

## A Marxian Version of Free Association

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In his discussion of Alexander Kluge's attempt to renew Sergej Eisenstein's project to turn Marx's *Capital* into a film, Fredric Jameson finds in both of their cinematographic programs a "Marxian version of free association." What, according to Jameson, Eisenstein has had in mind (and Kluge brings to the fore) is the attempt to loosely connect surface phenomena of everyday life, through which elements of the latent structure of social production will become visible. As Jameson writes:

It is at this point that we glimpse what Eisenstein really has in mind here: something like a Marxian version of Freudian free association—the chain of hidden links that leads us from the surface of everyday life and experience to the very sources of production itself.<sup>1</sup>

Especially in the context of the concrete analysis of either Eisenstein or Kluge, this is a very sharp remark. It emphasizes the ontological distinction between the latent and the manifest which connects Marx with Freud.

What Jameson conceals from his readers, however, is that Marx already had his own version of free association long before psychoanalytical readings could have been applied to his work. Marx regularly discusses the association of free and equal producers as a form of self-governed societal order, operating independently from repressive state apparatuses and the predominance of commodity fetishism—the latter a regime of representation that represses the self-organization, and even perceptibility, of labour. For Marx, the apparent universality of state and capital conceal the driving forces of basic bourgeois class structure and the cognition of the relations of production. By referring to the organizational forms of "associations," Marx alludes to labour's possibility to present itself in a form that avoids the forms of political alienation identified in the dominant regimes of social representation: state and capital.

In the following, I would briefly like to sketch the ways in which Marx, against the background of the history of labour struggles and its theories, speaks about association. Funnily, the way in which Jameson discusses the Marxian version of free association in Eisenstein and Kluge is present in Marx already. And because of its specific way of articulating and organizing labour, as a very specific form of self-regulation, I will try to argue that Marx's idea of association already contains central elements of the aesthetic.

### **1. Associations in Labour History**

But let's look back into the history of emancipatory social philosophy. It is with Rousseau that the term "association" is introduced to social philosophy; he uses the term to positively describe the linking between free and equal citizens. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau speaks of "free association, which obliged none of its members,"<sup>2</sup> as a form of societal organization. In the *Contrat Social*, it is the contract itself that constitutes the association of a free society.<sup>3</sup> In both cases association appears as self-determined connectivity of the members of a free and equal society.

With this tradition, the term association slowly gains specific connotations. They are linked to the idea of an emancipated society. After Rousseau, Claude Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier specified egalitarian forms of organization as "associations." Saint-Simon reflected on association as the form of organization of the *classe industrielle*, or the *classe productive*, a professional organization for scientists, artists, and workers that should, in the end, reorganize society.<sup>4</sup> Beyond social atomism, and beyond the market and the state, associations were considered as extrinsic systems of social organization that would not adequately represent the productive classes of society.

The idea of an association of producers who would “work together and market their goods in common” was the central idea of Fourier’s utopianism.<sup>5</sup> “Association,” for Fourier, Saint-Simon, and their aftermath, stood for an alternative form of organization. Such associations were meant to connect the separated field of social production directly, independently of the mediation through the market.

The theoretical efforts of early socialists, so-called associations became the central element in the working class’s actual self-organization on the ground. Strikes during the French Revolution of 1830, for example, engendered a movement committed to the ideals of associationism. As Bernard H. Moss writes, associations were “originally designed with expanding funds of collective capital to ensure the continual admission of new members without capital and emancipate the entire trade.”<sup>6</sup> In 1848, Paris alone hosted around 300 of such associations with approximately 50,000 members collectively. The idea of common labour in self-organized associations, an idea that Charles Fourier had originally conceived for agricultural contexts, would become the leading slogan for urban craftsmen and the organization of the industrial working-class in the early and decisive years of struggle.

## **2. Marx’s Use of the Term Association**

Marx refers to these historical connotations in his use of the term “association,” too; famously so in the *Communist Manifesto*: “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms,”<sup>7</sup> Marx and Engels write, “we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>8</sup> In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx writes: “The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will

be no more political power properly so-called. . .”<sup>9</sup> It does so by spreading the idea and political form of association as broadly as possible.

Marx and Engels emphasize in *The Communist Manifesto* that with the bourgeois order a relation between labourers emerges as its immanent product, something that is already present in a latent form. “The advance of industry,” they write, somewhat teleologically, “whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association.”<sup>10</sup> Marx quite regularly uses the term association when he emphasizes the anti-statist aim of the socialist movement. Association articulates a form of politics that cannot be alienated.

As Marx claims in the 1850 “Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League,” associations will have to,

Make the revolution permanent, until all the more or less propertied classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far . . . that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians.<sup>11</sup>

Time and again, “association” describes a form of social organization that functions as means and ends for the egalitarian organization of society. From *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto* to the third volume of *Capital*, just as much as in Engels’s later writings, this use of the term association can be found as a description of socialist politics and the working class’s self-organization, which transgresses the repressive and alienated organizational forms of state and capital.

Wherever Marx speaks about the organization of a future society, the term associations is used to characterize the free and non-coercive forms of social organization, through which goods are collectively produced and freely distributed. What Marx finds in the loose and voluntary

structure of association is a description of the collective potential of workers to communally manage the production and distribution of material wealth on a small and large scale.

Normally concealed by the socially necessary illusion generated by the commodity form, labour itself gains visibility and autonomy in and through associations. When sketching outlines of a future society, Marx confronts the institutionalized spheres of state and capital with such a capacity of material production to self-organize.

### **3. The Aesthetic of Material Self-Regulation**

If Jameson is right, and I think he is, bringing labour to visibility, articulating the latent, is an aesthetic practice. The Marxian version of free association, according to Jameson, is a form of cinematic montage, which allows reflection upon the hidden logics of social production. The question remains, however, why such Marxian associationism would have to move through the history of cinema to come to itself. Isn't the presentation of the latent structures of production precisely what Marx expects from labour associations already? Even without any kind of cinema being involved, associations are key to the Marxian project. They allow for overcoming the isolation of the worker by revolutionary organization. Association is a free form of coordination—it helps organize an intrinsic link that might otherwise be repressed.

In and through associations, the sphere of symbolic representation is confronted with the hidden dynamic of production. In labour struggles, production articulates itself in a way that is normally excluded from an apparent logic of representation.

To my mind, this structure of re-shaping the systems of re-presentation can be called aesthetic. It can be called aesthetic as it articulates and organizes material dynamics that are

normally repressed in social representation. This understanding of the aesthetic is determined by at least three dimensions.

The first dimension is the dimension of mediation between the material and the symbolic: In Marxist terminology, the association of workers avoids the flaws of the bourgeois state by bringing economic production and political organization (indeed a form of symbolic practice and, for better or worse, representation) directly together. It helps with the articulation of labour directly without separating the logics of material production from the sphere of politics, and without separating, as in the terminology of Arendt or Habermas, work or labour from action or interaction.

The second dimension is the dimension of articulating the repressed in free and intrinsic ways: Associations establish an order based on the inherent affinities of the concealed logics of material production. Secretly, latently, the potentialities of the social producers are already connected, despite the way in which they might appear isolated as individual commodity owners or bearers of rights. It is the aesthetic method of free association that lays bare the inner connectivity of the various parts of social production. The particular dynamic and quality of labour associations is, in other words, to organize social elements that in the dominant (or manifest) structure of representation appear as isolated.

The third dimension is the dimension of opening up new horizons of meaningful practice: Labour associations open up new dimensions of social life by rearranging the conditions for social production. The satisfaction of social needs can be directly addressed in and through their collective articulation. By addressing the field of social production directly, associations help with the imagination and production of new forms and conditions of social life. In other words, labour associations are a means of *poietic production* which articulates the forces of a latent structure.

These three dimensions are aesthetic: interpretive, productive of meaning (which, again, has to be understood in its openness without being arbitrary or deductive), and rooted in the grey zones of symbolic representation. With the idea of association, then, the politics of the aesthetic appears as a concrete logic of (dis)organization that also allows us to rethink the historical function of the aesthetic and its relation to the political in more concrete terms, without merely repeating forms of aesthetic or political alienation. This is how the logics of labour association lay bare, to quote Jameson, “the chain of hidden links that leads us from the surface of everyday life and experience to the very sources of production itself.” Eisenstein’s and Kluge’s association had, in structure, already been present in Marx’s oeuvre.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Marx and Montage”, *New Left Review* 5 (2009), 109-17, 113.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Rousseau, *Contrat Social*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 116.

<sup>4</sup> See Henri de Saint Simon, *1760-1825: Selected writings on science, industry and social organization* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc, 1975), 158–161.

<sup>5</sup> See Charles Fourier, *The Utopian Version of Charles Fourier. Selected Texts on Work, Love and Passionate Attraction*, ed. Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 329 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard H. Moss, “Producers’ Associations and the Origins of French Socialism, Ideology from Below,” *The Journal of Modern History* 48 (1) (March 1976), 69-89, 72.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in MECW: vol. 6 1844-1895, 477-519, 506.

<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 496.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in MECW: vol. 6 1844-1895, 105-212, 194. See Abensour’s discussion of “true democracy” in which the “constitution” will rest upon the ongoing self-constitution of the people themselves: Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 497.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, “Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League,” in MECW: vol. 10, 277-87, 281.