just like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, he descends into a fantasy world; but, unlike Alice, the creatures populating this world are commodities. The documentary continues with the narrator quoting Marx who says that a commodity changes an everyday thing “into something transcendent.”⁵ This transcendent quality is value – the social labor that goes into the commodity, allowing it to be exchanged at a particular price and to be converted into profit. For Marx, value is an abstraction that standardizes the cycle of exchange and not a quality inherent in the material body of the commodity. Rather than being intrinsic to the commodity, value is intrinsic to the human labor that goes into a commodity.

⁵ Marx uses the example of wood crafted into a table and sold as a commodity to explain this transcendence. As a commodity, the once simply wooden table comes to life and takes on a new existence. (See *Capital*, p. 163.)

It is precisely this transcendent power of working human beings that accounts for Marx's conception of commodity fetishism. As he (1964) explains in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, commodities contain the innate quality of our very species. The value-adding power of life emerges in labor wherein "all the natural, spiritual, and social variety of individual activity is manifest" (p. 66). Workers transfer life value into commodities, and this accounts for why we invest special powers in these things. In the documentary, media theorist Norbert Bolz summarizes this process by stating that, in addition to fulfilling our needs, commodities "convey a spiritual surplus value and this value is the real reason for the purchase." Peter Sloterdijk puts it even more boldly, arguing that "the immortal part of Marx's doctrine" is that he "discovered the fact that things live." Commodities acquire this remarkable attribute from socialized human labor. The exploitation of wage labor means that social agency becomes externalized within commodities and thus alienated from large segments of the population. Commodity fetishism, although it emphasizes a negative critique of capitalism, contains the seeds of a more positive theory of collective agency promoted as the common.

To explore the common the documentary interjects yet another animated scene. Here the camera pans down a hallway, zeroes in on a door, and then moves through the keyhole of that door. Inside is a room with a bewildered Karl Marx musing over a doll of Slavoj Žižek clashing cymbals together as if he was a wind-up toy. In this segment Žižek explains in an interview how commodity fetishism is an illusion, but it is, he claims, an "illusion that is part of reality itself." From this perspective, we can unmask the illusion of capitalism and its commodity fetish, but we nevertheless live according to its myths. At heart, this argument, one central to all Žižek's work, maintains that a framing myth or organizing fantasy cannot be separated from pragmatic action. Consequently, if we debunk the myth of capitalism, we must either live as though we have not done so or we must replace the commodity with another equally strong fantasy. For this documentary and many contemporary theorists, the common provides the structure for such an alternative.

The common, which designates the collective and cooperative labor of production rather than its exploitation, offers a rhetorical spin on global economic interconnectivity. Besides stressing the shared nature of our natural resources, it highlights the socialization of labor. According to critical the-

orist Jodi Dean, the common “designates and takes the place of human labor power (Marx’s source of value), now rereconceived in the broadest possible terms of the potential of creativity, thought, knowledge and communication” (pp. 134-135). The power of the common stems from the same power of capital – value production. The difference is that the common highlights the collective labor that goes into products while the commodity emphasizes individual profit. Through this shift in perspective, a rhetorically constructed mythology of the common enables and authorizes us to argue with impunity that the capitalist class, the now infamous one percent, “are not free to do as they will but are governed, controlled, and limited by the rest of us” (Dean 71). Because the common provides a conception of citizenship that nudges us toward a different democratic terrain without embracing the legacy of state communism, the film challenges us to create social structures based on the common rather than the commodity. Fittingly, its final image is of a crane removing the bust of Karl Marx from its unspecified location, suggesting that the answer to the conundrums of democracy can be found in what Antonio Negri (1989) calls “Marx beyond Marx” – the creative use of Marxist theory to bypass the stale political manifestations of Marxism.

As I have discussed through this reading of *Marx Reloaded*, the myth that rhetorically links democracy and capitalism begins with the commodity as a metaphor for the self-contained individual whose talents are crafted in relationship to private property. Such a metaphorical frame ignores not only the necessity (and often exploitation) of other individuals; it also turns a blind eye to the destruction of our natural environment. To engage the possibility of citizenship beyond the horizons of capitalism requires replacing this metaphor with the metaphor of the common, which calls attention to collaborations among people as well as to the need to care for our shared worlds, both those that are natural and those that are built. No doubt, McCloskey is correct to attribute part of capitalism’s success to a rhetorical revaluation of self-interest, individual dignity, and other bourgeois values, and yet it is wrong to think that this decision was made for us several hundred years ago and that we have no traction on how that choice plays out for us today.⁶ Our collective agency is obviously circumscribed by a nexus of ideas, institutions, habits, and traditions, but it is nonetheless open to change. The

⁶ See also Albert Hirschmann’s classic *The Passions and the Interests* (1997) for an earlier explanation of how self-interest shifted from a short-coming to a virtue.

goal for citizenship, from this view, begins by redefining itself through the common in order to engender a different democratic politics. I end with a brief summary of how a shift in our framing metaphors from the commodity to the common might adjust our other social relations.

TABLE I OPPOSING MYTHS OF CAPITALISM

Commodity	Common
Value in individual consumption	Value in collective production
Individual identification	Community identification
Economic and juridical relations	Cultural and deliberative relations
Citizenship as universal suffrage	Citizenship as an engaged publics

The above table charts the two foundational myths at hand within a Marxist critique of capital. The first myth is one that Marx opposes. Referring to the commodity as a mere representation or form of appearance, Marx understands its myth as one that obscures the source of profit in capitalism, which he (and liberal political economic theorists before him) identifies as labor. According to this myth, individuals are forced to seek value in consumption. As he says with characteristic sarcasm, “what I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but can buy for myself the most *beautiful* of women” (1964, p. 167). The commodity myth and its object fetishism stress individualism and individual identification. Citizens, in this conception, find their relationship through the economy and the political regulation of private property. This myth aligns liberal economics with liberal democracy as each takes the individual to be a rational member of society whose freedom is exercised by voting at the ballot box or in the marketplace. In his critique of capitalism, Marx implicitly presents another myth – one that I am calling the common. His assessment of classical political economy depends on a notion of the common that values collective labor rather than individual consumption; community rather than individual identification; cultural and deliberative relations rather than economic and juridical ones; and a sense of citizenship based on shared resources (from history and knowledge to the environment to the surplus wealth) rather than citizenship based on individual rights. The common, that is, offers a different framing myth, one with the capacity to reorient democracy toward deeper and more engaged practices.

Rhetorical citizenship, under the myth of the common, might emerge as more pervasive and more active publics. A broad range of social movement and counterpublic theorists have been exploring this form of rhetorical citizenship since at least the 1960s.⁷ Among their founding positions, however, is that this form of rhetorical citizenship is oppositional to the dominant structures. Indeed this is explicit in the notion of counterpublics. What I am suggesting is that the myth of the commodity helps maintain a structural relationship to both the civic and civil sphere such that the kind of active citizenship advocated by rhetorical theory becomes relegated to the margins of society and takes on the status of opposition. A shift in this framing myth, it seems to me, might reorient citizenship from a passive, rights-based activity to an active, public-formation activity, taking what is on the periphery and making it central to our very notions of citizenship. Indeed, the work of framing society through the common is itself an act of such citizenship: reimagining public space that is more environmentally sustainable and has people as opposed to profits at its core; working toward accessible public health care for all citizens; revising citizenship education by teaching deliberation rather than a prescribed list of historical facts; and advocating for an understanding of labor as an unavoidably collective activity in which all its participants receive its benefits – these are simultaneously rhetorical projects and ones in which a future common form of citizenship emerges.

⁷ For an example of counterpublic investigations, see Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer's collection *Counterpublics and the State* (2001); an equally strong articulation of contemporary social movement theory can be found in Christina Foust's *Transgression as a Mode of Resistance* (2010).

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