

Writing Marxism Out of Art History

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While there have been strides to widen discussions in art history to include issues like gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, the corporate marketing of pricey art-history textbooks to American college students produces materials that glaringly omit and/or deemphasize Marxism as an analytical catalyst. In addition, examples of historical experiments with self-described “real-existing socialism” tend to be so grotesquely abbreviated as to distort context and content and preclude understanding. “Marxism, however critically its inheritance is viewed, cannot be overlooked by those who make efforts to provide a consequent analysis and practice.” If the “history of all hitherto existing society has been the history of class-struggles,” [1] then it follows that the history of art should be enhanced by studying class struggle. And yet:

[t]he dominant mood in the art-historical academy of Britain and the United States today is a kind of liberal pluralism, an attitude that fosters tolerance of a range of different perspectives — in itself not an unworthy goal — but provides little or no incentive to debate between them, or to push their differences to a point of issue. Formalist art history, queer art history, feminist art history, post-colonial art history, and the social history of art coexist, with various overlaps and combinations, and behave as a set of rival specialisms. Marxist art history is at best a small side dish in this great smorgasbord, and is usually encountered only in diluted or adulterated forms. [2]

Everything having to do with “Marx” is a form of Kryptonite that needs to be held static and contained. As, it turns out, art history is itself a battleground in class struggle with art history textbooks functioning as battalions and regiments on that front.

Despite flourishes of interest in Marx, it is as if it’s enough to dismiss Marxism, and be done with it, warping back to 1989. In general, there is a serious dearth of college-level texts with any Marxist readings of history, for reasons that are fairly obvious to Marxists, not surprising in a context where neo-liberalism lays claim to academia at the “end of history,” to invoke Francis Fukuyama. It should be self-evident that disregarding the potential of Marxist analyses (not as a monolith, but as a springboard or series of springboards) robs art history of important insights, for example around class, value, commodification, imperialism, and religion to name but a few. And ultimately, these omissions constrain the potential otherwise gained by the very inclusion of topics around gender, race, and ethnicity, etc.,— obscuring how the roots of oppression intersect, inextricable as they are from basic questions like: “who wields power and who doesn’t” and what were the economics of “slavery,” and/or “colonial expansion?” [3]

One might argue that some select upper-division classes may expose students to Marxist art historians, like John Berger, David Craven, Luiz Renato Martins, Arnold Hauser, etc. But, of the few college students who study art history, fewer do so beyond first and second-year levels, and by the time art-history students reach upper-division classes, the damage is done, namely the illusion that one can construct historical world-views without including the insights of Marxist analyses. At best, Marxist content is appropriated and re-written in art history textbooks, legitimizing its further

obfuscation in pop culture. All things “Marx” are reduced to a microlith, a safe token paperweight holding down the potential it can unleash: yet another **unique perspective** for consumption into the mainstream, moderating the social history of art, shrinking Marxism into “a few tesserae which could bring to perfection the panoramic mosaic of traditional art history.” [4] When writing of general curricula, I am referring to ubiquitous influences like Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages* [5] and Janson’s *History of Art* [6] from which the Cengages, Pearsons, and W.W. Nortons, *et al*, of this world churn out potboilers on “art appreciation” for the masses, following the money that puts the highly profitable text-book industry before the art-historical horse, reinforcing the cultural predispositions that also sustain class stratification. As Marxism is ultimately concerned for the self-liberation of the masses, specifically their self-consciousness activity, Marxist art historians might want to not just interpret what’s going on in college-level art history but agitate and organize to change it.

The omission of Marxist analyses gives a sterilized character to art historical studies divorced from the real material world. Art history being unreminiscent of the real world might actually be a punch line somewhere. But why should it be? I think some of us might think back to a time when they first listened to John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (and yes I am being quite nostalgic) and thought: *wow, art has so much to do with social, cultural, inner, and economic realities, and it feels liberating to think about it this way!* Berger used his unique Marxist analyses to share insights at both introductory and advanced levels of engagement with the arts. He claimed that people who write and teach about art raise it to an almost religious status, mystifying it. In a similar way that religion discourages one from questioning the existence of the divine, one is averted from genuinely questioning the value of art and its market, as a means of control. In the way that Marx spoke of religion there are parallels applicable to the world of art, as in the religious world is a “reflex of the real world,” so art, to varying degrees, is a reflex of the real world and is able to affect the real world.

Against the logic of the system replicating the *status quo*, art educators have the opportunity to open students’ conceptual horizons. [7] We should loudly question the types of textbooks that delimit a catechism about what art means, — *which hides how it supports the market value of art*, — and then if it’s not **obvious** why students should care about art, they are not the *right kind of people* for a liberal-arts education. Art as “taste” creates symbolic boundaries for the professional-managerial classes (like professors) policing the boundaries of membership and belonging - being *in the know*. Instructors, following suit, teach more about sensibility or cultural capital, excluding the working classes, wrapped up in money and taste.

Artists today are caught in the neo-liberal expectations of competitive self-promotion, in an economic system disadvantaging and/or generally excluding the disabled, the economically disadvantaged, lower classes, the aged, feminine, and/or gender non-conforming. When members of these groups are finally included they are marketed as novelties for consumption. The expected commodification of an artist’s work is the expected commodification of the artist’s life. The various mainstream art markets have in common a lust for uniqueness, but not so much “otherness” as to expose the alienation, in a Marxist sense, of artists and persons who do not fit in and/or whose very existence could expose the structural expectations that hold the capitalist artworld together.

So how can Karl Marx be tied to art history when he did not write specifically about it, and there is no formula to place the autonomy of art within historical materialism? [8] But to paraphrase Engels, Marxism is a method of probing and turns into its opposite when it becomes too formulaic. Hence Marxism embodies different schools of thought and modes of explaining culture, post-Marx. Despite the fundamental divisions within Marxism itself nevertheless, there is tremendous potential for looking at art from a “family of theories.” [9] Thus the most vigorous critiques of Marxist traditions are potentially from other Marxists, channeling the micro-politics of a particular interest groups, into intersecting dialogues. [10]

Regarding the format that has emerged for general art history textbooks, replicated over and over, to quote Marx, “[j]ust as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge . . . a period of transformation by its own consciousness.” [11] The interpretations of art historical periods by select art historians in these aggressively-marketed textbooks (and compensatory online resources), that further merchandise art in the big historical picture cannot be judged by their own claims of legitimacy. Therefore, art history has to be judged by critical and self-critical art historiography to identify biases, and this historiography has to engage Marxist analyses.

To continue quoting Marx, “the money commodity itself contains a clue to the obscurity of the social dimension of production.” [12] It is the interests of those who wield power in the moneyed world to control the messages about social dynamics and dimensions as much as possible to avoid deconstructing this world, by deploying professional defenders of the status quo: - whether those professionals are fully conscious of their role or not. “[T]he use value of money commodity” expresses the “exchange value of all other commodities,” including art. [13] Money represents “the social wealth” and her/his/their owner’s “insatiable” need for more. Art becomes a kind of money in storage, as money is a token representation of the power of total social labor, and in this case the “genius” of the individual artist is a marketing term produced by the synthesis of artist, critic, gallerist, the corporate media, and/or art historian. It is true that art can be recognized as “valuable” outside of this group, ie, directly by the public, but for it to have monetary value it must be alchemized. [14]

So, while Marx defined “commodities” as “objects of utility” with capitalist ownership of the product and the means of the labor process, art is clearly different. And the artist cannot necessarily anticipate the monetary value of their work, given the non-utilitarian “purposes” of art, but relies on the mediation of the aforementioned gallerist, art critic, and art historian, etc., to create a value for the art commodity. I use the term art commodity, in a Marxist sense as an oxymoron, interjecting the alchemy-mystification that produces the “market value of art” to commodify it (turning art into gold) beyond utility into re-creating the dynamics of wealth and/or enhancing the *status quo*. Referencing Pierre Bourdieu, the sociology of art institutions’ identities are how cultural predispositions sustain class stratification. Alchemy, here, is synonymous with the kind of “mystification” that John Berger so often referred to as the value of art. Berger very famously identified oil painting, since the Renaissance, as kicking into high gear the commodification of art, with its ability to portray visual likeness and the illusion of tangibility. To own an oil painting was to own what it portrayed — to be worthy of wealth and envy. In spelling this out, it is useful to turn to Ben Davis’ 9.5 *Theses on Art and Class*:

“1.8 The ‘art market’ is approached differently by different classes; discussing the art market in the absence of understanding class interests serves to obscure the actual forces determining art’s situation. . .

2.0 Today, the ruling class, which is capitalist, dominates the sphere of the visual arts. . .

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2.3 The dominant values given to art, therefore will be ones that serve the interests of the current ruling class.

2.4 Concretely, within the sphere of the contemporary visual arts, the agents whose interest determine the dominant values of art are: large corporations, including auction houses and corporate collectors; art investors, private collectors and patrons; trustees and administrators of large cultural institutions and universities.” [15]

There is a self-policing complicity between artists, critics, gallerists, the corporate media, museums, academic institutions, capitalist interests, state power, and art historians, “[s]ince the art market is neither egalitarian nor meritocratic [although it purports to be the latter], but rather resembles an oligopoly (few sellers) serving an oligopsony (few buyers).” [16] Ultimately, bank monopolies decide what sells in the interest of profits, alongside the liberal rebranding of progressive insights, fetishizing fashions rather than dialectically-derived insights. Aesthetics propose special kinds of truths in art, behind which motivations for profit can be obscured.

The following are literally some textbook examples of obscurantism, using *Janson’s History of Art* and *Gardiner’s Art Through the Ages*, as so many art history text formats follow their examples. If you look up Karl Marx himself in the index of *Gardiner’s Art Through the Ages* there are three references, and it is a telling exercise. In a book of over a thousand pages there is a three-paragraph section called “Marxism and Darwinism,” and Marx even gets his own paragraph, being “one of” the dominant figures of the industrializing era. It mentions the Communist Manifesto, with Friedrich Engels thrown in, and even Dialectical Materialism, although it doesn’t explain it (while *Janson’s* does so only very briefly as class struggle). Which is mind-boggling given the arguable catalyst that dialectical thinking must have played in, at very least, the development of Surrealism and Berlin Dada. Marxist analyses are integral to understanding Realism in France, and much more should be written about this in both textbooks. The authors admit that the “political, social, and economic system Marx advocated held great appeal for the working poor as well as many intellectuals,” end paragraph. But the next brief paragraph starts with the words, “[e]qually influential was the English naturalist Charles Darwin.” [17] Darwin is so influential in fact, that in this textbook, however, that he is not even mentioned in the index.

Frankly, mainstream art historians don’t understand Marxism because they don’t really take it seriously enough to pay real attention to it. Hence, they are uninformed, being consciously and/or unconsciously invested in the status quo of the existing socio-economic system of capitalism. Thus, they will have a natural aversion to any approaches that call capitalist arrangements fundamentally into question.

In trying to define art, it is easy to slip into “valorizing” it. One of many reasons why the period spawning Modernism was so dynamic was the increasing breadth of who could make art. And while many Modern artists were either well-off enough and/or scrounged enough to find financial support, socially, there emerged a wider variety of voices, feeding an energy built off of other emerging ideas — in science, in social experimentation, in philosophy, etc. New quantities of ideas made for new qualities. In the case of Vincent van Gogh, the idea of his poverty and mental illness play a central theme in what makes his art more valuable today, part of his tortured state as an individual. Georg Lukács wrote the “fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society succeed in concealing reality.” [18] Instrumentalizing and fetishizing van Gogh’s poverty substitutes itself for a “Marxist analysis” of his poverty and class, and why he as well as his mistress, Sien Hoornik, suffered so. Art history instrumentalizes this view without really analyzing what social dynamics were at play in their world for the mentally ill, addicts, sex workers, single parents, and the poor. Van Gogh himself ministered to the poor, during his “potato eaters” phase, appreciating something of the inescapability of systemic poverty in ways that people wealthy enough to buy his paintings today do not.

Neither *Janson’s History of Art* nor *Gardiner’s Art Through the Ages* have any index entries on either Socialism or Socialist Realism. One can dig, finding references to them and Soviet art, but not much is meaningfully explained about why the early period in Soviet art is very different from latter expressions. Readings on Russian Constructivism should necessarily have to talk about political details, relating to the revolutionary struggles necessary to understand something about the dynamism of the artistic movements around the *avant garde* or political vanguards, — at the points

at which these overlap. In general, it's clear that the authors are influenced to conflate socialism broadly with Stalinism, informed by Cold War clichés. While referring to the "Communist" revolution as more radical than the French or American ones, The text claims that the Bolsheviks were "Russian Social Democrats" who promoted "violent revolution," because of "widespread dissatisfaction" with the Tsar's regime. [19]

Where to start with such a watered-down history?

"Dissatisfaction" with a regime, is like understating how victims of systemic violence are merely "dissatisfied" with their oppression. The horrors that came after the Bolshevik Revolution, were due largely to fourteen invading armies, civil war, famine, former Tsarist generals turned warlords, being unexpectedly alone in "world" revolution, and the survivalist, unrelenting, and, yes at times, brutal management of subsequent circumstances, — but not the actual Bolshevik revolution itself, which was less considerably violent than the American and French Revolutions. And finally, the Bolsheviks may have started out as a faction of the Russian Social Democrats, but they certainly did not end up that way, the label misrepresenting their political program altogether. This underscores how little the authors cared to know about the historical context and the basic facts. Not so incidentally, the text minimizes the violence of the American Industrial Revolution and the American Revolution, with one sentence about Native Americans being violently subdued. Obviously, these texts are not written by Native Americans, and this is a fundamental problem of art history, being written in the West, by people of the economic "North," as defined by Eduardo Galleano, excluding the considerations of the exploited "South" or indigenous peoples. [20]

When John Berger famously wrote about Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors*, he noted that the wealth on display in the image was there to show a world at the disposal of privileged, white, European men, and his insights into this dynamic was groundbreaking. At the bottom of the painting, hiding in plain sight, is a distorted skull in anamorphosis. [21] The skull in European painting was used as a warning against vanity, sin, and impropriety. *Memento mori*, as they are called, are images that employ still-life objects (symbols of wealth) counterposed with symbols of finitude, time, and death (like extinguished candles, fruit and flowers — that could decay, — hour glasses, and skulls). In the 17th century these types of still life images, also called *vanitas*, flourished in the Netherlands due to the economic surge, based on the discovery of resources abroad, made possible by the infamous "Age of Discovery," - the theft of resources that could be siphoned back to Europe. It is ironic that the wealth that stoked the market for purchasing these works of *vanitas* art (expressing a desire for righteousness) came at the expense of millions of indigenous lives abroad, via voracious colonial and Christian domination. A Marxist reading of the of the Dutch *vanitas* phenomenon would best capture the absurdity of this mass exploitation simultaneous to pious devotion, expressed artistically. Thus, consumption of these paintings as commodities satisfied "artificially stimulated phantasies," [22] to use the words of Erich Fromm.

Neither *Janson's* nor *Gardner's* sufficiently problematize World War I's competing imperialisms, and hence have little corresponding depth, regarding anti-war art. In general, they offer a travesty of omissions around the discussions of Germany in the early 20th century. Perhaps leaving out Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's monument to murdered Marxists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht is an apt metaphor for this blind spot. The texts leave out so much that could explicate the politics of the time. For example, the brief discussions in *Gardner's* of the Degenerate Art Show in 1937, curated by the Nazis, bypasses left political content, explaining that only six of the artists were Jewish. So, who were the rest? Even the guilt by association of Marx "being Jewish" isn't touched. They explain how the Nazis defined degeneracy in terms of race, sexuality, and morals but not politically. How can that be left out? This kind of approach can't begin to explain the why the first concentration camp, at Dachau, was for dissidents and political prisoners on the Marxist left. There is no account of the important dynamics of the 1918 socialist revolution and the subsequent evolution of Nazism,

and without an adroit political description of these events of 1918, any history of Weimar and Nazi Germany is rendered incomprehensible, leaving the discussion of art at the time frankly unsupported. Of course, the German Revolution beginning in 1918 is usually omitted in most Western Civilization course textbooks as well, condensing WWII into a useful moralistic tableau, that obscures the intersecting tentacles of capitalism, imperialism, and fascism worldwide.

One can read many mainstream multiple textbook entries on Frida Kahlo without discovering much about her Communist political affiliation. This kind of oversight makes it easy for people, like British Prime Minister Teresa May to wear her appropriated imagery on jewelry - either unawares or not caring, because *Marxists don't count*. In *Janson's*, Diego Rivera is described as a "staunch Marxist," without specifying what this means, while Frida Kahlo, "a more remarkable artist," is apparently not. It seems apparently tidier for the authors to relegate her beliefs to Catholic and ethnic mysticism but how very gender stereotypic and sexist. Why should she have a head for politics, being a woman after all? Thus, her affair with Trotsky, were it mentioned, would be potentially more soap operatic than intellectual, unable to make sense of Kahlo and Trotsky's (and Rivera's) mutual passion for Marxism.

Entries on Surrealism de-emphasize the socialism of founder Andre Breton, who in 1937 jointly wrote a manifesto with Leon Trotsky, signed by Diego Rivera, called *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*. [23] Surrealism was intent on exposing the contradictions beneath the veneer of bourgeois respectability, and these contradictions are potentially dialectical: where things turn into their opposite, contradictions lie at the heart, and reality is rarely as straightforward as it appears to be. [24]

Imperialist and capitalist oppression and exploitation represses the true realization of what it means to be human: "consumption should be a concrete human act in which our senses, bodily needs, our aesthetic tastes are involved." [25] We naturally have the need to indulge our creativity and vicariously appreciate the creativity of others, "but life becomes increasingly less creative, because of the demands and interference of work, social reproduction, and [ironically] the drive to consume." To quote Fromm again, "consumer goods [are] valued for their conspicuity . . . people have gone from consuming value to symbolic value . . . based on what the product is supposed to convey about the consumer." [26] Consumption should be meaningful, not replacing meaning with the mystifications that perpetuate consumption. General art historical textbooks construct and build upon existing mystifications, telling you what you need to know to seem educated and refined, or to pass a course; they construct an identity for the college graduate, — with the prospective value of either fitting into the labor force or "rising to the top" and collecting the labor force's surplus value. This is in part enabled by mainstream art historians who delimit the educational and conceptual apertures of their students by excluding Marxist analyses of class, imperialism, colonialism, and commodification, [27] etc. The bottom line, we have to ask ourselves, is what is the difference between students "consuming" education verses being changed by it: consuming education to belong to the club verses consuming education to experience what it is to be human and enhance the real world? In the end, the efforts to maintain "social status and emulate those at the top of society creates tremendous strain." [28]

UCLA Art historian T.C. Clark, argued that "art history had to be fought on its own terrain, that Marxism should demonstrate its superiority to 'bourgeois art history' by showing that its own procedures generated a more complex and real grasp of artworks than its rival." [29] The demise of many left-leaning educational associations in the USA, like the Marxist Caucus of the College Art Association, as well as art-historical journals such as *Marxist Perspectives* and *Praxis: A Journal of Radical Perspectives on the Arts*, speaks also to the hostility of academic environments towards Marxism, a lack of resources, and, as I would argue, the corporate textbook marketing complex that is antagonistic to broader learning. Social reality is diverse, the attempt to mine it for meaning

should be also, opening the doors, recognizing the potential for Marxist analysis. Why should we care about art history, when the world has but twelve years to do something about the climate change tipping point? Because it is yet another ideological front in ongoing class struggle, which is at the heart of both our survival and the quality thereof.

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P.S.

Red Wedge

<http://www.redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/writing-marxism-out-of-art-history>

Footnotes

[1] Andrew Hemingway, editor, *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, (London: Pluto Press, 2006), ix.

[2] *Ibid.*, 1.

[3] In addition: how did capitalism come into existence to begin with, in terms of “primitive” or primary accumulation, including the dispossession of indigenous peoples, peasantry, and non-capitalist modes of production?

[4] Nicos Hadjinicolaou, in “New Left Art History’s International,” chapter 10, in *Ibid.*, 194.

[5] Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History*, 15th edition, (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016).

[6] Penelope J. E. Davies, Walter B. Denny, Frima Fox Hofrichter, Joseph Jacobs, Ann M. Roberts, and David L. Simon, *Janson’s History of Art: The Western Tradition*, 8th edition, (London: Prentice Hall, 2011).

[7] I like not being sure if art and art history are vehicles for Marxist thought or vice versa.

[8] Hemingway, 176.

[9] *Ibid.*, 2.

[10] *Ibid.*, 2.

[11] *Ibid.*, 1.

[12] Karl Marx, *Capital*, (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 131-133.

[13] A. E. Davis, "The New 'Voodoo Economics:' Fetishism and the Public/Private Divide," in *Review of Radical Political Economics*. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0486613412447057>.

[14] David Winkeweder, editor, *Art History as Social Praxis: The Collected Writings of David Craven*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 2.

[15] Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).
http://art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/8594/9.5-theses-on-art-and-class-2011-10-25.pdf.

[16] Winkeweder, *Art History as Social Praxis*.

[17] *Gardiner's*, 818.

[18] Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 13.

[19] *Ibid.*, 905.

[20] For an excellent discussion of this see, Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of Continent and Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*.

[21] Anamorphosis is a distortion of point of view/perspective.

[22] Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), 129-130, in David Matthews, "Capitalism and Mental Health," *Monthly Review*, (19 January 2019).

[23] Alan Woods, "For Revolutionary Art! On the Anniversary of the Death of Andre Breton," <https://www.marxist.com/death-andre-breton-revolutionary290905.htm> accessed in April 2019.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*, 129-130.

[26] *Ibid.*, 129-130.

[27] For a broader discussion of the commodification and exceptionalism of art, see Dave Beech, *Art and Value*.

[28] T. C. Clark, in "On the Absence of a Marxist Economics of Art," review of chapter 7 of *Hemingway*, by Nizan Shaked.

[29] *Hemingway*, 180.