

# *“That single, unconscionable freedom”: Reflections on Marx’s “Speech on the Question of Free Trade”*

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With characteristic irony Marx opens his “Speech on the Question of Free Trade,” (hereafter, Speech) from the exultant perspective of bourgeois political economy: “The Repeal of the Corn Laws in England is the greatest triumph of Free Trade in the nineteenth century [...]. To burden corn with protective duties is infamous, it is to speculate on the hunger of the people” (452).

On the one hand, these lines initiate a withering critique, developed throughout the speech, in which Marx pillories the hypocrisy, illogic, and self-interestedness of political economy’s newly discovered devotion to *free trade*. He openly mocks this devotion throughout the address, ridiculing the gall of Free Traders who allege to pursue economic gains not for themselves, but “in the interests of the working class” (452). To artificially inflate food prices by maintaining subsidies and protections on grain, the Free Traders disingenuously profess, would be to “speculate on the hunger of the people” (452). Marx promptly deflates such sanctimony, pointing out that the supposed objects of the Free Trader’s benevolence, the hungry workers themselves, remain entirely unpersuaded by the bourgeoisie’s professed altruism. Inured to the double-talk of bourgeois ideologues, the British laborers in Marx’s account, unambiguously regard the Free Traders as “their worst enemies and the most shameless hypocrites” (452). This mode of revealing the class antagonisms in the debate about free trade through dialogic exchange serves as the Speech’s

primary formal method of exposition. Indeed, Marx trots out, one after the next, a range of arguments from political economists extolling the wonders of free trade, only to have them summarily rejected by clear-minded representatives of the working class.

On the other hand, Marx, ever the dialectician, cannot allow an exposé of free trade to function solely as negative critique. The expected negation of the negation occurs in the Speech's final paragraph:

But generally speaking, the Protective system in these days is conservative, while the Free Trade system works destructively. It breaks up old nationalities and carries antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie to the uttermost point. In a word, the Free Trade system hastens the Social Revolution. In this revolutionary sense alone, I am in favor of Free Trade. (465)

Excerpted from the speech as I have done here, this passage appears to offer a very Marxian conclusion. Indeed David McLellan, in his biography of Marx, considers this concluding paragraph to be the Speech's "thesis" (163). This is correct to a point. The Speech surely demonstrates that the ideology of free trade clarifies the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat. However, this is but one aspect of the class struggle recounted in the address. Marx demonstrates that the struggle over free trade marks the historical moment of a transition to industrial capital, and hence he gives considerable attention to depicting the perspectives of other classes – landowners, farmers, farmworkers, merchants, manufacturers – whose earlier class distinctions and positions of social status are being subordinated to the sharper antagonisms of industrial capital. More noteworthy still, the affirmative claim about hastening the "Social Revolution" effectively appears for the first and only time in these concluding lines, absent any meaningful argumentative development. In the context of the Speech as a whole, the conclusion reads more as a rhetorical flourish than a thesis, adding a dash of dialectics and revolutionary fervor to a speech whose primary preoccupations lie in developing a somewhat different set of arguments.

In truth, the concluding paragraph of Marx's Speech might more plausibly be regarded as the thesis of that rather more famous document: "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" (hereafter, Manifesto).<sup>1</sup> Penned more or less concurrently with the Speech during the opening days of 1848, the Manifesto also features a prominent critique of free trade, lyrically dubbed, "that single, unconscionable freedom" (487). Indeed, the Manifesto makes good on several of Marx's promises in the final paragraph of his Brussels address. In its brief but expansive account of the capital relation at the scale of the world market the Manifesto, far more explicitly than the Speech, develops the arguments that "working men have no country" (502); that industrial capital has "simplified its class antagonisms," increasingly "splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat," (485); that the bourgeoisie ultimately produces "its own grave-diggers," and that "Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (496). Not only does the Manifesto advance such claims, it does so with eloquence and a sweeping world-historical urgency: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win" (519). Surprisingly, this *to-the-barricades*-bravura is largely absent from Marx's address to the Democratic Association of Brussels.

How, then, might one take seriously the Speech's rhetorical qualities *as a speech*, when it stands so obviously in the shadow of its historically contemporaneous and far more celebrated relation, the Manifesto? The Manifesto, of course, was always intended to be a printed document, read and circulated rather than delivered as oratory. One might argue, perhaps, that it benefits by comparison from its literary rather than oratorical style. However, that seems only partially correct. The manifesto as a genre is something of a hybrid literary-oral form. Certainly when viewed in relation to the more obviously literary style of, say, *Capital Volume One* (which Marx himself fully revised for publication), the Manifesto takes on an oratorical quality in its concision, its daring, and the directness of its rhetorical address. It is not much of a stretch, I think, to imagine the Manifesto being delivered aloud to an audience in slightly condensed

form, (skipping, for instance, the third section on the internal distinctions between and among lines of socialist and communist thought). Conceived in this light, as an oratorical text by extension, the Manifesto far outstrips the Speech both in its style and in its ambition.

This line of argument extends in the opposite direction as well. That is to say, very little about the Speech's mode of presentation appears to have been specifically crafted to meet the rhetorical demands of a public address. Beyond what has been mentioned above, two prominent formal elements illustrate what I will call the Speech's oratorical awkwardness. First, Marx presents several long quotations from Bowring, Ricardo, Ure, and others, in order to assail the blind-spots or perfidy of bourgeois political economy. Readers of Marx will find this format very familiar, as he regularly employs it in both his published texts and, especially, in those manuscripts that he does not see through to publication (e.g., *Grundrisse*, Volumes Two and Three of *Capital*, *Theories of Surplus Value*, etc.). One can surmise that Marx used the practice of critically annotating passages from other thinkers (especially political economists) as a method to take notes, to organize his thoughts, to develop his critique, and to consider how best to present his arguments. But nothing about this method is unique, or particularly well-suited, to an oratorical format. Indeed, however fruitful it may have been as a way for Marx to sharpen his own ideas, it is difficult to believe that reading extended quotations from the likes of Bowring or Ure would be an especially effective technique for public speaking.

There is a second prominent formal feature of the speech that exacerbates its oratorical awkwardness. Well over a third of the address stages a quasi-Platonic dialogue among a cast of *dramatis personae* that includes the Free Trader, the Proletarian Worker, the Manufacturer, the Small Tradesman, the Farmer, the Farmworker, and the Economists. In addition to these bearers of class position, Marx also incorporates into the dialogue the published positions of three minor historical figures – Hope, Morse, and Greg – whose essays were awarded prizes and published by the Anti-Corn Law League to celebrate “the wholesome influence of the

Repeal of the Corn Laws on English agriculture" (454). The sheer number of characters involved in this staged dialogue – in addition to the somewhat confusing mix of character "types" and actual historical figures – makes for an ungainly dramatic exchange, both in its form (how does one keep track of all the different voices?) and in the content of the "lines" given to each character. Here, too, it is difficult to imagine Marx performing this section of the speech. Consider the following statistic-laden response by "the workers," refuting the bourgeois assertion that free trade will reduce food costs and by extension boost the purchasing power of workers' wages:

The workers in turn asked of the manufacturers, –

"How is it that in the course of the last thirty years, while our commerce and manufacture has immensely increased, our wages have fallen more rapidly, in proportion, than the price of corn has gone up?

"The tax which you say we pay the landlords is about three pence a week per worker. And yet the wages of the hand-loom weaver fell, between 1815 and 1843, from 28s. per week to 5s., and the wages of the power-loom weaver, between 1823 and 1843, from 20s. per week to 8s. (453)

More allegorical polemic than dramatic dialogue, such phrasing makes scant effort to realistically represent the cadence or content of actual workers' speech. Instead, it functions as a mechanism to lend subjective voice to the political positions borne by particular class interests. (The clarity that might emerge from character-types speaking as the bearer of class position, however, is somewhat muddled by Marx's inclusion of the actual published statements by Hope, Morse, and Greg, though they too, in effect, function as pure ideologists of free trade.)

Again, we can turn to Marx's published (non-oratorical) work to find more effective examples of this technique. Consider the famous passage in Chapter Seven of the first volume of *Capital* in which the capitalist who has advanced his capital but received no profit in return, "stares in

astonishment” (297) as he realizes that his own contributions to the productive process have created no new value: “Consider my abstinence” (298); “Did I not provide [the worker] with the materials?” (299); “Have I not myself worked?” (300). Marx, teasingly, cycles through a list of meritless protestations from Mr. Moneybags. Indeed, even the representatives of capital are not so naïve as to believe their own rationalizations: “The whole litany just recited was simply meant to pull the wool over our eyes. He himself does not care twopence for it. He leaves this and all similar subterfuges and conjuring tricks to the professors of political economy” (300). Marx’s dialogues in the Speech, particularly those sections in which he exposes the insincerity of those self-same professors of political economy, have an equivalent function even as they lack the precision and clarity of this example from *Capital*.

Both formal elements of the Speech that I have highlighted – the extended quotations from political economists and the leaden dialogue between personifications of class interests – work primarily to introduce the logic of bourgeois political economy so that Marx can expose its contradictions and self-interested class perspective. However, very little about these two modes is unique to oratory. The same features appear in Marx’s written texts, often to better effect. Marx’s wit is certainly evident throughout the Speech, though again in a less finely polished form than we encounter in the Manifesto or Volume One. Audiences, in my experience at least, are rarely roused by the recitation of extended quoted passages from political economy; likewise, it is difficult to imagine that the staged dialogue, with its overabundance of moving parts, fully hit its dramatic mark. Such flaws may well have been mitigated by inspired performance. I can only conclude, for instance, that Marx must have introduced an exaggerated dose of sarcasm into his lines as he delivered the address from the podium. Nevertheless, the Speech presents problems of both content and form that must be factored into in any assessment of the document *as a speech*.

But how much emphasis do these oratorical deficiencies merit? It is helpful to recall that Marx’s address appears to have been a considerable

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success when delivered. As the editors of the *Marx and Engels Collected Works* note in their brief bibliographical history of the Speech, the *Deutsch-Brüsseler-Zeitung* published the following enthusiastic account of its immediate reception:

Thanks to *Karl Marx's* speech on the question of free trade this meeting turned out to be one of the most interesting of all held by the Association. The report in French took more than an hour, and the audience listened with unflagging attention all the time. (695 n. 246)

The Speech was quickly translated into German and published as a pamphlet. Engels chose to include it as a supplement to his published edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy* in 1885, and it was translated into English for an American publication in 1888. Marx himself seems to have thought highly of the Speech. In his celebrated 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where he offers perhaps his most concise formulations of determination and historical materialism, he singles out the Speech, along with the Manifesto, as two of the documents from the period in which he and Engels presented to the public their materialist critique of Hegel and the Young Hegelians (264). If one accepts my assessment that the Speech *qua* speech is not resplendent oratory, how do we explain its appeal, both in the moment and long after? What kept the Democratic Association of Brussels audience riveted "with unflagging attention" for over an hour? And what accounts for its legacy within the Marxist cannon?

In what remains of this essay, I will hazard four arguments that endeavor to explain the Speech's seemingly unlikely success. First, and most straightforwardly, I suggest that the ironic critique of bourgeois self-interest, coupled with a celebration of worker acumen and agency, clarify the class antagonisms of the free trade era and thus foster something like a proletarian standpoint of critique. Second, I contend that the Speech is best understood as an historical document, chronicling the mid-century transition into a fully-realized industrial capitalism distinct from a prior moment of British monopoly protectionism in which landowners and

merchants, especially those with colonial interests, held pride of place among the capitalist factions. In this sense the Speech, far more explicitly than the Manifesto, tells the story of class struggle in a quickly passing era, placing it within the tradition of Marx's historical writings such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Chapter Ten on the Working Day from the first volume of *Capital*, or the "Critique of the Gotha Programme." Third, I will argue that although Marx has not yet settled on the term *relative surplus value*, the basic concept, *avant la lettre*, is central to the Speech's argument about capital's contradictory tendency, only fully realized in the age of machine-based production, to both absorb and displace labor as it expands. This opens up an objective critique of the value relation that provides a necessary counterpoint to the subjective class standpoint argument I advance in my first point above. Finally, I contend that Marx introduces the notion of human suffering throughout the speech in a manner that links the plight of workers in England with the deprivations of weavers in India and the violence of slavery in the West Indies. The platitudes of free trade, then, mask the agonies of an ever-solidifying world market increasingly determined by the contradictions of the value form. Taken together, these four argumentative strands clarify why Marx's Speech held such considerable rhetorical power at the moment of its delivery, and why it continues to have historical and theoretical significance for us today. Having outlined these arguments here, I'll develop each in turn.

First I am suggesting that the Speech rhetorically establishes a proletarian subjective standpoint of class critique via the ironic presentation of bourgeois arguments, and an explicitly laudatory presentation of workers' perspectives. Evidence of this position abounds throughout the Speech. We have seen above how Marx's opening lines mock the insincerity of the free traders' feigned unwillingness to "speculate on the hunger of the people" (452). Marx likewise ridicules their two-faced arguments to workers, shopkeepers, and agricultural interests, suggesting to each audience that any negative consequences that might accompany repeal will fall solely on other



classes, leaving the group being addressed unharmed if not advantaged. Marx shows that Mr. Hope and Mr. Morse, despite garnering prizes from the same judges, actually reach antithetical conclusions on the question of whether the price of grain will rise or fall after repeal. No matter. They both assure the industrial and agricultural laborers that only land-owners will be injured by this rise and/or fall in prices. Marx likewise scoffs at the evidence presented by Morse about correlations between the price and quantity of foreign grain imported to England, concluding that "This prize winner forgets that the importation was not the cause of the high price, but that the high price was the cause of the importation" (454). Often Marx is openly dismissive, calling the free trade arguments "silly stuff," (455) or "cant" (456). Perhaps most scathingly, Marx excoriates the political economists Bowring and Ure for their callousness in describing the acute distress of displaced Indian weavers and English textile workers alike as "temporary sufferings during a transition period"; never mind, Marx retorts, "that these temporary evils have implied for the majority the transition from life to death" (461).

As Marx directs his scorn at the bourgeois political economists he often addresses the workers directly, as a class, lauding proletarian acumen at seeing through the mendacity of the bourgeoisie and its apologists. Consider the following passages, the first of which begins in the voice of a worker:

"If the landlords were to sell our bones, you manufacturers would be the first to buy them, and to put them through the mill and make flour of them."

The English workingmen have shown the English Free Traders that they are not the dupes of their illusion or of their lies; and if they have made common cause with the manufacturers against the landlords, it is for the purpose of destroying the last remnants of feudalism, that henceforth they may have only one enemy to deal with. (457)

Or this passage, again adopting the now-familiar ironic mode:

Besides, how should the workingmen understand the sudden philanthropy of the manufacturers, the very men still busy fighting against the Ten-Hours Bill? [...] On the one hand they nibble at the workers' wages in the pettiest way, by means of factory legislation, and on the other they are prepared to make the greatest sacrifices to raise those wages by means of the Anti-Corn Law League. (456)

Or, finally, this direct address to the Brussels audience as workers:

Gentlemen! Do not be deluded by the abstract word Freedom! whose [*sic*] freedom? Not the freedom of one individual in relation to another, but freedom of Capital to crush the worker. (463)

Thus on the one hand, the Speech's dominant mode is an ironic critique of the bourgeois class interests that underpin its universalizing rationalizations of free trade. On the other hand, Marx offers a direct appeal to workers as a class exploited by capital. He depicts workers, therefore, as capable of seeing through the mystifications of political economy and, by extension, overcoming capital's principal relation of exploitation. Taken together, these two appeals offer both a coherent critique of the free trade epoch and a clear political project in opposition. This, of course, is the bread and butter of Marxist revolutionary praxis – the proletariat as a class in and for itself acting as the agent of history to abolish bourgeois social relations. One can well imagine that such an appeal would be all the more persuasive and affirming in the context of a public address, where participants would share the experience of listening among a crowd in full solidarity. Given that so much of the Speech proceeds in this rhetorical mode, I suspect that Marx's appeal to a class standpoint for critique and revolutionary transformation accounts in no small part for its apparent success, especially at the meeting where it was delivered.

My second argument about the Speech's appeal is that the address works in the register of Marx's historical writings. In this case Marx

analyzes bourgeois efforts to repeal the Corn Laws as both a symptom of, and a necessary step in, the transition to what in his later work Marx will call *industrial capital* to distinguish it from manufacturing or merchants' capital.<sup>2</sup> Marx's Manifesto, of course, largely presumes the principal class antagonism of a fully-realized industrial capital, the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, "two great hostile camps directly facing each other" (485). The Speech, by contrast, takes up the task of analyzing the particular lines of struggle around the 1846 Corn Law repeal efforts. To do so requires an account not only of the bourgeoisie's struggle against the proletariat, but also its antagonisms with a landed agricultural class as well as a merchant capitalist class buoyed by colonial protectionist monopolies such as the East India Company and the West Indies sugar plantations. In other words, if as I suggested above, the Speech is successful in part because of its direct address to a proletarian class standpoint, that standpoint does not here presume the clarity of a singular antagonism with the bourgeoisie. Unlike the Manifesto, the Speech operates in a more concrete historical mode, analyzing the shifting, contradictory alignments forged between and among *a variety of class positions* during the period of industrial capital's solidification.

To illustrate this point it helps to clarify why, from Marx's perspective, the Free Traders are so committed to ending state protections for English agriculture by opening markets to less expensive grain from abroad. Marx offers at least three key motives. First, reducing the cost of raw materials via foreign trade directly increases capital's rate of profit – the analytical category *most visible to the capitalists themselves*. Because raw materials constitute a major component of constant capital, and because, as circulating capital, their entire value is passed along during production into the value of the new commodity (as opposed, for example to the slower depreciation of fixed capital) reducing raw material costs has a direct and significant effect on profit, increasing the ratio of surplus value to cost price, the amount invested by the capitalist. The bourgeoisie's primary interest in free trade policies, as Marx systematically demonstrates in the third volume of *Capital*, is to reduce the cost of

circulating capital in order to maximize its rate of profit.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps surprisingly this motive is implied throughout the Speech's frequent discussions of grain pricing, but never developed in systematic detail.

Instead, the Speech keys on two additional reasons that the Free Traders are so enthusiastic about the Corn Law repeal effort. First, the bourgeoisie in their public campaign to pass the legislation touted anticipated reductions in food prices. An apparent short-term benefit to the proletariat, Marx shows that depressing the price of necessary consumer commodities ultimately paves the way for depressing workers' wages across many if not all branches of capital. The Free Traders make public appeals to workers by promising cheap bread and more money for savings, knowing all the while in private that they will ultimately use the same rationale to cut wages once grain prices have fallen. Finally, the Free Traders understand that inexpensive foreign grain undermines the economic basis of a landowning class, whose monopoly control as property owners of arable land or land used for industrial production has ensured its continued social power.<sup>4</sup> Marx's Speech devotes considerably more attention to these latter two motives – the cost of grain as a consumer good and the profits of landowners through ground-rent – than it does to the direct correlation between the cost of raw materials and the rate of profit (the principal focus of his critique of free trade in Volume Three). The Speech's emphases, I contend, shift our attention away from the calculations adopted by individual capitalists to maximize profit within the process of production, and highlight instead the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole, consciously and intentionally engaged in class struggle with both proletarians and landowners in this legislative battle to repeal the Corn Laws.

On the one hand, by drawing a correlation between cheapening grain and cheapening the value of labor-power, Marx begins to sketch his arguments about relative surplus value (more on this below). Here we find his analysis of the relations of exploitation and the ever-sharpening antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat in the process of valorization, the determinant struggle of industrial capitalism. On the other

hand, in its account of the historical struggle over the Corn Laws, the Speech takes seriously the multiplicity of class affiliations and oppositions still at play in the particular legal battles over free trade, perhaps most counterintuitively illustrated by the proletarian coalition with the bourgeoisie to displace the entrenched feudal interests of a landed property class. We saw evidence of this above in the passage where Marx states, "if they have made common cause with the manufacturers against the landlords, it is for the purpose of destroying the last remnants of feudalism" (457).<sup>5</sup> For Marx this is not an example of a working class duped into siding with élites against its own interests, but rather a strategic, temporary coalition so that, "henceforth they may have only one enemy to deal with" (457). Highlighting the contingent nature of such class alliances, Marx notes that in the subsequent struggle over the Ten-Hour bill, the landowners turn the tables and side with the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.<sup>6</sup> By recounting these shifting class alliances, Marx illustrates the historical challenges encountered by proletarian organizations in their struggles against an emergent but not yet fully dominant bourgeoisie, while simultaneously working to unseat a residually powerful landowning class.<sup>7</sup>

The Speech's sections of staged dialogue make evident still more competing class interests. Marx's dialogue depicts the duplicitous bourgeoisie advancing contradictory arguments to win over not only the proletariat, but also the small shop owners, the farmers, and the agricultural laborers. That the bourgeoisie must rely on support from these quarters illustrates that it is a class that remains on the cusp of its ascension to full dominance, still enmeshed in a pitched battle to wrest influence away from the powerful interests of a landed, property-owning class in England as well as colonial monopolies abroad. Seen from this perspective, the more apt comparison for the Speech is not the Manifesto, but rather Marx's account of the struggle over the Ten-Hours Bill in the famous "Working Day" chapter in the first volume of *Capital*, which itself recounts the strange bedfellows that arise during the Corn Law repeal. My speculation here is that such historical depictions would be rhetorically

appealing in a speech because they depict class not as an abstract category of analysis, but rather as a social formation actively engaged in the realpolitik of class struggle. Here we find an illustration of Marx's oft-cited remark from the Preface to *A Contribution to Critique of Political Economy* that consciousness of determinant relations often arises through the struggle over "ideological forms." In this case the multi-class struggle over free trade serves as the terrain on which workers "fight it out" (263).

In addition to clarifying something about the Speech's appeal, this historical register is relevant for several other reasons. For scholars of Marx, we encounter in the Speech a moment in the evolution of Marx's thought in which, although still unsettled, some of the rigorous technical vocabulary of *Capital* begins to come into focus. In addition to the still-fluid distinction between *manufacture* and *industry* mentioned above, the Speech's concern with conflicts between tenant farmers and landowners offers a relatively early treatment of *ground-rent*, a prelude to Marx's extended discussion of this subject in Volume Three of *Capital*.<sup>8</sup> The Speech, for example, demonstrates both how ground-rent is "determined by the price of the product of the inferior soil," and how reductions in ground-rent "enable tenant farmers to invest more capital in their farms, to use agricultural machinery on a larger scale, and to save manual labor" (455), setting the stage for capital-intensive agriculture. Moreover, the Speech offers suggestions that Marx is beginning to draw the essential distinction between *labor* and what he will come to call (but does not yet do so in the Speech) the commodity, *labor-power*. Central to Marx's argument in the Speech is the existence of a commodified form of labor, the value of which, as with all commodities, will tend to decrease with the introduction of a free trade régime. "If all commodities are cheaper," Marx states, "labor, which is a commodity too, will also fall in price" (458). Were we to find this sentence in *Capital*, it would almost surely read *labor-power* rather than *labor*.

Such terminological matters risk a quick descent into Marxology – certainly not my intent. Instead, I raise these points because Marx's struggle to gain terminological clarity illustrates an important claim he

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makes repeatedly throughout his work: that categories of analysis arise only when historical conditions allow them to become visible. He states this idea perhaps most succinctly in the *Grundrisse*:

As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. [...] this abstraction of labor as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labors. Indifference toward specific labors corresponds to *a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labor to another*, and where a specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference." (104, emphasis added)

Marx argues here that categories such as *abstract human labor* or *labor-power* can only properly come into being at the historical moment in which different concrete forms of labor become so leveled out as to become broadly interchangeable. The categories of analysis are not conceived by the philosopher and fitted to the world. Rather, the historical movement of society creates the conditions under which analytical categories become visible and hold purchase as abstractions that begin to grasp the totality of determinations in a given historical epoch. I am suggesting in this regard that the Speech is very much a document of its moment, a moment of revolutionary historical transition, in which the determining forces of industrial capital are becoming visible but have not yet solidified into the explanatory categories that Marx will later adopt.

For instance, although he has not yet settled on *labor-power*, he is fully aware both of labor as a commodity and of the new modes of machine-based industrial production that have substantially leveled distinctions between particular forms of concrete labor through a widespread process of deskilling. Marx argues the following in the Speech:

This centralization [of capital] involves a greater division of labor and a greater use of machinery. The greater

division of labor destroys the especial skill of the laborer;  
and by putting in the place of this skilled work labor  
which any one can perform it increases competition  
among the workers. (459)

Once industrial capital can shed the fetters of landowners and monopolists, labor-power as well as ground-rent become fully subject to the determinations of the value form. The depiction of this transition moment lends the Speech the quality of seeing history in motion. No doubt this becomes clearly visible only after the fact, for those of us who are aware of the categories of analysis that Marx will ultimately adopt as a way to explain capital's movements. But it seems plausible to suggest, even in the context of the 1848 audience, that Marx's depiction of historical fluidity or transience would enrich, even if somewhat inchoately, the Speech's rhetorical appeal to the proletariat as historical subject.

In grappling with the category of *labor-power* as it emerges into historical visibility, then, the Speech begins to draw its audience's attention to the determinants structuring proletarian life and the social relations of capital. The same can be said for Marx's treatment of *relative surplus value*. Again, Marx has not yet settled on that term, but key aspects of the category are present in the Speech. In drawing this connection we can pivot to my third argument about the Speech's appeal: that Marx's theorization of *relative surplus value*, most notably capital's dual tendency to absorb and displace labor, posits for the Brussels audience the relation between proletarian subjective class agency and the objective determinations of the value form.

Free trade, Marx demonstrates, intensifies both of these contradictory aspects of capital. On the one hand free trade spurs capital's expansion, with new value-productive labor being *absorbed* into a widening sphere of industrial production for a world market. On the other hand the dictates of relative surplus value and the rising organic composition of capital, most notably its increasing reliance on machinery, results in the relative *displacement* of labor from production and the creation of a surplus population. Marx elaborates on this contradiction in the *Grundrisse*<sup>9</sup>:



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It is a law of capital, as we saw, to create surplus labor, disposable time; it can do this only by setting *necessary labor* in motion – i.e., entering into exchange with the worker. It is its tendency, therefore, to create as much labor as possible; just as it is equally its tendency to reduce necessary labor time to a minimum. It is therefore equally a tendency of capital to increase its laboring population, as well as constantly to posit a part of it as surplus population – population which is useless until such time as capital can utilize it. (399)

In the Speech Marx explores this contradiction through what he terms, somewhat inelegantly, the "law of the commodity labor" (463). The Free Traders' repeal of the Corn Laws accelerates two aspects of capital's drive for relative surplus value. On the one hand, it cheapens the price of grain and other imports of necessary consumer commodities, which in turn cheapens the value of labor-power. Considered from within the process of production, cheapening the value of labor-power shortens the amount of necessary labor time relative to surplus labor time, and hence provides an increase in relative surplus value for the capitalist. On the other hand free trade encourages the competitive search for technological advancements that improve productivity. This affords the innovative capitalist a temporary advantage over competitors for the period during which she can sell commodities below their value but above production cost for the "early adopter" of productivity-enhancing machinery. On the other hand, the application of machines to boost productivity has the necessary consequence of displacing labor (at least relatively) from production, since it takes fewer workers to produce the same quantity of commodities and since each individual commodity contains less value than it did when made at lower rates of productivity. This relative decline in valorization, in turn, creates a tendency for capital's expansion, since it can maintain the same level of profitability only by producing more commodities. Those additional commodities, in turn, require greater quantities of raw material as inputs, sending capital afield to search for new and cheaper sources of

the commodities (raw materials) necessary for productive consumption. Likewise, the commodities from expanded production still need to be realized in circulation necessitating new markets or greater degrees of both individual and productive consumption. This contradiction, inherent in the value form, is of paramount importance to Marx, most notably his theory of crisis.<sup>10</sup>

Among the real theoretical strengths of the Speech is the fact that Marx explicitly takes up these contradictions of relative surplus value and capital's dual tendency to absorb and displace labor with his Brussels audience:

This competition [between workers] becomes more fierce as the division of labor enables a single man to do the work of three. Machinery accomplishes the same result on a much larger scale [...] the more productive capital grows, the more it is compelled to produce for a market whose requirements it does not know [...] and consequently crises increase in frequency and intensity. But every crisis in turn hastens the concentration of capital, adds to the proletariat. Thus, as productive capital grows, competition among the workers grows too, and grows in a far greater proportion. The reward of labor is less for all, and the burden of labor is increased for some at least. (459-60)

Despite capital's dizzying expansions that add to the proletariat, the productivity gains from machinery result in "less for all": less employment, less material wealth, lower wages, and the intensified exploitation of those who do work. Indeed the Speech repeatedly argues that free trade, by necessity, drives capital's expansion to produce for a world market and, also by necessity, creates an ever-expanding pool of surplus labor, displaced from work. This is as true for Indian hand-loom weavers in Dacca who are thrown out of work by the import of machine-made textiles from England, as it is for the mill workers in Manchester who make the same cheap textiles that decimate Indian weaving: "in

1829 there were, in Manchester, 1088 cotton spinners employed in 36 factories. In 1841 there were but 448, and they tended 53,353 more spindles than the 1,088 spinners did in 1829" (460). When capital stops expanding, Marx sympathetically acknowledges, "the workman is the first victim. He goes to the wall before the capitalist"; however, even during times when capital experiences cycles of growth as predicted by the political economists, inevitably the worker "will go to the wall just the same" (459).

The same basic point I made above in the discussion of *labor-power* can be reiterated here: the proletarian class standpoint of critique is enriched by the Speech's historical awareness of the emerging determinants of industrial capital. But a further argument can be made as well. An after-the-fact reader of the Speech may be tempted, given its heavy dose of ironic critique, to imagine that the rhetorical appeal of its class standpoint was achieved through a sort of workerist, subjectivist Marxism, a one-sided emphasis on the proletariat as agent of history. One might assume that a subjective class critique would play particularly well in the form of an oratory address to an audience of workers, whereas, by contrast, dialectics and objective critique would be better reserved for the contemplative pace of the printed page, for the intellectual *élites*. This is true to a point, and I readily admit that the Speech places its emphasis on the construction of a subjective class position as spelled out above. One never mistakes its prose for the *Grundrisse*. But to overlook the objective critique of capital's internal contradictions presented in the Speech, in this case capital's simultaneous tendency to absorb and displace labor driven by the determinants of relative surplus value, is to miss the primary critique that Marx levels against free trade. Indeed at times he states this argument in fully dialectical formulation:

Thus, of two things one: either we must reject all political economy based on the assumption of Free Trade, or we must admit that under this same Free Trade, the whole severity of the economic laws will fall upon the workers. (463)

It is through the Speech's analysis of the contradictions of relative surplus value (absent the term itself) that Marx develops his dialectical construction of a class standpoint; it situates the proletariat as subjective agents of history, even as that class itself remains subject to the objective determinants of the law of value under industrial capital.

Such an argument, I think, reinforces my earlier suggestion that the Speech is best compared to Marx's historical writings, most notably his chapter on the Working Day. That chapter, which chronicles the proletarian class struggle to enact the Ten-Hours bill, concludes in mock-triumphant style with, at best, a qualified affirmation of class agency:

For 'protection' against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contact with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day [...]. *Quantum mutatus ab illo!* (416)

What change indeed! The Bill, no doubt, represents a material improvement in working conditions. The workers, as a result of committed organizing and struggle, emerge victorious in their efforts to restrict capital's ability to tether laborers to its machines for sixteen hours a day. But the Bill merely constrains capital's capacity to extract absolute surplus value, erecting a legislative barrier that, as Marx demonstrates in subsequent chapters, only spurs capital to increase its pursuit of relative surplus value. The Ten-Hours bill is a victory, but at best it amounts only to a "modest Magna Carta." Legislative victories, Marx never ceases to remind us, do not a revolution make. When he describes the law as an "all powerful social barrier," we hear again his characteristic irony. There can be no such thing as an "all powerful" barrier under capital, the movements of which invariably arise in relation to the barriers and contradictions it confronts. He makes this point precisely in the *Grundrisse*:

By its nature, therefore, it posits a *barrier* to labor and value-creation in contradiction to its tendency to expand them boundlessly. And in as much as it both posits a barrier *specific* to itself, and on the other side equally drives over and beyond *every* barrier, it is the living contradiction. (421)

Capital's movement posits its own barriers, encounters them as limits, produces crises, overcomes these crises, and posits new barriers again, now under conditions of intensified development. Each of these phases exists independently as a separate moment; taken as a whole, however, they form a unified, though contradictory, system in historical motion.

Marx's aim to establish a standpoint of class critique in the Speech, then, amounts to something more than merely urging an audience of workers to put their heads together as a class in efforts to pass better legislation. His task, rather, is to situate the proletarian class in relation to capital, this contradictory totality in historical flux. While a brief Speech cannot possibly be as explicit about such dynamics as *Capital* or the *Grundrisse*, its pivotal focus on the not-yet-named category of relative surplus value makes clear that its horizon of class struggle is not fixed solely on the "modest Magna Carta" of political or legislative battles. Rather those struggles are conceived alongside an objective critique of the capital relation as such. Although pitched at workers in a public address, the Speech contains within it the outlines of Marx's dialectical critique of the capital relation that sees class struggle in a dual aspect: the subjective agency of a proletarian class and the objective "laws of motion" (Vol. 1, 92) that determine a historical totality.

This brings me to my fourth and final claim about the Speech's appeals, merits, and relevance. Here my contention is that the subject/object dialectic of class struggle in the Speech is articulated most effectively in Marx's representation of the acute human suffering that he posits as the necessary product of the capital relation extended to the scale of the world market. Particularly striking in this regard are Marx's attempts to draw out a shared relation between the suffering of Indian

weavers, West Indian slaves, and English factory workers. Marx opens this line of argumentation by quoting from a speech delivered in 1835 to the House of Commons by Dr. Bowring, responding to the inability of some 50,000 hand-loom weavers in London to find new employment after having been cast out of work by the wide-spread adoption of power-looms. Bowring depicts this mass joblessness as an inevitable, but temporary, cost associated with the march of scientific progress. By way of analogy he draws a comparison with the displacement of Indian weavers, whose primary economic activity had been decimated by the introduction of British textiles. Bowring recounts a letter on the matter from the governor general of the East India Company<sup>11</sup>:

The reports on the distress of the Indian weavers are terrible. And what is the origin of that distress? The presence on the market of English manufactures, the production of the same article by means of the power-loom. A great number of weavers died of starvation; the remainder have gone over to the [sic] other employment, and chiefly to field labor. Not to be able to change employment amounted to a sentence of death [...]. In the whole history of commerce, it would, perhaps, be difficult to find suffering equal to what these whole classes in India had to submit to. (461)

Marx is struck by Bowring's account both because it faithfully depicts the desperate conditions of displaced workers in Dacca, and because it hypocritically tries to use this as further evidence to support claims about the progressive benefits of free trade. Marx chastises Bowring, who is only capable of seeing the workers (both in Dacca and London) "as means of production which must be superseded by less expensive means of production" (461). Marx, by contrast, draws his audience's focus to the shared experience of human suffering. He responds sardonically to Bowring's characterization that such moments of displacement amount merely to temporary transitions. For most workers, Marx darkly reminds his audience, this amounted to a "transition from life to death" (461).

Later in the Speech Marx widens this international perspective on suffering to include the question of slavery and the colonial monopoly protections granted to West Indies coffee and sugar plantations. As much as corn, these were the commodities – in addition to cotton, the undisputed king<sup>12</sup> – most in demand by industrial capital. Hence these are the commodities driving the free trade agenda. Marx makes a special effort to educate his audience on this point, emphasizing that the *needs of capital* – not any natural wealth or cultural proclivity – dictate *which* raw materials are produced, *where* they are produced, and *how* they are produced. Note how he hails his audience directly at this point in the address:

You believe perhaps, gentleman, that the production of coffee and sugar is the natural destiny of the West Indies.

Two centuries ago, nature, which does not trouble itself about commerce, had planted neither sugar-cane nor coffee trees there. And it may be that in less than a half a century you will find there neither coffee nor sugar, for the East Indies, by means of cheaper production, have already successfully broken down this so-called natural destiny of the West Indies.

And the West Indies, with their natural wealth, are as heavy a burden for England as the weavers of Dacca, who were also destined from the beginning of time to weave by hand. (464)

Marx here calls his audience to consider how a capitalist class, working in tandem with the English State, bears responsibility for the torture, murder, and exploitation of West Indian slaves, just as it bears responsibility for the displacement and starvation of East Indian weavers.<sup>13</sup> It is to the nation-state, England, that Marx nominally ascribes these burdens, but of course he means primarily the English capitalist class, having already established a deep commonality between displaced weavers in London and Dacca. By adding the questions of slavery and the colonial protections afforded to West Indian planters, Marx emphasizes that the shared suffering of workers throughout the world market stems not from natural

forces but rather is determined by capital's need to valorize value. Whether sugar will be grown and harvested by slaves in Jamaica or wage laborers in India will be driven by capital's requirements for accumulation, not by any social or ecological attributes of either region, let alone any moral considerations about the form of labor involved.

Here Eric Williams' classic 1944 account of the West Indies slave economy, *Capitalism and Slavery*, is indispensable.<sup>14</sup> Like Marx, Williams takes great pleasure in dismantling the hypocrisy of the English capitalist class, both the plantation monopolists and the free traders. From different sides of the Atlantic the two texts narrate a shared history of free trade. In fact both texts quote Bowring's zealous pronouncement, "Jesus Christ is Free Trade, and Free Trade is Jesus Christ" (Williams 136; Speech 455).<sup>15</sup> The great strength of Williams' text is its ability to demonstrate that the movements of abolition and emancipation were at root pragmatic rather than ethical, advanced primarily in accordance with the needs and interests of capital, and motivated by philanthropic concerns as a trailing (if still consequential) afterthought.

Williams masterfully recounts the ideological reversals of a mercantilist class and an industrial class, each vying for dominance.<sup>16</sup> Because slave labor was the mode of production that initially ensured the highest profitability, West Indian planters fiercely defended the institution for decades, offering moral as well as financial justifications for the practice of owning human beings. However, the rapid ascension of *industrial* capital during the first half of the Nineteenth Century required cheap raw materials and commerce throughout an expanding world market. The colonial protections afforded to the East India Company and the West Indies sugar plantations artificially raised prices on key commodities, giving an advantage to entrenched monopolist interests in competition with industrial capitalists. The campaign to repeal the Corn Laws analyzed in Marx's Speech aimed to do away with just such commodity protections. Intent on destroying monopoly interests, the bourgeoisie campaigned feverously against the moral indignities of slavery. Hoping to save their monopoly (and their hides),<sup>17</sup>



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the West Indian planters reversed course, hastily finding enlightenment and embracing the cause of abolition and emancipation. New converts to the Rights of Man, the planters then wept crocodile tears to Parliament, arguing that their monopoly protections should be maintained because their moral refusal to continue using slave labor placed them at a competitive disadvantage to slave-grown sugar from Cuba and Brazil. Such arguments, however, could not stave off the requirements of industrial capital and in the sacred name of free trade the West Indies sugar monopoly was ended in 1846, the same year that the Corn Laws were repealed. Soon after, those same free traders who had denounced the planters for their inhumane use of slave labor quietly relinquished their abolitionist zeal, realizing that they could procure cheaper raw materials from slave-production in Cuba, Brazil, and, most crucially, cotton from the US South. Williams summarizes this sequence of events as follows:

The capitalists had first encouraged West Indian slavery and then helped to destroy it. When British capitalism depended on the West Indies, they ignored slavery or defended it. When British capitalism found the West Indian monopoly a nuisance, they destroyed West Indian slavery as the first step in the destruction of West Indian monopoly. That slavery to them was relative not absolute, and depended on latitude and longitude, is proved after 1833 [the year England abolished slavery in its colonies] by their attitude to slavery in Cuba, Brazil, and the United States. (169)

Such is the "heavy burden" of horrific suffering in the interests of profit that Marx decries to his audience in Brussels (464). As Williams demonstrates, the moral arguments of abolitionists rained down with righteous fury when they served the interests of free traders. But once the West Indian monopolies were abolished, the universal abolition of slavery fell off the political agenda. Indeed, the continued use of slavery in non-British colonies was tacitly accepted, even justified with rationalizations

not dissimilar to those voiced by Bowring and Ure about a necessary “period of transition” on the way to capitalist growth faced by economies in early stages of development. More to the point, as both Marx and Williams would surely agree, the moral arguments against slavery, even if earnestly believed by the historical actors involved, could never have stood between Manchester and its need for cheap cotton.

At issue here is the discomfiting fact that the needs of Manchester capitalists must have surely appeared to many as inseparable from the needs of Manchester workers. This is among the brutal contradictions of capitalism, entirely necessary for its social reproduction. The fundamental antagonism between labor and capital can at times become clouded as workers come to see their own interests as dependent upon the continued profitability of capital, even if that profitability requires their own ongoing exploitation as well as the exploitation of others. In pointing this out we can return to the complex rhetorical construction of a class standpoint for critique in Marx’s Speech. Without cheap, slave-produced cotton the mills, no doubt, would stop running. The only thing worse than being exploited by capital, as the saying goes, is *not* being exploited by capital – being cast out of wage work and left to starve like the Indian weavers. It is easy to imagine, then, how English (or Belgian) workers when confronted with the suffering of slaves might shrug their shoulders, given that their own jobs depended in no small measure upon the availability of the cheap and plentiful imported commodities that fueled the industrial revolution.

By introducing this brief history of slavery and emphasizing Marx’s comments about the Indian weavers, I wish to draw attention to the ways that the Speech rhetorically positions human suffering throughout the world market in relation to the category – again, *avant la lettre* – of *relative surplus value*, in particular capital’s tendency to displace labor. Once established, this relation between suffering and relative surplus allows Marx to cleave apart two antithetical conceptions of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand he outlines the pitiless cosmopolitanism imagined by the Free Traders:

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We have shown what sort of fraternity Free Trade begets between the different classes of one and the same nation. The fraternity which Free Trade would establish between the nations of the earth would not be more real, to call cosmopolitan exploitation universal brotherhood is an idea that could only be engendered in the brain of the bourgeoisie [*sic*]. (464)

Contrary to the emphasis that Marx typically places on the leveling effects of capital's combined development – among the most famous examples of which is the Manifesto's celebrated claim that the bourgeoisie has "through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country" (488) – Marx's Speech offers a rare instance in which he makes the explicit analogy between class polarization within England and the uneven geographical development between nations in the era of free trade. "If Free Traders cannot understand how one nation can grow rich at the expense of another," he tells his Brussels audience, "we need not wonder, since these same gentlemen also refuse to understand how in the same country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another" (464-65).

On the other hand, Marx's Speech asks his audience to consider a workers' cosmopolitanism. This, in effect, is the case I have outlined above, which conceives of human suffering – whether experienced by the workers of India, the West Indies, or England – as the necessary consequence of exploitation under capital. The suffering of others cannot be understood as a temporary stage in the progressive march towards prosperity as Ure and Bowring callously pretend. Instead, "the prosperity of the bourgeois class," Marx urges his audience, "presupposes as necessary the suffering of the laboring class" (462).<sup>18</sup> If slave-produced cotton were to dry up (as would happen in 1865) the mills of Manchester would no doubt sit still. In such a scenario, Marx admits (as we saw above), "the workman is the first victim. He goes to the wall before the capitalist." And in those prosperous years when cotton is cheap and plentiful and the factories are hiring? The worker "will go to the wall just

the same” (459), Marx insists. In a world market structured by the capital relation, “The reward of labor is less for all, and the burden of labor is increased for some at least” (460). Immanent to the value form, but only fully realized under industrial capital with its ceaseless search for relative surplus, is the contradictory tendency to both absorb new labor and displace it, to make laboring populations surplus, disposable. The case for a workers’ cosmopolitanism that Marx sketches for his Brussels audience, therefore, is predicated on suffering within the capital relation and the world market, the shared condition of workers everywhere – in England, India, and Jamaica – , those whose waged or unwaged toil is being exploited alongside those who have been displaced from work, all of whose lives remain determined by the value form. In crafting this appeal to totality, the Speech constructs for its audience the historical and theoretical ground for understanding a class standpoint of critique as it plays out in the 1840s battles over free trade.

In closing, I return to the questions I posed above: What accounts for the fact that Marx’s audience listened with rapt attention for over an hour to this address on free trade? Why did Marx, Engels, and others return to this particular speech long after it was delivered? I have suggested that an explanation cannot be found in its oratorical flourishes or any formal qualities of the Speech *as a speech*. Nor do I think its appeal stems primarily from a straightforward rhetorical construction of a subjective proletarian class in motion, ready to cast off its chains. My argument is at once more concise and more expansive: its appeal issues from its *Marxism*. I intend this neither to be a glib response nor a tautology. As I have tried to demonstrate, the Speech offers, in abridged form (and with a few admittedly awkward constructions along the way), the richness of Marx’s dialectical conception of capital as a social totality in historical flux. In addition to a delightful barrage of well-struck blows at the scurrilous political economists of the free trade era, we find throughout this address glimpses of the fecundity of Marx’s intellect as he seeks to give shape to a set of historically emerging categories – most notably industrial capital, labor-power, and relative surplus value – that will become indispensable

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to the critique of capital he develops in his later work. This critical impulse is paired in the Speech with Marx's genuine concern for the relations of suffering and exploitation shared by workers who would otherwise appear to occupy very different structural positions within a world market. Here we find the germs of a true internationalism, articulated in relation to both the subjective class standpoint of workers and the objective determinants of capital. Free trade functions as the entry point for this analysis, the concept through which Marx is able to draw out the contradictory relations between, among other things, food, wages, land, machines, a world-market, the absorption and displacement of labor, monopoly protections, slavery, abolition, famine, colonial policy, suffering and solidarity. Thus, although Marx apparently did not hit upon the phrase until a few weeks later as he drafted the Manifesto, those members of the Democratic Association of Brussels in attendance that night no doubt left the hall with the unshakeable conviction that in free trade they could discern their epoch's "single, unconscionable freedom" (487).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Speech was delivered to the Democratic Association of Brussels on 9 January 1848, but it appears to have been largely composed the previous September. Marx and Engels (primarily Marx it seems) wrote the "Manifesto of the Communist Party" in the months between December 1847 and February 1848, when it was published, somewhat anticlimactically, just *after* the first of 1848's revolutionary upheavals on the Continent. For a brief account of the sequence of events regarding the publication of these two texts, see David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, 160-70. The Corn Laws were repealed two years prior in 1846.

<sup>2</sup> The terminology remains somewhat in flux in the Speech. Marx often appears to use *manufacture* or *manufacturers* as synonymous with *industry*, *industrial capital*, or *industrialists*. For instance, the bourgeois position is voiced by the "Manufacturers" in the staged dialogue on pages 453-54. Likewise, he outlines the penal codes established by the

“manufacturers,” which fine workers for any breakdowns of machines in the factories (456). I take this as a description of *industrial* textile production in the sense that Marx uses the term in *Capital*. But Marx uses the term *industry* in the Speech as well. In an important passage about the tendency to utilize machines that displace labor from production, Marx makes a clear distinction: “The accumulation of productive capital forces the industrial capitalist to work with constantly increasing means of production, ruins the small manufacturer and drives him into the proletariat” (459). I contend that the category of *industry* is just coming into focus for Marx in the Speech. I argue below that this is likewise true of the categories *labor-power* and *relative surplus value*.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular 201-3. Marx writes, “We can thus understand how important for industry is the abolition or reduction of import duties on raw materials. To let in raw materials as freely as possible was already a principal doctrine of the system of protection in its more rational presentations. This was, alongside the repeal of the Corn Laws, the main preoccupation of English Free Traders, when they took care to abolish the duty on cotton as well” (202).

<sup>4</sup> In this, the Speech anticipates arguments Marx will later advance in his “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1875), accusing the Lasallians of focusing solely on capitalists and failing to account for the power of landowners: “In present-day society the means of labor are the monopoly of the landowners (the monopoly of land ownership is even the basis of the monopoly of capital) *and* the capitalists [...]. In England the capitalist is mostly not even the owner of the land on which his factory stands” (83).

<sup>5</sup> See note 2. In this context the term “manufacturers” should be taken either to be synonymous with “industrialists,” or if Marx is here cognizant of this distinction, an amalgam of both sectors.

<sup>6</sup> Marx returns to this historical reversal repeatedly throughout his later work. See, for example, *Capital* Volume One (395), and Volume Three (203).

<sup>7</sup> That such alignments are contingent and fluid, of course, in no way implies that the analytical category of class as such is contingent or fluid;

Marx is unfailingly consistent in his analysis of class as an objective relation to the means of production.

<sup>8</sup> See Part Six, 751-950.

<sup>9</sup> See the longer section from which this passage is taken (398-423), which offers a crystalline account of this dynamic at the scale of the world market, in the realm of circulation, and in the totality of the capital relation. See, too, 604-10 on what Marx terms the "virtual pauper." These passages should be paired with what many consider to be the climactic chapter in Volume One of *Capital*, Chapter 25, "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," 762-870.

<sup>10</sup> This is the basis of Marx's "Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit" in the third volume of *Capital*, 317-75, and Marx discusses various aspects of the problems of organic composition in all three volumes plus *Grundrisse* (including passages cited above). It is also the basis of much contemporary Marxist scholarship. See, for example, Endnotes, Moishe Postone, and the *Wertkritik* theorists (many of whom have recently been translated into English in the collection *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, edited by Neil Larson, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nichols Brown), also available online as a special double-issue of *Mediations: The Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*: ([http://www.mediationsjournal.org/toc/27\\_1](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/toc/27_1)).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, this is Marx quoting W. Atkinson, who in turn quotes Bowring. Again, it is difficult to see how such material could have been presented in a public address without considerable awkwardness.

<sup>12</sup> See Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*.

<sup>13</sup> It is true that Marx does not depict the suffering of slaves explicitly. He includes no quotations from abolitionist pamphlets to parallel Bowring's account of the starvation of Dacca's weavers. However, given the consistent references to slavery throughout Marx's writings, I think the referent to England's "heavy burden" in the West Indies is clear. The passage implies both the burden that stems from capital's direct exploitation in which it extracts value from the production of commodities, and the burden arising from the social destitution in the wake of capital's

inevitable abandonment of one region for more profitable sites elsewhere (in this case, Marx speculates that cheap wage labor in South Asia will displace slave labor in the Caribbean). Again, I will suggest that this argument can be seen as something of a precursor to Marx's Working Day Chapter, where he offers the famous dictum, "Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" (414).

<sup>14</sup> See in particular Chapters 7-10, 126-77. Among the principal contributions of Williams' book is that he theorizes racism toward Afro-diasporic people *historically*, specifically in relation to the requirements for capital's accumulation that drove the slave trade, its gradual abolition, and the legacies it continues to cast long after the descendants of slaves have been pulled into and/or displaced from wage labor. Williams' approach – in its commitment to theorizing oppression (and liberation) in relation to the historical determinants of capital and the world market – contrasts with the recent rise within the US academy of theories of intersectionality, which attribute various degrees of autonomy to race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, and a range of other forms of discrimination or marginalization. For a valuable engagement with and corrective to intersectionality's tendencies to conceive of oppression as autonomous vectors that aggregate at points of intersection, see David McNally's essay, "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory," in the recent collection *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*. McNally's essay and Social Reproduction Theory more broadly (like Williams' work) insist that any contemporary theoretical analysis of oppression must necessarily advance from within a theoretical analysis of the capital relation and the historical determinants that issue from there.

<sup>15</sup> The quotation in Williams changes the verb to past tense: "Jesus Christ was Free Trade, and Free Trade was Jesus Christ," though he admits to be quoting from memory.

<sup>16</sup> Williams succinctly characterizes this shift through the struggle for dominance between Liverpool's shipping interests (garnering huge profits both from slaves and other commodities) and Manchester's industrial



interests: "In the age of mercantilism Manchester was Liverpool's hinterland, in the age of laissez faire Liverpool was Manchester's suburb" (162). As a speculative aside, the particular importance of Liverpool in the development of English capital may, in part, explain Marx's decision to include transport as a form of value-productive labor, when he counts all other aspects of circulation as unproductive labor. See *Capital*, Volume Two, 225-29, and *Grundrisse*, 533-34.

<sup>17</sup> The legacy of Toussaint and the Haitian slave revolts looms large in this history as well. C.L.R. James, in *The Black Jacobins*, makes plain the stakes of this conflict for both slave and planter: "The rich are only defeated when they are running for their lives" (78).

<sup>18</sup> This passage, surely, is a precursor to Marx's famous synthesis in the first volume of *Capital* (replete with its reference to slavery): "Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labor, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital" (799).

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