

## The Marxist Premodern

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The history of Marxist recruitment of the premodern is as old as Marxism itself (even older, if we view Hegel's vision of Western historical unfolding through the proleptic lens of Marxian hindsight). The tremendous diversity of this history will be axiomatic in what follows, though something of its character can be discerned even within the plainspoken polemic of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). The opening section of the *Manifesto*, in fact, finds Marx and Engels turning immediately to the Middle Ages as both the wellspring of "modern bourgeois society" and an exemplification of the forms of political organization and collectivity this society would jettison in its emergence:

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang the chartered

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burghers of the earliest towns. From these burgesses the first elements of the bourgeoisie were developed.<sup>1</sup>

What is notable in this passage is not so much the transparency that Marx and Engels impute to modern class antagonisms, but rather the social complexity they locate in the ancient and medieval periods. The “subordinate gradations” that characterize even the most ruthless and exploitative relations among the various clusters of workers and those who have an interest in their labor prefigure the “new conditions of oppression” under the sign of capital, but they do so with a crucial difference: a difference that works directly against the otherwise relentless historical march of serf to burgher to modern bourgeoisie.

This sense in the *Manifesto* of the medieval as the resistant well-spring of capitalist modernity adumbrates the vision of premodern England Marx outlines years later in several riveting chapters in the first volume of *Capital*. Examining the history of medieval labor legislation and its continuity with later juridical expropriations, Marx embraces the Statutes of Laborers, the Rising of 1381, Fortescue’s *De laudibus legum Angliae*, and many other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century phenomena in his account of the era that ushered in a “new nobility” during the long process of agrarian enclosure, a class that held the “transformation of arable land into sheep-walks” as its “slogan.” The accumulative tendencies of capitalism converge in the practice that bears an almost typological relation to the modern:

So-called primitive accumulation . . . is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as “primitive” because it forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital. The economic structure of capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.<sup>2</sup>

As many of Marx’s commentators have recognized, the suggestion here that the dissolution of feudalism “set free” the forces of capitalism posits within the feudal economy a form of capitalism *in potentia*, ready to spring into another kind of being as the basis of capitalist society.

The Middle Ages thus clearly represents in classic Marxism something of a paradox: both a prelapsarian pastoral of “free peasant proprietors . . . farming independently for themselves,” enjoying “the right to exploit the

common land” to which they “had the same feudal title as the lords themselves”; and, simultaneously, a field of production sown with the seeds of capital and promising to yield the worst exploitative tendencies of industrial capitalism (*Capital*, 877–78). This tension between the timeless stability of feudal mutuality and the sinister adumbration of capitalist expropriation can be seen as the very essence of the Marxist view of premodernity, a view that informs some of the most influential work in the history of medieval and early modern Europe, Marxist and non-Marxist alike. The so-called Brenner Debate, for example, whose stated subject was the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, might also be understood as an argument over the continuing vitality of Marxist historicism and Marxist models of causality in the comprehension of preindustrial European civilization and of the class antagonisms that did or did not shape its fundamental economic and social character.<sup>3</sup> More recent work on the emergence of modernity, such as Ellen Meiksins Wood’s *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism*, has focused on the stubborn survival of ancient and medieval forms within capitalism, suggesting that we should abandon old discourses of “uneven development,” with their implicit grounding in some essentially pure forms of capitalism and feudalism, in favor of an appreciation for the dynamic value of old ideologies and structures within capitalism itself.<sup>4</sup> This work would force us to ask whether our historiographical categories have allowed us to account for the mixed nature of the premodern in a way that neither dissolves historical transition into genealogy nor hypostatizes feudalism and capital into pure and opposed constructions. Such questions recapitulate Marx’s own unspoken and often confused struggle with the transition question throughout his oeuvre, which, as Stephen Rigby’s wide-ranging essay in this volume suggests, turns frequently to the history of feudalism yet without fully clarifying the intellectual stakes of this turn for the project of Marxist critique.

Given the spectrum of contradictions inherent in the feudal-capitalist transition as postulated within classic Marxism, it should come as no surprise that much of the subsequent history of Marxist thought has remained unsettled regarding the exemplary status of the Middle Ages within its myriad critical projects. An extreme case by any measure is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2001), with its crypto-Augustinian model of globalization and its paeans to the “new barbarians” flooding the gates of multinational corporations. Hailed by Slavoj Žižek as the “*Communist Manifesto* of our time,” *Empire* concludes with a paragraph (italicized in the original) that appropriates the founder of the Franciscan order as an exemplum of communism’s prehistory and the promise of its better future:

*There is an ancient legend that might serve to illuminate the future life of communist militancy: that of Saint Francis of Assisi. Consider his work. To denounce the poverty of the multitude he adopted that common condition and discovered there the ontological power of a new society. The communist militant does the same, identifying in the common condition of the multitude its enormous wealth. Francis in opposition to nascent capitalism refused every instrumental discipline, and in opposition to the mortification of the flesh (in poverty and in the constituted order) he posed a joyous life, including all of being and nature, the animals, sister moon, brother sun, the birds of the field, the poor and exploited humans, together against the will of power and corruption. Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis's situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control—because bio-power and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrespressible lightness and joy of being communist.<sup>5</sup>*

This rather New Agey enlistment of Franciscanism as a politicized love for “sister moon, brother sun” and all the animals of the earth provides a peculiar culmination for a book on the implications of globalization, as rhetorically jarring as it is historically suspect.<sup>6</sup> Hardt and Negri's utopian fantasy of an anticapitalist medieval mendicancy, though, must be understood as part of a largely occluded Hegelianism in which a dialectical habit of analysis constantly proposes vast cosmic oppositions (in this case capitalism and mendicancy, the “will to power” and “communism”) only to subsume them within the indiscriminating embrace of a new global formation. In fact, *Empire's* avowed medievalism may have more purchase on the book's subject than even its authors suspect: in his contribution here, Andrew Cole advances the startling hypothesis (to French Hegelians, at least, accustomed as they are to Kojève's exegesis of a universal dialectic) that the so-called master/slave dialectic possesses a historical particularity rooted in medieval feudal relations.

The century and a half separating the *Communist Manifesto* and *Empire* develops a neglected but powerful strain in Marxist thought that this volume names and studies as the “Marxist premodern”: the diffuse practices of historical and theoretical appropriation in the Marxist critical tradition that collectively enlist, abject, and reconstitute the cultures and

artifacts of medieval and early modern Europe as explanatory tactics in the analysis of modern ideological formation and of the problematics of capitalist emergence. On one level, the Marxist premodern exists as a *longue durée* of theoretical innovation, from the early writings of Marx himself through myriad twentieth-century revisionisms in the work of Gramsci, Althusser, and Žižek, among many others. At the same time, it oscillates between a tactical recruitment of the premodern as a source of critical energy and a more strategic interest in policing the disciplinary boundaries between modernity and the Middle Ages as selective archives of exemplification, between the *grands récits* of Marxist historiography that locate premodernity within bold narratives of social change and the fragmentary appropriations that can lend the medieval in particular an almost iconic resonance within certain texts and traditions of Marxist thought.

The essays comprising this special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* engage the Marxist premodern from a variety of angles and with a number of contrasting results. Contributors focus on both the formations of medieval and early modern Europe—intercontinental trade, investment practices, civic drama and the public theater—as well as some of their modern intellectual legacies: habits of periodization, the historiography of medieval institutions and economies, the development of Marxist aesthetics, and so forth. The volume’s aims, then, are as avowedly theoretical as they are properly historical. While medievalists and early modernists have been engaged for many years in the critical application of Marxist paradigms to the study of premodern culture, our primary concern in this volume has been with the informing presence of the premodern in the development of Marxism itself, both as social theory and as institutionalized intellectual history.

The most arbitrary survey of various modern critical traditions in the West suggests the sheer limitlessness of the Marxist premodern as a domain of knowledge production and theoretical consolidation. Max Horkheimer’s “Authority and the Family” begins with strong words against periodization, in particular the “traditional threefold division of history” into “antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times”: a division that for Horkheimer is “highly unsatisfactory” not so much for the stale historicism to which it leads, but for the vitality of dialectical materialism that it sacrifices.<sup>7</sup> As Maura Nolan shows in her essay here, the tradition of Marxist aesthetics—particularly as worked out by Horkheimer’s Frankfurt School colleague, Theodor Adorno—posits a model of dialectical immanence that reacts to the alleged severing of the medieval from the modern and the generic antagonisms to which this hypos-

tatized epochal divide gives rise. A century earlier, the medieval household functions as a critical lens in Marxism and in ancillary models of economic historiography upon the very emergence of modernity: as in the administrative history of Marx's contemporary, T. F. Tout, haunted, as D. Vance Smith argues below, by a "principle of animation within the dull household of history"—a principle personified, as it turns out, by the early-fifteenth-century poet and clerk, Thomas Hoccleve. Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), which marked a new direction in Anglo-American Marxist cultural theory, works at some length with the magnum opus of the French Jesuit and cardinal Henri de Lubac—whose four-volume *Exégèse médiévale* (1959–64) exhaustively studied what Jameson terms the "striking and elaborate hermeneutic which is the patristic and medieval system of the four levels of scripture"—in discussing the allegorical dilemma at the heart of the Althusserian notion of expressive causality.<sup>8</sup>

The broadly diachronic trajectories traced in this special issue may also provide a corrective to recent work in Marxian literary studies that has overlooked the medieval genealogies of capital. A typical example here is the groundbreaking collection *Marxist Shakespeares*, edited by Jean Howard and Scott Shershow, which proposes a focused transhistorical comparativism as a means of excavating both early modern and nineteenth-century layers of economic history subtending the late-capitalist present. As the editors ask in their introduction, "[W]hat is the relationship between the early modern period, *when the regimes we have inherited were inaugurated*, the moment of nineteenth-century industrial capital when Marx elaborated his analysis, and the moment of late capitalism where we are now negotiating a relationship to both these prior historical moments . . . ?"<sup>9</sup> What that italicized clause strongly implies, of course, is a particular moment of origin rather than one point along a dialectical continuum. As Marx himself argued repeatedly, however, if the "capitalist era" proper "dates from the sixteenth century" (*Capital*, 876), the "regimes we have inherited," in Howard and Shershow's phrase, possess a much more ancient history, at least as ancient as the speculative capitalism that in part defined the economic life of the medieval Mediterranean. If the idealism that once inspired Henri Pirenne to describe the medieval city as far back as the eleventh century as a hotbed of capitalist ferment and bourgeois aspiration now strikes us as wishful hyperbole,<sup>10</sup> the last several decades of work in medieval economic history have revealed an epoch in which investment, speculation, and profit functioned as part of broadly (if not ubiquitously) capitalist systems subject to both slow and sudden change: for example, the gradual transformation from the tenth

to the fourteenth centuries that Robert S. Lopez dubbed the “commercial revolution of the Middle Ages,” or what others are showing was the increasing complexity of English capital markets—due in no small part to lowered interest rates and the sorts of speculative investments in the grain and wool trades they allowed—well before the fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> As Valerie Forman’s essay illustrates, the very notion of *investment* helped legitimize the expansion of capitalist practices over the course of the seventeenth century, when the correspondence of the East India Company begins to understand the institution’s trade practices in accumulative rather than simply profitable terms. Worth exploring, too, is the bearing on the Marxist premodern of the iconoclastic strain in the historiography of medieval and early modern class relations, such as Susan Reynolds’s influential work exposing the fictionality of feudalism as an explanatory category for medieval social formation.<sup>12</sup> If Marx’s ontology of premodernity left particular strands of preindustrial economies unaccounted for and unknowable, this should only encourage a more rigorous effort among medievalists and early modernists to work with and through the continuing legacy of Marxism in the understanding of capitalism’s diachronic complexities.

Another way of putting all of this might be to call for a kind of intraperiodization of Marxism itself, one that would recognize the specificity of capitalist and paracapitalist formations in the Middle Ages, yet without sacrificing such specificity to the providential teleologies of Marx’s own powerful narrative and the universalizing assumptions about the nature and rise of capitalism that this narrative continues to reify. To adopt Raymond Williams’s vocabulary, the early modern period—so often imagined as the fount and origin of commodification and all it represents—might then appear as an era of stratified continuity with earlier symptoms of capitalist emergence rather than as a revolutionary paroxysm of inauguration, the Middle Ages not as an archaic ruin of abandoned precapitalist collectivities, but as a forcefully residual foundation of later, dominant economic relations. The work gathered here argues collectively that such revisionism remains true to Marx’s original project. As John Parker’s essay reveals, the theological (and often explicitly sacramental) languages that accrue to *Capital*’s theatrical accounts of commodity fetishism have a more than incidental bearing on the production of sacrament within the history of dramatic spectacle, from the fifteenth-century mystery plays through Shakespeare. It is our hope that “The Marxist Premodern” will open up new questions rather than resolve old ones in its scrutiny of a Marxism that today remains simultaneously archaic, residual, and, perhaps, emergent.

The idea for this special issue, and for other projects to come, originated in meetings of the collaborative Group 190. Group 190 began as an absinthian effort to foster conversation about the place of cultural theory in medieval studies. The editors would like to thank 190 for continued support and friendship in this endeavor, especially Michael Uebel, who has been a model of energetic and generous intellectual comradeship. We would also like to thank Michael Cornett for his work on this issue.



## Notes

- 1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1888 English edition), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 474.
- 2 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1992), 875, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
- 3 See the essays collected in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 4 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 413.
- 6 Contrast the treatment of Franciscanism's relation to the emergence of capitalism in Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); relevant too is Joel Kaye's work on the infusion of economic language into various theological discourses, in *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a treatment of Francis in the context of the medieval agricultural economy, see Lisa J. Kiser, "Animal Economies: The Legends of St. Francis in Their Medieval Contexts," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, forthcoming. On the medievalism of *Empire* more generally, see Bruce Holsinger, "Empire, Apocalypse, and the 9/11 Pre-modern," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104 (forthcoming 2005).
- 7 Max Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1999), 47.
- 8 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 29.
- 9 Jean Howard and Scott Shershow, introduction to *Marxist Shakespeares* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.
- 10 Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, trans. Frank D. Halsey (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1939).



- 11 See, among many others, Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); John H. A. Munro, *Textiles, Towns, and Trade: Essays in the Economic History of Late-Medieval England and the Low Countries* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1994); and J. Mayhew and P. R. Schofield, eds., *Credit and Debt in Medieval England, c. 1180–1350* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2002).
- 12 Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); see also the approach adopted in S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status, and Gender* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

