

Marxism

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“The framework of the journal is Marxist in the broadest sense of the term.” So begins the second paragraph of the “Prospectus” for *Social Text* 1 (1979). Framed like this, a reflection on Marxism and *Social Text* thirty years later seems to have a lot to answer for. Indeed, John Brenkman tries to answer for that framework in his entry for *Social Text* 100 on the “Prospectus” that he helped to draft. Writes Brenkman, in this issue: “Why at the moment that *Social Text* was founded did Marx seem so relevant and liberalism so bankrupt, whereas today—a scant thirty years later—Marxism might reasonably be thought to be dead, while the fundamental elements of liberalism are in need of vigorous defense?” Brenkman’s effort to answer for *Social Text*’s Marxist framework leads him to repeat the familiar old *and* new American left plot of nostalgic reflection (on well-meaning but misguided origins), decisive renunciation (of Marxism as an inevitable “illiberalism”), and sober adoption of former foes (“embrace the ordeal of liberalism,” he advises). Rather than “answer for” Marxism in *Social Text*—as if it were an accusation, an original sin, or a silly delusion of one’s juvenilia—I’ll treat Marxism as, well, a social text.

The word *framework* appears three times on the first page of the “Prospectus” in *Social Text* 1: in the sentence quoted above, as well as in references to “the dialectical framework” and the “Marxist framework” that will allow the journal to raise and discuss political and theoretical questions in a properly historical light. The word sits uneasily alongside the “Prospectus”’s simultaneous embrace of “new modes of critical and utopian thought,” “new emancipatory impulses and new forms of struggle,” precisely because “frameworks” are what such new modes, impulses, and forms of struggle usually direct their energies against. Indeed, Brenkman renounces Marxism because he thinks of it as a framework, a schematic

tendency to see “patterns of human behavior in groups,” and he opts for liberalism because he thinks it is more attuned to action and potentiality: “liberalism postulates individuals in their capacity of action.” Perhaps it is a sign of the distance separating *Social Text* 1 from *Social Text* 100 that thinking of Marxism as a framework, and liberalism as anything but a fantasy, seems out of tune to me. Thanks in part to the kind of thinking *Social Text* helped to put in motion between issue 1 and issue 100, some of us learned Marxism not as a framework but rather as a way to think outside the frame.

“Frame work” originally referred to the product (or “work”) of a machine (or “frame”) composed of parts fitted together, like a loom for weaving or a mold for casting. Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopædia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1738) explains that the word “frame is more particularly used for a sort of loom, whereon artizans stretch their linens, silks, stuffs &c. to be embroidered, quilted or the like. See EMBROIDERY, TAPESTRY *work* &c.”¹ The 11 May 1812 issue of *The Examiner; a Sunday paper, on politics, domestic economy, and theatricals* asserts that “Frames . . . indisputably lessen the number of workmen,” and G. P. R. James’s *The Woodman; A Romance of the Times of Richard III* (1849) describes “two young girls who sat near with tall frames before them, running the industrious needle in and out.”² So in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least, “frame work” named the interface between commodities and the artisans, workmen, and young girls who made them under conditions of automation, structural unemployment, and child labor that echo into this crisis-ridden, twenty-first-century global economy.

Rather than thinking of Marxism as a framework, then, we could treat *framework* as a term forged in and through capitalist discursive practice, like *primitive accumulation* or *use-value*. The “so-called” (*sogenannte*) in the title “So-called Primitive Accumulation” of part 8, volume 1, of Marx’s *Capital* reminds us of how Marx liked to interpret such terms when they appeared in the familiar plots of the classical political economists. The following passage from “So-called Primitive Accumulation” exemplifies what we might call the analytic of the so-called, which is more traditionally known by Marxists as the critique of the form of appearance:

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential.

Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work.³

In the face of pervasive, over-familiar terms that one cannot not utter, terms that utter us as much as we utter them, Marx had a method: inhabit in order to know, perform in order to critique, and parody in order to revolutionize.

What happens when we turn this analytic of the so-called on *framework* itself? Frameworks are said to help us know and act by bringing everything together more efficiently, more neatly. For instance, the “Prospectus” says that “the Marxist framework seeks to restore . . . history and historical perspective” to the theory of its day, as if the task of thinking were to put everything back in its proper place, as if that proper place were knowable, as if “history” tells us exactly where to look. However, as the 11 May 1812 issue of the *Examiner* points out, frames also automate the work of thinking, “lessening the number of workmen.” From the perspective of the frame in James’s *The Woodman*, it is the needle that is industrious, not the young girls, as if the needle works the girls themselves. So what about the workmen who are “lessened,” pushed outside the frame—how and what do they think? And what are the girls up to while they sit alongside those industrious needles? The so-called of the framework points us toward what happens in and through, but also alongside and outside, the frame.

Grace Lee Boggs, in her 1999/2000 interview with L. Todd Duncan and Katheryne V. Lindberg published in *Social Text* 67 (2001), talks at length about working in an industrial plant during World War II. Of the social and political action that went on among the workers, she says: “There was a tremendous camaraderie. While our hands were busy wiring and soldering, our mouths were yapping away.” Boggs continues: “In *Capital*, Marx contrasts the stage of attraction, when the workforce is expanding, and that of repulsion, when it is shrinking. World War II was a period of tremendous expansion. Blacks, women, intellectuals were coming together in the plant for the first time in great numbers. They would exchange books, go bowling together after work, hold discussions. It was a very lively place.” Inside, alongside, and in apposition to the order and efficiency of the plant’s so-called frame work, wiring and soldering, Boggs and her coworkers kept their mouths from being lessened, automated. They yapped away and went bowling, had discussions and exchanged books—“lazy rascals.” They questioned what Stanley Aronowitz reminded us to question in *Social Text* 24 (1990): “the crucial bourgeois ideology—work as an ethical form of life.” In turn, they raise for us what Aronowitz called the

“most subversive slogan since the nineteenth century,” a frame-busting question if there ever was one: “why work?”

The plot of Marx’s “anecdote about the past” from “So-called Primitive Accumulation” is familiar, with its misguided origins, its featured individuals, its heroes and villains. It is old, it is new, and it is an ordeal, this plot, but apparently someone has to tell it, or else we’ll all start asking what we’re working for, and why we can’t take a break, refuse to work, live riotously. And if we do ask, just like always, we’ll be called “illiberal,” which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* means “ill-bred, ungentlemanly, unrefined, base, mean, vulgar, rude, sordid”—lazy rascals, yapping away. This plot still tells itself today, as if automated, a frame work, running the industrious keyboard on our computers with confidence and ease, calling us all. So-calling us all.

Malcolm X knew something about this plot, and he also knew something about the analytic of the so-called: “This so-called democracy has failed the Negro. And all these white liberals have definitely failed the Negro. So, where do we go from here? First, we need some friends. We need some new allies. The entire civil-rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation. We need to look at this civil-rights thing from another angle—from the inside as well as from the outside.”⁴ This democracy, this liberalism, this civil-rights thing—Malcolm insisted that we could inhabit them and find a way out of them, too. To where? There’s no framework for that. A young Marx had a similar thought, in 1843: “Therefore not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, namely an individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires and separated from the community”;⁵ this “political emancipation is certainly a big step forward. It may not be the last form of general human emancipation.”⁶ It may not be. But who knows? That’s the social part of this text of Marxism.

Here’s one way to start, though: take a big step backward to *Social Text* 1, where, a few pages after the “Prospectus,” Sylvia Wynter’s essay “Sambos and Minstrels” breaks out of the frame that Marx’s own critique of so-called primitive accumulation left in place: the frame of the so-called primitive. Drawing “attention to that implicit cultural blanchitude which has been central to the social machine of the world system,” Wynter reflected on how slave cultures of the Americas expose “the contradictions of the egalitarian creed.” She thus took “another angle” on the richly theoretical internationalism that fed into *Social Text* at its start: “In constituting another self, another collective identity whose coding and signification moved outside the framework of the dominant ideology, the slaves were involved in a long and sustained counterstruggle.” In a sense, Wynter inaugurates what would become a long *Social Text* counterplot to a certain liberalism’s egalitarian creed and its inevitable imperial articula-

tions, as well as to a certain Marxism's (anti)primitivism and its inevitable imperial articulations, a counterplot told in *Social Text* from the third world, from postcolonial critiques of the third world, from critiques of the postcolonial.

Get in and get out, Malcolm and Marx said. Grace Lee Boggs and Sylvia Wynter, too. Both at once. But don't forget how to get out. There's riotous work to perform. Illiberal living to be lived. Friendships and alliances to create. Yapping to do. Outside of the so-called framework.

Notes

1. Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1738), 296. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale.

2. G. P. R. James, *The Woodman; A Romance of the Times of Richard III* (London: T. C. Newby, 1849), 13; *The Examiner; a Sunday paper, on politics, domestic economy, and theatricals* (London), 11 May 1812.

3. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 873.

4. Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Merit, 1965), 31.

5. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), 230.

6. *Ibid.*, 221.