

# A Political Economy of the Humanities: Turning Tables with Marx and Kant

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The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness.

*Marx Capital I* 163

At a full table, where the number of courses is intended only to keep the guests together for a long time (*coenam ducere*), the conversation usually goes through three stages: 1) *narration*, 2) *arguing*, and 3) *jesting*.

*Kant Anthropology* §88, 181

**H**OW ARE SCHOLARS IN THE HUMANITIES, WHO INVARIABLY ASSUME THE POSITION OF underdogs or outliers in the academic pack, to grapple with Simon During's challenging argument, presented in the previous issue of *Australian Humanities Review* (Issue 58), that 'defences of the humanities that appeal to dignity and social functionality ... may be not just useless but damaging' ('Precariousness' 54)? For, notwithstanding consequential differences in status, rank, job security, and remuneration, which factor into the normalised 'adjunctification' (Adjunct Crisis) of the contemporary academy, we are complexly bound to the humanities in their besiegement by neoliberal reasoning—that is, by

'structural adjustment' of the university (and thus the value of higher education) toward private sector market principles.<sup>1</sup>

As During notes, 'under Western neo-liberalism, the socio-capitalist status of the humanities is being transformed', precisely because public support for the humanities' 'weakly instrumental' and poorly marketable pedagogy is fading (54). Whether they are burning out or fading away as members of 'the bourgeois precariat' (54), humanities labourers have recourse most often to ubiquitous logics of damage control that govern the platitudinous op-ed prose of liberal apologists such as Nicholas Kristof, for whom the beleaguered humanities may yet deliver on lush promises of 'awaken[ing] our souls', 'lead[ing] us into fictional lands', and 'help[ing] us to exercise our minds and engage the world' (Kristof). For During, these very promises are, qua defences, 'not just useless but damaging' (54). Appraising the neoliberal uselessness of the humanities as an index of their unexchangeable value, we pursue During's insightful critique by suggesting, via Marx and Kant, how the humanities might eschew self-justifications of this sort, which trivialise both their political significance and their labour.

### **Wasting the Humanities: On the General Prospects of Uselessness as Value**

The humanities' general predicament as a pawn in the chess game of neoliberal marketisation is perhaps familiar enough for us to bypass investigative description.<sup>2</sup> What seems more pressing is to dismantle certain bromides whose limelight does not extend to the material circumstances of those whose labour enables the teaching, learning, and production of literature, the arts, philosophy, etc. For instance, in his appeal for readers of *The New York Times* not to dismiss the humanities, Kristof entertains only the liberal idealism of cultured reading as a species of ethical mind-expansion, whereby even daily diets of consumers like himself may be ameliorated by philosophical insights. Geared to understandable justifications of self-interest, Kristof's case for the humanities' significance is restricted to their self-reflexive ethical import (ruminations on selfhood, imaginative access to 'the world' as a kind of real engagement, well-chosen enigmas to unravel for one's cognitive calisthenics, etc.); rather than to their ethical-political context, i.e. practical conditions of academic work within and beyond the humanities that precipitate the dapper abstractions bracketed above. Such practical conditions, which are not devoid of theoretical implications, include the fact that 76 percent of instructional appointments in American higher education are precariously non-tenure track (AAUP). These labourers experience

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<sup>1</sup> See comments by Christy Clark, Premier of British Columbia (Hunter), Florida Governor Rick Scott (Wolin), North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory (Marcus), and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker ('Wisconsin Governor').

<sup>2</sup> Several luminaries have undertaken this task. See, for example, Noam Chomsky, 'The Death of American Universities'.

long hours, low pay, no benefits or security, the drudgery of commuting between different campuses, crowded or non-existent office space, and no meaningful bearing on departmental, university, or professional governance (Basen; Anderson; Faucher).

Emblematic of many university administrators' attempts to mediate the humanities in their perennial crisis, Kristof's diminution of philosophy, literature, and their cognates into a rational-choice app that 'animate[s]' our 'smartphones and tablets'—thereby infusing them with enlightened humanistic content whose ghost allows the machines in question to be more than 'just slabs'—unwittingly justifies the 'onlining' of the humanities. By neglecting to address, critically or otherwise, the situation of material labour and culture in his call for readers not to dismiss the humanities, Kristof in effect laxly dismisses them: he ultimately posits the humanities as worthy supplements to money-making technologies, rather than as interactions with students and teachers, conferences, research, and work in contractual or permanent positions. Essentially, the default logic of liberal apologetics only tightens, toward a superlative deadlock, the humanities' bind to neoliberal valuation—whereby, for example, 'online learning is generalised and ends up replacing other education delivery modes' (Mondon and Hoffstaedter) to which philosophy, literary studies, history, and related disciplines are (at least as we have experienced them) infinitely better suited. Reduced to an instructional delivery mode, which harbours the imagery of industrial conveyor belts, the humanities teacher assumes the verve of an algorithm: producing lessons and evaluations of coursework more or less mechanically and thus without the academic freedom to question effectively the governance that consolidates this system as increasingly normative. Students, meanwhile, are left to their own slab-like devices, which may finally quicken them into equating higher education with trappings of high-end consumerism, including its animation of smartphones and tablets to which we may defer as a one-click-away means for world engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Kristof is not intentionally lobbying for the trivialisation of the humanities as merely a leisurely adjunct to cultures of technology; rather, his unchecked liberal idealism as an apologist for the humanities is precisely what aids and abets their further institutional deterioration in the midst of all such well-intentioned op-ed campaigns not to dismiss them. Qua During's critique, the somewhat paradoxical notion to underscore here is that popular rhetorical defences of the humanities as timeless, universal, personalised, worldview-changing liberal goods that enliven one's otherwise slab-like technology inadvertently weaken efforts to rethink the humanities as determinable, or rather as radically indeterminate, beyond the political economy or calculus of neoliberal

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<sup>3</sup> On the commercial repackaging of the humanities and the corporatisation of the globalising university, see Catherine Chaput, *Inside the Teaching Machine*; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Humanities, Democracy, and the Politics of Knowledge in Higher Education'.

reasoning. For, while they most certainly are *subject to* political economy in its current conjuncture, the humanities as an intricate assemblage of disciplines and labourers arguably have yet to intuit a political economy *of* or *for* the humanities: a possessive or genitive political economy, necessarily involving the (im)material labour of immanent critique, from within the humanities' neo-liberally useless resources and on behalf of the humanities' neo-liberally wasteful interest in political textures of economic restructuring.

To be clear, we are emphatically not advocating for the humanities as a locus of *rapprochement* for philosophers, literary critics, historians, etc., and neoliberal administrators for whom citizens are reducible to taxpayers and gender studies is a pursuit reserved for those students willing to accrue massive debt at private colleges.<sup>4</sup> Neo-liberally speaking, the humanities vouchsafe largely useless resources. As such, and because we seem unable to wish away the neoliberal order, we simply cannot lobby for their rebranding as an untapped site for resource extraction to supplement an erstwhile-unappreciative political economy. We are arguing instead for the humanities' uselessness (for example, as training for 'real-world' jobs) and wastefulness (for example, firstly of one's time, because the humanities are more than ever before considered 'a bad investment and a luxury for the elite, compared to an education that trains a student for a specific job' (Marcus); secondly of the university's resources and payroll) to be conceded in *post-liberal* fashion. Then, upon embracing their uselessness and wastefulness, we maintain, these 'defects' should be radicalised *as critical resources for an aesthetic judgement* of political economy on the theoretical humanities' own terms—that is, not via paradigms of neoliberal reasoning. Post-liberal concessions as to the humanities' uselessness and wastefulness are not tantamount to their trivialisation. Rather than intensifying our current fixation on the humanities as devoid of exchange-value, these concessions unravel their abstract use-value for an immanent critique of political economy.

Such unravelling seems all the more apposite given the strong alignment of op-ed pro-humanities liberalism with the stalwarts of humanistic close reading. Literary critic Peter Brooks, for example, suggests that '[t]he ability to read critically the messages that society, politics, and culture bombard us with is, more than ever, needed training in a society in which the manipulation of minds and hearts is increasingly what running the world is all about' (2). For Brooks, 'society, politics, and culture' are somehow in agential terms combatively detached from us. Accordingly, the humanities' commodifiable gift of close reading—for Brooks, the 'intense, disciplined reading crucial to literary studies' (3) should be 'an export commodity to other fields' (2)—at once shields us, the entirely *subjective* proponents of the humanities, from our own complicity in discretely *objective*

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<sup>4</sup> See comments by North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory (Marcus).

forces whose top-down manipulations we are uniquely trained to decipher; and enables us to combat such forces intellectually, given that they are for Brooks oppositional to textures of literary studies and its wider export zone.

A close reading of Brooks' apologetics for close reading reveals that literary scholars, historians, philosophers, etc., are to conceive of themselves as standing outside the folds of state and political economy—and this by virtue of a singular dexterity with the hermeneutics of suspicion. Through such a binary, which posits a clean break between humanistic interpretation and the powers that be (for Brooks, that is to say, we are bombarded unilaterally by objective formations of society, politics, and culture), how can we even begin to critique political economy across its mediations? Is the university so tidily exempt from disagreeable ideologies of our world? If we are to bank on humanistic reading over against the 'bombardment' of messages and other projectiles from socio-political domains, then we humanities labourers become ill-equipped to think through our complicity in policies of structural adjustment that are not unilaterally assailing us from some external realm of society, politics, and culture. Such liberal apologetics are simply not robust enough to finesse a political economy of (not contra) the humanities.

Brooks represents humanistic practices of close reading as an export commodity even as he skirts the material conditions through which such commodification occurs. Practices of humanistic reading here are gauged as pure products of a disembodied mind, incautiously abstracted from the very political economy of neoliberalism to which Brooks would entirely object. So disembodied a mind, with so total an opposition to external oppressions, cannot but discount minds and bodies: embodied minds of the humanities—i.e., intellectual labourers—who are inevitably bound to logics of capitalist accumulation via the food, heat, and shelter of their university employment. *These* humanities remain invisible to Brooks even as he entertains their commodification.

Significantly, Kristof's untested faith in the humanities cannot but find its institutional corollary in ethical prerogatives Brooks reserves for close reading as such: its disciplinary, even commodifiable, penchant for representing the other as transparently present and accounted for. Thus, while Brooks denies 'that reading good books necessarily makes one a good person', he nevertheless asserts that reading itself can be 'an ethical act' (3); literary reading for him is thus consonant with 'a certain ethics' of 'self-dispossession in favor of the text, another voice in the room' (11)—the conjuration and management of a certain otherness.

At close range, this 'certain ethics' of textual deference is also an ethics of certainty, an ethics whose scrupulous capture of the other obscures the humanities' material concern *for* the other. In Brooks' account, humanistic readers efface their own

voice to sublimate any difference; to ventriloquise any other, so much so that Brooks conflates ventriloquism with dialogue; and finally, to erode otherness by lionising close reading via its 'full articulation':

It is my own view that the teacher of literature (and this can be true as well for the teacher of philosophy or art history or music, for instance) has the strange experience of not speaking quite with or in his or her own voice. In the classroom, we let other voices, from the past for instance, speak through us. As interpreters, we are *mouthpieces of others*—we are ventriloquists of the ideas and words of others. This experience of otherness ... seems to me characteristic of reading and interpretation in the humanities. ... At its best, such an attitude allows the voice of the other to develop *its full force, its full articulation, without censoring it* ... When class begins, the text or the artifact may appear absent or mute; it is our job to try to give it voice: *not our voice* but one we create from our understanding of it so that students can enter into dialogue with it. We, as teachers, are speaking in dialogue with another voice, which we try to make present in the classroom with full justice to its claims in order that we may make the dialogue just. (11; emphasis added)

Unwittingly, Brooks presages the end of representation-as-difference, or the discursive conquest of the untranslatable (Derrida, 'Faith'; Abeysekara; Apter; Soni), for he renders fateful questions such as 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' all but superfluous. As Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan reminds us, 'Foucault and Deleuze announced magisterially that representation no longer exists, only to be critiqued magnificently by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argued that in their avant-garde epistemological haste, Foucault and Deleuze had conflated the two valences of representation, philosophical and political, with disastrous implications. The upshot of it all was that *representation is all we have*, even though representation is flawed through and through' (790-1; emphasis added). If in Brooks' case representation is all we have, this is so only inasmuch as it serves us—rather than the others we ventriloquise or for whom we speak without compromise or difference—in institutionalised praxes of close reading whose slogan might unfurl as 'full force ... full articulation, without censoring'.

Trailing Radhakrishnan (trailing Spivak), our understanding of representation as intricately and thus productively flawed, rather than as a metonymy that blithely collapses into seamless and thus unproductive translations, reframes the foregoing liberal apologetics as drastic *overvaluations* of the humanities' commodity-form. For Brooks and Kristof, the humanities afford a gadget-ready panacea for machinations of society, politics, and culture. Both purify the humanities' value as a solution for and/or supplement to neoliberal political

economy. In turn, the latter's hegemony is precisely as disarticulated as the very material labour that sustains the university in ruins. The endgame here finds the humanities clinging to an op-ed valuation of their own usefulness in an era of structural adjustment that trivialises all such claims. The blinkered persistence of these claims merely betrays the caustic 'post-political' ideology in our midst (Wilson and Swyngedouw).

Yet how to understand post-liberal uselessness and anti-neoliberal wastefulness as the humanities' peculiar modality of value? How to rethink uselessness and wastefulness as immanently and only then as transcendently valuable 'outside in the teaching machine' (Spivak, *Outside* 22)? How to finesse them as a twofold lever of valuation whose eruptive effect is the abstract social condition of possibility for reading? And how to engage them as value (not as leisure, boredom, torpor, or chilly aloofness) itself? There is an unmistakable Nietzschean timbre in our rhetorically making so much of value for value's sake: 'Let us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called in question*—and for that there is needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed ... a knowledge of a kind that has never yet existed or even been desired' (Nietzsche 20). Incidentally, Judith Butler has renewed this very demand in the same volume that features Brooks' aggrandisement of commodified close reading. 'What is now the value of our values?' asks Butler ('Ordinary' 37):

Socially and politically, we are in a bind because the imperative to 'save' the humanities often propels us into states of urgency in which we imagine that the only future left to us will be one secured precisely through those metrics of value that are most in need of critical re-evaluation. Oddly, our very capacity for critically re-evaluating is what cannot be measured by the metrics by which the humanities are increasingly judged. This means that the resource we need to save the humanities is precisely one that has been abandoned by the metrics that promise to save the humanities if only we comply. So perhaps we must retrieve from the threat of oblivion those ways of valuing that put into perspective the closing of the horizons enacted by the metrics we are asked to use. (32-3)

Latching on to Butler's deployments of 'valuing' and 'use', we would 'retrieve from the threat of oblivion' the 'ways of valuing' locatable in signal texts by Marx and Kant, to whom we turn in response to During's call for us not to defend the humanities (During 'Stop'), but rather 'to attune them to an emergent global social order' (During, 'Precariousness' 54). 'And that attuning requires', During argues, 'analysis of the cultural [and thus philosophical] past from the perspective of the current social regime, that is to say, from a position in which precariousness and

debt are primary' (54). On these grounds, and by means of both philosophers' discursive engagements with the materiality of tables, we aim to crosshatch Marx on the abstract social condition of use-value and Kant on the aesthetic dimension of the *sensus communis*.

### **Marx's Table Talk or, Abstract with Caution when Intuiting the Social as Value**

What was once known as political economy has corroded into a deft chiasmus, hinging doubly on a figurative to be: economy is politics, politics is economy. Whereas classical political economy conserves an imbrication between the sociopolitical and the socioeconomic, enabling at best a mutual (if uneven) critique of both spheres, contemporary neoclassical economics denominate the political as a dependant manifestation of the economic. The economic is vested with a sub-zero determinism: cultural and sociopolitical spheres are reducible, via logics of quantification, to economic calculation. For Marx, this reductionism adheres to a prescriptive calculus of exchange-value or exchange-relations.

Circuits of exchange, themselves simultaneously abstract (money) and material (currency), articulate *the social* as the predication of exchange-relations whose agential output is the individual. Exchange-value individualises rather than socialises. It overwrites the social as the individual and tokenises both as an exchange-relation. Transmutably preceding and 'passing' through exchange-value, use-value alone for Marx harbours Value—transcendentally capitalised here because radically immanent—as an abstraction whose locus in material objects figures as a portal through which to reconceive the social as irreducible to exchange-relations. Marx doubly binds the social to exchange and to use as value's articulable forms. This double bind embodies an opening for the individual, erstwhile fixated on *quantitative* exchange-relations, to abstract from *qualitative* use-value toward the social as Value itself (128-9). Value abstracted from use-value, with or without the mediation of exchange, de-individualises agency by occasioning an imagination of the social, rather than the market, as Value's denominator. For fundamentalisms of exchange, this denominator of Value is useless because the social per se is irreducible to marketisation.

Through their lingering facility with intellectual labour on behalf of sociopolitical experience, the humanities may be singularly predisposed to finesse use-value into the social as Value. If this is so, then the humanities are precisely as useless as the Value they faintly intuit when, for example, teacher-scholars make use of *Midnight's Children* or the *Conversion of Saint Paul*, both of which exceed, in the midst of being subject to, crude determinations of exchange. These unreservedly social humanities, as we might call them, are consequently also apt to gauge Value,



perhaps with a dose of nostalgia for high theory, as ~~Value~~.<sup>5</sup> The social as denominative Value is bound up with a 'force that will make appear the massive confrontation between capital and its complicit other ... Socialized Labor' (Spivak, *Outside* 108). The systemic gravity of exchange-relations will not vanish simply because the social as Value has been abstracted from use-value. Upon its revelation to labourers, the social as Value is not thereby exempt from exchange-relations that capitalise on its ostensible reduction to the market.<sup>6</sup> Our double bind with the social as Value is thus precisely in the throes of its wasteful uselessness.

With Value under erasure, then, our emphasis falls on the word *caution* in this section's heading. If (neo)liberal reasoning tends to jettison the materiality of labour, then many vulgar Marxists tend to overdetermine labour as nothing but materiality with a pulse, devoid of abstractions of culture that mediate the very experience of work. The tension on which to ruminate here is between two 'determinations of the question of value': 'the modern "idealist" predication of the subject is consciousness. Labor-power is a "materialist" predication' (Spivak, 'Scattered' 73). Unavoidable on Marx's own terms,<sup>7</sup> value's overdetermination as either idealist or materialist is an embattling gesture that has bequeathed many generations of 'strictly' cultural and 'strictly' economic accounts of Marx's critique of political economy.

Precisely because, on the register of 'individual men and women' rather than society (Thatcher), we find bodies that do and do not matter (Butler, *Bodies* 32), these predications are doubly bound. Hermeneutically speaking, that is, we cannot afford to think a materialist predication would exorcise every trace of idealism, or vice versa. One invariably haunts the other:

By opposing the mystical character of the commodity to that which constitutes its real, actual body, 'in flesh and bone', to know its use-value, and by undertaking to explain the alchemical transmutation that converts one into the other, Marx resumes the ambiguous journey situated between ontology and hauntology, by discovering the horror, but also the derision, of a reality full of specters, and which is perhaps only the specter of itself and its own 'reality'. This economy, which is religious even before being political, belongs closely to being and its

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<sup>5</sup> On writing 'sous rature', or under erasure, see Spivak, Translator's Preface to *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>6</sup> To its detriment, organised labour tends to equate, without remainder, labour with value on the premise that, for Marx himself, 'Value represents Labor' (Spivak, 'Scattered' 77). See also Vincent, *Abstract Labour* (88-9).

<sup>7</sup> Marx and Engels polemically avow a materialist predication over against its idealist counterpart (*German*). However, as we will suggest via Derrida's overemphasis on an idealist counterweight to a prioritised materialism, Marx's own post-Hegelian dialectics necessitate a double bind.

images, like the sensible and insensible, which is also a suprasensible, or the suprasensible of the sensible. (Macherey 22)

Here, Pierre Macherey eloquently reads Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and *Capital I* into one another. The upshot of Macherey's labour is our discernment that, 'at the very moment Marx recognizes the spectral character of reality, he denies it' (23); and that Derrida radically tips the scale by drawing Marx 'alongside his ghosts' and 'succeeds perfectly on the condition of filtering his inheritance to the point of retaining from *Capital* only Part I, Chapter 1: Marx without social classes, without the exploitation of labor, without surplus-value, risks, in fact, no longer being anything but his own ghost' (24).

Macherey's reading of *Specters of Marx* underscores the quandary of use-value at the heart of 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret' (Marx chapter 1). As Marx intimates in his case study of the wood table, the abstraction of Value from use-value proceeds through the materiality of useful objects, which are to be measured without mystification (163-4). Such measurement is isomorphic: use-value and Value abstracted as the social repel mysticism and otherworldliness. They achieve a formalist rigor. Yet, as Derrida persuasively argues, Marx's materialist predication of use-value banks on a logic of uncontaminated self-identity:

[The wooden table's] use-value, Marx seems to imply, was intact. It was what it was, use-value, identical to itself. The phantasmagoria, like capital, would begin with exchange-value and the commodity form. It is only then that the ghost 'comes on stage.' Before this, according to Marx, it was not there. Not even in order to haunt use-value. But whence comes the certainty concerning the previous phase, that of supposed use-value, precisely, a use-value purified of everything that makes for exchange-value and the commodity form? What secures this distinction for us? It is not a matter here of negating a use-value or the necessity of referring to it. But of doubting its strict purity. If this purity is not guaranteed, then one would have to say that the phantasmagoria began before the said exchange-value, at the threshold of the value of value in general, or that the commodity-form began before the commodity-form, itself before itself. (Derrida, *Specters* 159-60)

Derrida's contamination of Marx's overly-wooden scene of use-value effectively sullies 'the value of value in general'—i.e., the social, whose fold was always-already mysteriously spectral or differential, albeit not thereby commodified in circuits of exchange. The social is irreducible to itself. As an extraordinary reader of Hegel, Marx perhaps should have known better than to whittle away immaterial differences of culture and signification in granting anteriority to the egg over the

chicken. Origin stories aside, the predicament with which Derrida's intervention leaves us is how to rethink Marx's useless abstraction of social Value from use-value when, all along, the 'progress of the investigation' (Marx 128) would never have amounted to a perfunctory exorcism.

Are those training for lucrative, 'real-world', 'useful' careers in, say, financial speculation, corporate management, or digital marketing expected to grapple with the spectral implications of such abstraction, whereby the social materialises through the concreteness of use-value? One hopes in vain that hedge-fund managers—workers in their own right—are puzzling out the social as Value through the solid mediation of unequivocally wooden tables. For the university as it stands, and perhaps as it has always stood, it is the humanities' lot to *use* the wood table for its stolid unambiguousness (Marx) and to *read* the table for its enigmatic bearing on Value (Derrida). These explanatory paths are not forked: we must use and read the table simultaneously. Yet to abstract with caution, we must trace the spectral fissure that was intuited, only to be disavowed, by Marx's materialism. Our task is thus to chart idealism's contamination of the social's materialist emergence as Value.

Apropos of Marx's phenomenological object-lesson, then, how are we to characterise the social's materialisation through the table's putatively undifferentiated use-value? As a corollary of its emergence as Value through the density of *der Tisch*—or, less playfully, through the latter's pure serviceability to the density of 'human [socio-physiological] needs' (Marx 163)—is the social precisely as 'wooden' (i.e., stiff, inexpressive, inflexible) as the table? For Derrida, of course, an affirmative answer would accommodate a host of ambivalent spectres. Following through with Marx's materialist intuition, we would conduct a séance with the ghostly matter at hand to discern *the woodenness of the social*—or, rather, the *ur-social*:

No *Gesellschaft* has come along to help the State, industry, and capital dissolve a prior *Gemeinschaft*. It would undoubtedly be more accurate to say ... that *Gesellschaft*—'society', the dissociating association of forces, needs, and signs—has taken the place of something for which we have no name or concept, something that issued at once from a much more extensive communication than that of a mere social bond (a communication with the gods, the cosmos, animals, the dead, the unknown) *and* from [a] much more piercing and dispersed segmentation of this same bond, often involving much harsher effects (solitude, rejection, admonition, helplessness) than what we expect from a communitarian minimum in the social bond. *Society* was not built on the ruins of a *community*. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something—tribes or empires—perhaps just as

unrelated to what we call 'community' as to what we call 'society'. So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us*—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society. (Nancy 11)

For Jean-Luc Nancy, this simultaneously 'much more extensive communication' and 'much more piercing and dispersed segmentation' of 'a mere social bond', whose cavernous unnameability we have registered by means of a catachresis, i.e. 'Value' (Spivak, *Critique* 105), 'now descends heavily like the net of an economic, technical, political, and cultural snare. Entangled in its meshes, we have wrung for ourselves the phantasms of the lost community' (Nancy 11-2). Between Marx's table talk and Derrida's Ouija board, Nancy's conception of '*what happens to us ... in the wake of society*' reframes the former's originary scene—'an originary difference' (Spivak, *Outside* 106)—of use-value as the epicentre of the unnameable 'social [as] bond'.

With Nancy's intervention, perhaps we satisfy both Marx's vital yearning for materialist predications of the social and Derrida's hankering after precisely what escapes, in order to haunt, all such predications (here, the name of the unnameable<sup>8</sup>). Necessarily ephemeral, this satisfaction risks mastering itself as a species of readymade humanism—a fountainhead humanism, a humanism already on the originary scene of abstracted Value, an emancipatory humanism *as* Value ideologically deriving itself from use<sup>9</sup>—that will not linger over the table's woodenness, its gratification of 'human needs' (Marx 163), as a condition of the social's very possibility. Such humanisms, often flourishing in institutions of self-interested philanthropy and do-gooding, are bound to substitute themselves for the force of Value's *social woodenness*. For, to be clear, we are arguing that for Marx the abstraction of the social as Value is infinitely more wooden than it is human(ist). Rather than human(ist), that is, Marx's tabled scene of Value is inhumanly human, socially asocial, disinterestedly interested, or materially abstract. Why? Because, in our counterintuitive recourse to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, the social Marx abstracts from use-value is sublime rather than beautiful (Kant, *Judgement* §29, 97-8), and is thus a yoking together of *Capital's* materialism and *Specters of Marx's* (im)materialism. To explore this conundrum, however, we will find ourselves interminably between Marx's table-as-such and Kant's *Tischgesellschaft* (Wellmon 131).

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<sup>8</sup> See Derrida, *On the Name*.

<sup>9</sup> On how Marx's 'carefully constructed definition' of the social slips out of its contexts and into the charitable snares of secular-liberal humanism, see Spivak, *Outside* (108-11).

### Kant's Table Talk or, Abstract with Caution when Valuing the Social as Sublime

In Kantian terms, the seeming capacity of the beautiful in nature and in art to crosshatch individuality and universality—that is, to (de)individualise subjects aesthetically toward universal conditions of possibility for judgements of taste<sup>10</sup>—continues to appeal greatly to radical theorists, particularly those engrossed by the aesthetic force of abstract labour-power:

Desire and liberty act on the totality of accumulated abstract labour, forcing it to be in excess and to develop new significations and surpluses of being. Liberated labour is language, collective essence of the excedence [sic] of being. Thus beauty is new being, an excedence constructed through collective labour, produced through the creative capacity [*potenza*] of labour. This production which determines the event of beauty, this production of beauty, is labour which has been liberated from command. Labour is all the more capable of producing an excedence of being when it is at its most abstract. These could be the first elements for a definition of beauty. ... Within this framework, art and aesthetic redemption became real through the discovery of liberated collective labour. Our experience could only liberate itself anew through the multitude—it was only the multitude that consoled us and constructed the mass base necessary for the production of an excedence of being. Whereas solitude brings us fear, and fear takes away our liberty; and solitude imposes upon us despotism, and fear removes the possibility of producing excedence of being. Art can only live within a process of liberation. (Negri, *Art* 49-51)

Grafted onto Marx's originary scene of the social-as-Value, with the wood table as product of labour crafted artistically from nature's raw materials, Antonio Negri's Kantian distinction between positive beauty and negative sublimity (Kant, *Judgement* §29, 99) intimates that the social-as-Value is beautiful, if not Beauty itself. Indeed, such an association appears to be consistent with Kant's own determination of the beautiful: 'The empirical interest in the beautiful exists only in *society*' (§41, 126). Marx's table-scene is certainly empirical: use-value is precisely as wooden as our human needs are socio-physiological. Yet, apropos of Value, Marx's concern here is not for *society* per se, but rather for *the social* as the former's abstract-material condition of possibility.

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<sup>10</sup> See Kant, *Judgement* (§9, 50). On universality without universalism in Kant's Third Critique, where certain collective subjects, e.g., women and the colonised, are 'naturally' disempowered from judgement, see Spivak, *Critique* (13-30).

We are here in the aporia of Nancy's simultaneously 'much more extensive communication' and 'much more piercing and dispersed segmentation' of 'a mere social bond' (Nancy 11). We are in the fold of society's undecidable groundwork. The beautiful (as) society, overwriting the social, risks its own reification as a determinate judgement (Kant, *Judgement* 15), unimaginatively predisposed to subsume beauty beneath the understanding's concept of society, which might transform the inhuman, disinterested, wooden emergence of the social into the tedium of social media: one-click-away activism, consumer surveillance for corporatised democracy, reduction of affect to emoticons, vast military budgets for 'shoot 'em up' gaming, an unwitting trashing of the humanities.

Tacitly, the sublime in the excerpt from Negri manifests in Kantian terms of 'solitude' (§29, 105), 'fear' (§29, 99), and thus an apparent preclusion of liberty. Negri thus seems to honour Kant's restriction of the sublime to ideas about nonhuman nature, rather than to ideas about the (in)human (§25, 80). Curiously, although elsewhere in *Art and Multitude* Negri rightly marks sublimity's Kantian effect of 'snatch[ing] us from impotence' so that we can 'leap from the theoretical to the practical ... in order that imagination may be able to construct' (Negri 25), in his reflections on beauty Negri concentrates only on the sublime's unconstructive negative *phase*: its primary facility with physio-sociopolitical paralysis (Kant, *Judgement* §29, 99). Consequently, he explains away the social as such by means of overly quantitative metonymies: 'the multitude' and 'the mass base' (Negri, *Art* 51),<sup>11</sup> both of which are arguably serviceable in a most mysterious way to *society's* top-down 'dissociating association of forces, needs, and signs' (Nancy 11).

While admittedly not Negri's focus per se, Marx's intuition of the social-as-Value is in our estimation an *ur*-scene of provocative sublimity, not beauty:

*Sublime* is the name given to what is *absolutely great*. But to be great and to be a magnitude are entirely different concepts (*magnitudo* and *quantitas*). In the same way to *assert without qualification (simpliciter)* that something is great, is quite a different thing from saying that it is *absolutely great (absolute, non comparative magnum)*. The latter is *what is beyond all comparison great*.—What, then, is the meaning of the assertion that anything is great, or small, or of medium size? What is indicated is not a pure concept of understanding, still less an intuition

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<sup>11</sup> Notably, in Negri's *Empire and Beyond* the multitude is so quantitatively 'monstrous' or amorphous that it resembles a series of 'unqualifiable figurations' (47). We proceed by underscoring a crucial aesthetic difference between quantitative monstrosity and the unqualifiable.

of the senses; and just as little is it a concept of reason, for it does not import any principle of cognition. (Kant, *Judgement* §25, 78-9)

Overlaying Kant with Marx, a gesture that draws on philosophical traditions both within and beyond the West,<sup>12</sup> we suggest that Marx's phenomenological materialism abstracts from the table's qualitative wooden usefulness as well as its quantitative singularity. By doing so, Marx derives a *transcendental pure intuition*<sup>13</sup> of the social-as-Value, whose absolute greatness consists in a *qualitative* abstraction (the social, not society) whose affective labour sets to work the imagination's utopian will to find a correlative in the *quantitative* multitude (cf. Lyotard, *Lessons* 80-1). A defeated but not necessarily defeatist way to capture the foregoing is to summon one lugubrious spectre, whose cultural memory canvasses a multitude of particulars: *socialism*. Yet another way to put this is to claim that by Kantianising Marx, we (counter)intuit 'the social sublime' (Clewis 223).<sup>14</sup>

With this ism's sublimity, its incalculable calculations ('How many of us are there?—How can you count?' [Derrida, *Politics* 1]), and our prerogative to abstract with caution so as not to equate without remainder the social with any given or imaginable society, Marx's table talk plunges us into the isomorphism of wooden use-value and bare socio-physiological need. In turn, this leads us to posit that Marx's table talk also plunges us into the rawness of Kant's *sensus communis*—a feeling to which neo-Kantians have conceptually flocked:

But if cognitions are to admit of communication, then our state of mind ... must also admit of being universally communicated, since, without this, which is the subjective condition of the act of knowing, knowledge, as an effect, would not arise. ... However, there must be one [disposition of the cognitive powers in relative proportion] in which this internal ratio [of imagination and understanding as cognitive

<sup>12</sup> See Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism*; Mieszkowski, *Labors of Imagination*; Geiman, 'Lyotard's "Kantian Socialism"'; Dodson, 'Kant's Socialism'; Ypi, 'On Revolution in Kant and Marx.'

<sup>13</sup> 'I call all representations pure (in the transcendental sense) in which nothing is to be encountered that belongs to sensation. Accordingly the pure form of sensible intuitions in general is to be encountered in the mind a priori . . . These belong to the pure intuition, even without an actual object of the senses or sensation, as a mere form of sensibility in the mind' (Kant, *Pure* B35/A21, 156). The social-as-Value is thus, by our heterodox reckoning, an implacable constituent of Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic. In other words, we would, perhaps fancifully, render the social *a priori* for Kant, which admittedly may not be equivalent to rendering Kant *a priori* a socialist.

<sup>14</sup> Our argument is counterintuitive to the grain of Kant's reasoning, 'because the sublime is confined [by Kant], although improperly, to a judgment about *Nature*' (Spivak, *Critique* 20). The social on Marx's abstract and material register could not be intuited as such in Kant's system because 'intuition can never be other than sensible, i.e. that it contains only the way in which we are affected by objects [of perception]' (Kant, *Pure* B76/A52, 193). As Value, the social is rather a transcendental pure intuition.

powers] suitable for enlivening (one faculty by the other) is best adapted for both mental powers in respect of cognition (of given objects) generally; *and this disposition can only be determined through feeling (and not by concepts)*. Since, now, this disposition itself must admit of being universally communicated, and hence also the feeling of it (in the case of a given representation), while again, the universal communicability of a feeling presupposes *a common sense*: it follows that our assumption of it is well founded. (Kant, *Judgement* §21, 69; emphasis added)

Jean-François Lyotard urges us to ‘make no mistake about it: if thought ... consists in thinking by concepts, then with the *sensus communis* philosophy touches on that thought which is not philosophical, touches on it precisely because it cannot handle it’. ‘Is it by chance’, he asks, ‘that the adverb *sensim*, which should mean “so that it can be felt,” mostly means “imperceptibly”’ (Lyotard, ‘Subject’ 161)? Lyotard’s answer, with which continental thinkers are still grappling as a major contribution to Kant studies,<sup>15</sup> finesses a ‘*sensus* imperceptible to the *intellectus*. A community imperceptible to the community of argumentable [sic] syntheses’; for, it is ‘a question of a community which is unintelligent still ... Unintelligent, therefore, that is to say, proceeding without intellect’ (Lyotard, ‘Subject’ 161). To reintroduce the aporia of Nancy’s inoperative community, we might paraphrase Lyotard by saying: proceeding sublimely, socially through the husk of the beautiful (as) society.

With its pre-conceptual feeling surreptitiously conducting the radar of reason, understanding, and imagination, Kant’s *sensus communis* predicates what we have called the social-as-Value in Marx: cautiously abstracted from use, disarticulated by austere relations of exchange, and thus, for the strictures of neoliberal political economy, uselessly essential. Mutatis mutandis, it is precisely on the raw scene of the *sensus communis*, to which the beauty industry (to recall our prioritisation of the sublime over the beautiful) cannot appeal for advertising purposes, that Marx’s wooden table becomes a necessary predicate for the cosmopolitan ethics of the dinner scene in Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. More specifically, we discern a double bind between the sublimity of Marx’s social-as-Value and the beauty of Kant’s cosmopolitan interlocutions, even while the table in the next excerpt is not subject to phenomenological meditation in its *gemütlich* setting. Indeed, Kant’s table can only afford to be an integral ornament, quasi-adjective, or *parergon* (Derrida, *Truth* 17-147; Soni 154-8) because its use-value, en route to its social Value, is intuitively vehicular:

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<sup>15</sup> Lyotard’s signal contribution has been to ‘prevent the conclusion that the universality invoked in Kantian *sensus communis* might ever be realized in an empirical political community’ (Hicks 115).



When I manage a dinner party composed of nothing but men of taste (aesthetically united), insofar as they intend not merely to have a meal in common but to enjoy one another's company ... this little dinner party must have the purpose not only of physical satisfaction—which each guest can have by himself alone—but also social enjoyment, for which physical enjoyment must seem to be only the vehicle. ... It goes without saying that in all dinner parties, even one at an inn, whatever is said publicly by an indiscreet table companion to the detriment of someone absent may not be used *outside* this party and may not be gossiped about. (Kant, *Anthropology* §88, 179)

As Chad Wellmon notes, 'Kant's world citizen ... is not the traveling cosmopolitan but the frequenter of the *Tischgesellschaft* (a good meal in good company), and it is in the figure of the dinner table that Kant's pragmatic anthropology—now that it has bracketed more intractable concerns—takes shape' (131). Although Wellmon rightly qualifies Kant's table as a figure upon which he shapes his pragmatic anthropology, we would question the contextual relation between Wellmon's terms—specifically, the relation between figure and shape.<sup>16</sup> Is Kant's table as qualitatively figurative (*bildlich*) as it is quantitatively spatial (*eine Figur*)? Does Kant's pragmatic anthropology take shape (*Gestalt annehmen*) more normatively (i.e., architectonically) than descriptively (i.e., ethnographically)? Such questions amount to more than quibbles over semantics. For, although the table remains as wooden as ever, there is a certain beautiful-sublime difference (cf. Lyotard, *Lessons* 56-60) between the *Gesellschaft* (society, company) of *one's Tisch* and the social of *no one's Sozialismus* (socialism).

### **Tabling the Humanities: On Uselessness as Index of Unexchangeable Value**

If the humanities are alarmingly useless, as many politicians and university administrators contend, this is because their knowledge is irreducible to exchange-value as fetishised under neoliberal political economy. Rather than joining the chorus of liberal apologists, for whom the humanities represent either an untapped commodity-form or a case study in pure resistance to oppressions, we have conceded the humanities' uselessness as an index of their unexchangeable Value. Radicalising humanities' theory by means of its uselessness to neoliberal policies, we extrapolated from Derrida's critique by intuiting a genitive political economy *of* or *for* the humanities. This effort counteracts the humanities' familiar subjection to or accommodation of neoliberal reasoning, and challenges liberal apologetics that disingenuously pitch the humanities as mediums for capitalist damage control or as panaceas for external

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<sup>16</sup> This relation is complex, both within and beyond the orbit of literary theory: in 'Shelley Disfigured', Paul de Man identifies 'the shape as the model of figuration in general'; in turn, this identification prepares the way 'for the subsequent undoing and erasure of the figure' (61).

oppressions. A critique of political economy on behalf of the humanities, we have argued, eschews ongoing trivialisations of the humanities' labour.

However 'politically fraught' (Spivak, *Critique* 264n15) it may be as a philosophical gesture, crosshatching Marx's value-form and Kant's aesthetic judgement is crucial for this critique.<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding exchange- and use-value in their double bind, Value per se in Marx is an abstraction beyond use-value. This abstraction is the social, which the humanities are singularly predisposed to finesse. Significantly, whereas Marx gauges his table's use-value as purely material, the use-value of Kant's table is the abstract cosmopolitan *Gesellschaft* it enables. Reading Marx's and Kant's tables into one another, we have argued that their production and use-value are always-already material and abstract. If use-value is an abstract materiality, then its precondition and effect are the social, a material abstraction beyond even the woodenness of the table. A transcendental pure intuition, the social as finessed by the humanities is irreducible to exchange- or even to use-value.

Construed as the abstract-material condition of possibility for both society (*Gesellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*), the social-as-Value outpaces fundamentalisms of exchange. Because it can only be intuited through reflective (rather than determinate) judgement, the social-as-Value is beholden to the Kantian sublime, or the social sublime. Not marketisable to society, the social sublime is the raw *sensus communis*: irreducible to exchange-value and therefore radically useless to neoliberal political economy. The humanities' ability to work through the social sublime as radically useless is their—and thus our—unexchangeable Value. Complicit in their own institutional degradation and crisis, the humanities' theoretical achievement of uselessness (i.e., unmarketability) and wastefulness (of time and tuition, as well as university resources) apropos of neoliberal calculation represents for us a final frontier of opposition to reductionisms of exchange-value, structural adjustment, and neoliberal reasoning.

### **Acknowledgements**

An extended version of this article was presented as an ASPECT Working Paper at Virginia Tech. We are especially grateful to Brian Britt, Rachel Scott, François Debrix, Ananda Abeysekara, Rohan Kalyan, Anthony Szczurek, and Katharine Cross. We would also like to thank Scott Rutherford and Sayyida Jaffer. This article

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<sup>17</sup> As Spivak suggests, 'Marx's questioning of the individual as agent of history should be read in the context of the breaking up of the individual subject inaugurated by Kant's critique of Descartes' (*Critique* 264n15).

is part of a collaborative book project, tentatively titled *The Laboring Humanities: Reflections on Theory's Praxis*.

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