Counterfeit Capital: Poetic Labor and Revolutionary Irony

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Reviews

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Jennifer Bajorek's *Counterfeit Capital* is a superb and unexpected hybrid entity: a book that manages to make time for intricate readings of Baudelaire's poetry even as it remains preoccupied, from beginning to end, with revolution. Bajorek makes so much time for her readings, in fact, that, upon first perusal, her book appears to be primarily a monograph. An abundance of framing devices advertise the book's underlying political concerns, but each chapter hinges upon a sustained engagement with one or two key poems that threatens to overflow its allotted space. Nonetheless, the book is animated by the urgency of the desire to make social and political justice possible. In the final analysis, Bajorek devotes at least as much space to Marx as to Baudelaire. More than any of its arguments, in fact, this delicate and often elusive distribution of critical labor would be the book's central statement. The point here is to show, on the one hand, that literary criticism is inseparable from the more ambitious and urgent political projects and, on the other, to "revolutionize the revolution," that is, to demonstrate a mode of political discourse that does not sacrifice the ethics of reading.

The formal economy of *Counterfeit Capital* packs a polemical punch. The book presents a challenge, not only to political theory, but also to its reader. It challenges the reader, who would review or paraphrase its project, to respect its own economy--that is, not to disregard its irony, not to convert its often allusive and open-ended readings into a theory of revolution, and not to run roughshod over its critical labor in order to reach a goal that this labor renders inaccessible or problematic. There is, however, no way to rise to such a challenge. Although it is possible simply to acknowledge and admire the book's economy from a distance, there is no way to enter into a sustained discussion of any of its elements without upsetting their delicate balance. Indeed, one of the book's great virtues is the seductive levity with which it bears its own defiance. Bajorek knows perfectly well that no reader will be able to respect the book's economy in the way it demands to be respected. Her epigrammatic style eschews the reproducibility of philosophical discourse that proceeds through expansive arguments according to the order of reasons. Especially when she discusses the "revolutionary irony" evoked in the book's subtitle, her arguments tend to culminate abruptly in witticisms rather than boldly underscored conclusions. Considering the importance that Bajorek confers upon the concept of irony, it would not be unreasonable to expect that

she would formally introduce it as a concept, attempting to establish its history and its role within a variety of disciplinary discourses. Instead, the book's first mention of irony takes the form of a passing remark. Bajorek slips in an aside about the way in which irony inevitably slips into Marx's discourse on revolution:

> Seen from the angle of this development, the revolution—not even the one that Marx himself prophesied—will not and cannot ever be a revolution "against" capital. And it is no longer possible to speak of a future that would not just be a repetition of the present possibilities without a heady dose of ironic vertigo slipping in. No wonder so many of the stories Baudelaire and Marx tell us about capital's future are marked by a manifest investment in this vertigo. (3)

Of course, Bajorek's discussion of irony does not stop there, but it does stop and start in an inimitable manner. And even the most sustained discussion of irony tends to feel oblique.

Bajorek's title only refers to one type of irony, but her book brings many ironies into play, on the level of both form and content. Each discussion of irony ends up feeling oblique because Bajorek makes no attempt to connect it to the others. One knows that each could be read as a clarification of the others, but Bajorek herself does not undertake this reading. She proceeds as though, each time, the question of irony arose on its own, according to the demands of the particular reading at hand, and thus only requires enough elaboration to take this reading one step forward. Nonetheless, the book is very much a book about the politics of irony, so it will be useful, in order to present the book as a whole, to distinguish and make some connections between these various ironies.

The Irony of Discursive Economy

In chapter 2, "*Paris Spleen* (The Irony of Revolutionary Power)," Bajorek offers what appears to be her most un-ironic definition of irony. It also turns out to be a return to the experience of vertigo, which seems inseparable from the encounter with irony:

> With irony, there is an infinitely repeated and repeatable interruption of two incompatible meanings, one of which is always the other's negation, and neither of which can establish itself in a position of historical precedence, or "pure anteriority," in relation to the other. This is the infinite vertigo and permanent parabasis that de Man is so fond of citing from Friedrich Schlegel. Each of two voices or of two meanings negates the other while at the same time referring to this other as its own historical condition, such that there ensures a kind of generalized referential disorder. This disorder, which posits the reference to alterity as a condition of meaning's history, binds irony to textual and material conceptions of history. It also opens more explicitly political questions. (23-24)

There are a number of elements from this definition that might be adduced to explicate aspects of Bajorek's own discourse. The formal economy of this discourse, which I have already evoked, is thoroughly ironic, not only because of its laughing refusal to say everything, but also because of its deep indebtedness. Bajorek makes no secret of her intellectual debts. Indeed, one of the signatures of her discourse is the peculiarly up-front manner in which it declares and assumes its debts. And these declarations are perhaps less a matter of honesty than of saving time and energy. She can both permit herself to write in such an abbreviated style and to make so much room for her readings only because she supposes rather than explains the theoretical framework that orients these readings. Rather than building an argument on the basis of axioms, she confesses theoretical debts and indexes knowledge rather than elaborating it. She is particularly intent upon acknowledging her debt to Walter Benjamin: "Speaking of old questions coming back, and questions of transmission in particular, I should say something about my debt to Walter Benjamin. . . . I have been inspired by Benjamin's decision to think the material(ity) of capital's history as a matter for poetry" (5). The virtue of such a gesture is that it allows for an engagement with Benjamin's lapidary texts that goes beyond commentary; it opens the possibility of generously acknowledging debt without limiting it to one or two sentences. Indeed, the gesture institutes a generalized irony insofar as it invites the reader to understand the text on two levels at the same time. It is both a series of statements that respond to local problems of textual understanding, and an implicit, ongoing commentary on another text that is never cited at length. This involves Bajorek's own reading of Baudelaire and a repetition of Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire. Bajorek says that she was "inspired" by Benjamin's elaboration of a historical materialist reading practice around Baudelaire's poetry. Yet her book is ultimately much more than simply inspired by Benjamin. It takes the considerable risk of *repeating* Benjamin's project and thus, of opening herself to the possibility that Benjamin's text will always interrupt, invalidate, or even undermine her own.

The danger of not denying such debt is that it places knowledge on the side of the Other to such a degree that it can paralyze speech. The author-debtor risks reducing herself to silence. Of course, the very existence of *Counterfeit Capital* bears witness to the fact that Bajorek has not succumbed to this danger. The book manages the eminently ironic feat of converting almost too much proximity into just enough distance. From sentence to sentence, her discourse saves itself from the silence to which her willingly accrued debts threaten to consign it. Accordingly, the book is less an explanation of Benjamin than an attempt to carry this debt forth and to discover what future opens up when one insists upon *this* debt before all others.

The Irony of Reading

When Benjamin's precedent threatens to interrupt *Counterfeit Capital* at the source, Bajorek parries with an interruption of her own. Often rereading the same texts that Benjamin reads, Bajorek emphasizes questions that that are essential to her precursor's project, but that he does not and perhaps cannot directly address. Whereas Benjamin upholds Baudelaire as the witness to the *allegorical* structure of the capitalist economy, Bajorek reads Baudelaire as an ironist. Her turn to the question of irony is thus not simply a matter of literary history or criticism; it is also the lever that affords her the minimal ironic distance necessary to assume such weighty debts without being crushed by them. In and for this book, the question of irony is not merely a more or less interesting "topic." It is also a matter of discursive life and death—which lends its exposition an intriguing dynamism. Accordingly, the slight shift from allegory to irony constitutes the book's decisive intervention, opening new ways of reading Benjamin, Marx, and Baudelaire. More generally, it offers new ways of understanding the relationship between Benjamin and Marxism.

In a related gesture, Bajorek's book thus raises a host of questions that cannot be accounted for in terms of the debts that she goes out of her way to acknowledge. The turn to the question of irony opens a space for her work within the constricted field of Benjaminian discourse. However, this turn itself is conditioned by an unaccountable freedom with respect to this discourse. But where does this freedom come from? It is often possible to escape burdensome debts by taking on other debts--that is, to play one debt against the other and to serve two masters. And this is indeed what Bajorek does.

The debts that *inspire* her project or allow it to take form are not necessarily the same as the debts that make it *intelligible*. Despite the fact that the title, *Counterfeit Capital*, explicitly recalls Jacques Derrida's reading of Baudelaire's prose poem, "La Fausse monnaie," in *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money,* Bajorek seems less certain about her debts to Jacques Derrida. Her discussion of Derrida's important book ends almost as soon as it gets underway. After making short work of a complex passage on the concept of the gift, she hastily shifts focus to the question of deconstruction and the possibility of justice: "It is interesting to note in this context, and before leaving Derrida's text behind, that *Given Time* is, like so many of his more overtly ethico-political analyses, a critique of social and economic injustice" (72). True enough. But one is left wondering by Bajorek's abrupt turn away from Derrida's analysis of the gift. Why does she even bring this lengthy and complex analysis into play, and why evoke it in the title of the book if she only glosses it in a single paragraph? In fact, it is precisely the all-too-brief discussion of the gift that makes it possible to weigh the stakes of Bajorek's intervention. Despite the fact that her

book has very little to say about Derrida's work, and that it is not very faithful to Derrida's idiom, it operates entirely within a problematic that Derrida systematically formalized from the earliest to his latest works. Whereas Bajorek pretends to cite Derrida merely as in important reader of Baudelaire, perhaps even a reader in the Benjaminian tradition, Derrida ultimately *matters* to her work because of his unrelenting elaboration of the aporetic relationship between *political economy* and what Georges Bataille called *general economy*—an elaboration that not only entails readings of Hegel, Marx, and Bataille, but also the powerful twentieth-century traditions of anthropology (Mauss, Lévi-Strauss) and phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger). To do justice to Bajorek's project, therefore, it would be necessary to do what she does not do: explain the way in which she situates her work in relation to this tradition.

Let us briefly examine the displacement that the perspective of general economy introduces into the field of political economy. Whereas political economy is exclusively concerned with the sphere of capitalist production, general economy attempts to take in all economic activities—especially "unproductive" activities such as gift-giving, play, and poetry. Accordingly, general economy attempts to rethink social and political upheaval, if not revolution, in relation to such phenomena. But general economy does not only designate a sphere of economic activity that is larger than the sphere of capitalist production. It also makes it possible to elaborate the genealogy of capitalist economy as such, to rewrite the history of capitalism starting from the unproductive expenditure and thus to discern the force of such aneconomic expenditure at the heart of political and economic life. The truth (and the injustice) of capitalism lies not merely in the relations of exploitation that underlie the system of industrial production and circulation, but in the specific mode in which capitalism traffics in the incalculable.

Even as Bajorek's book pretends to be a patient engagement with the problems posed by a limited number of texts, it can thus be read as a contribution to the much larger project of rethinking Marxism advanced in the work of Ernesto Laclau, Etienne Balibar, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Christian Marazzi. Bajorek has in common with these diverse philosophers the attempt to rethink the relationship between capital and language. As she elaborates in her most extensive reading of Marx, "Animadversions (Technics after Capital)," Marxism has traditionally conceived of language as an ideal or "superstructural" agency, locating its effects within the bourgeois public sphere, where it functions as an ideological representation or false consciousness of the capitalist relations of production. However, like her fellow readers of Marx, Bajorek discovers the work of language within the labor process itself--that is, on the

level of what has traditionally been conceived as the material basis of the economic infrastructure. This intervention, in turn, gives rise to a series of consequences. First, it demands, in general, that we rethink the nature and place of labor in society. Second, if language is not merely a means of representation or a form of consciousness, but rather the instance of a technicity "older" than technology, then it becomes necessary to rethink the relationships between labor and technology, between technology and the capitalist exploitation and expropriation of labor, and ultimately, between capitalism and capital. Third, if language is not merely a means of representing the world, then it becomes necessary to rethink the role of interpretation in Marxist criticism. How might this infrastructural language appear within linguistic artifacts such as lyric poetry? Finally, at the limit, Bajorek's intervention demands that we rethink the relationship between capital and revolution. If language is an essential moment within the production of capital, then capital harbors something within itself that is a potentially revolutionary force while also absolutely resisting revolutionary change. No matter the power of revolution to transform social and political institutions, the revolution can do nothing to change the fact of language. Emphasis upon the role of language within capital thus demands that we confront the essential question of the eternal return of the same within the movement of revolution.

Revolutionary Irony

But what is revolutionary irony? Does it refer to a stylistic trait of Marx's writings--the acerbic irony of the revolutionary thinker with respect to bourgeois institutions? Or is it, in fact, a post-revolutionary irony, marking the disillusioned stance of a would-be revolutionary with respect to his former hopes? Or could it be understood to suggest that irony itself possesses the political power to turn everything upside down? Bajorek opposes all of these understandings of her phrase because each presumes that irony is a graspable attitude or force. In an unrestrained Hegelian gesture, she makes clear that irony is neither an attitude toward things nor a free-standing thing itself. Rather, it lies within "the thing itself" and divides from itself. More specifically, revolutionary irony is inseparable from the self-constitution of the odd thing that Marx called capital. Unlike the theorists of capital that preceded him, Marx discovered the truth of capital, not in the conditions of production, but in their transformation; not in exchange, circulation, and reproduction, but in revolution. Capital is animated by a "revolutionary irony" to the extent that it gives rise to the movement of its own abolition. Although capital lies at the heart of the processes of capitalist accumulation and appropriation, capital "itself" has nothing of its own; it cannot be defined in terms of self-preservation. This

is why, in Marx's theory, the proletariat, which has nothing to lose but its chains, is ultimately the product that defines the capitalist mode of production. Capital is "nothing" but a movement of unending expropriation and revolution is "nothing" but the hypothetical transition whereby this movement would finally come into its own. Far from ridding the world of expropriation once and for all, the prospect of anticapitalist revolution confronts us with the question of expropriation for the first time. Accordingly, for Bajorek, anticapitalist revolution both changes everything and changes nothing. It opens the ironic prospect of a radical future that will potentially be indistinguishable from the past. The melancholic Baudelaire thus becomes the prophet of this encounter with the same:

> Schematically . . . we may note that Marx's analysis leads to two different kinds of reflection on capital's future in *Capital*. . . . First, capital calls for revolution; it calls revolution forth, as it were, from the future, and a future that is therefore different from, something other than, the accumulation of (more) capital—a future to which nothing "in" capital per se corresponds. The second half of this postulate holds that capital is itself, and always has been, a revolutionary force. This first reflection is in full dialectical swing. It has room for a production that would make its peace with destruction: for the possibility that capital may still change things for the better, even if it appears so far, only to have changed them for the worse for a large number of people. . . .
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> The second reflection on capital's place in history also hopes for a different future, but it has a harder time predicting, let alone promising, capital's demise. It is no less sensitive to the seductions of capital's transformative powers; if anything, it is more so. Hence it wants to know, in a mode at once concessive and anxious: Yes, something will have to change, but how? And then, if and when it changes, how will we know—will we even know—once it does? This second reflection is the true source of Baudelaire's melancholy, which registers the arcane and complex links between capital's powers of transformation and the very mode in which the future would have to come. (10)

Herein lies the true novelty of Bajorek's analysis. Rather than writing off irony as a mere attitude, it places irony (and revolution) within the material infrastructure of capital itself. On the one hand, capitalism is a machine of the systematic exploitation of workers. On the other hand, in order to carry out this exploitation, it must perform an effective and complex analysis of the labor process. As capitalism reduces labor to labor time, transforming the multiplicity of technique to unskilled labor, alienating the worker from his own productive power and separating labor from its relation to a determinate object, it brings to light aspects of labor that had hitherto remained hidden. Ultimately, capitalist production does not separate labor from its object. It reveals the fact that labor, by virtue of its primordial technicity or, as Bajorek might say, its primordial irony, does not and never did have a natural link to any object whatsoever.

Moreover, it exploits the structural possibility that labor can be directed toward goals that exceed human needs or desires. Indeed, according to Bajorek's reading of Marx, political economy is nothing but the attempt to calculate this excess and build it into the political life. The question is, can capitalism control the excess that it brings into play? Can it control the referential aberration of language from which it attempts to profit?

According to Bajorek's analysis, therefore, capitalist production is based upon a systematic calculation of the disruptive force of language within society and politics. Within this framework, however, poetry is not merely an embodiment of this disruptive force. Bajorek's superb readings of Baudelaire begin with the presupposition that each of his poems stages a relation to its own excessive principle of production. Each poem implicitly recapitulates the calculus at the heart of capital. Unlike capital, however, the poem does not shield itself from the necessary failure of this calculus. For Bajorek, poetry becomes the allegory of the inability of capital to control the irony that it systematically places at the basis of the process of production. This allegory makes it possible, in turn, to calculate a future that capital would not control—even as it strips us of the ability to formalize a vision of this future upon which it would be possible to found a political project. This allegory of irony thus becomes the resource of a politics that would not be neutralized in advance by the representation of its own horizon.

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