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Enthusiasm

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Enthusiasm, an affect once associated with abstraction and testimony to divine inspiration, has its origins in religious experience.¹ In the long history of this Western phenomenon, it was generally thought that the only real measure of humanity's access to divinity could be confirmed by the expression of something named "enthusiasm." Over time a series of religious reformations coupled with modern social and political enlightenments, transformed enthusiasm from a religious affect into a political danger. And, by the end of the 18th century, enthusiasm seemed to have become a centerpiece of revolutionary, rather than religious, life.²

Because of this complicated admixture of religious and revolutionary potencies, we should not be surprised that Marx struggled to orient himself to the concept of enthusiasm. If capital's power manifests itself in abstractions that re-disguise materiality, enthusiasm might appear as a significant resource for capitalism, generating new pathways for novelty (Toscano 2008). But, as I hope to illustrate, Marx's language on enthusiasm shifts, specifically from *Enthusiasmus* to *Begeisterung*, tracing Marx's changing thinking on the communist revolution, as well as the religious imaginary. Following this shift, we see an opening for a new modality of enthusiasm that can be deployed against capitalism and towards collective agency, in the form of a revolutionary occupation.

1. Illusions

Marx's struggle with religion, and its notable absence in his theory of a communist future, is well known (Colas 1997, 337-342). Contextually, Marx is often read as one who means to assault the passivity of religion, in contrast to the necessary activity of the enlightenment of communism (Rosenberg 2011, 60). Indeed, the religious experience he so often describes looks to be emblematic of a logic of abstraction. As he famously exclaims, "Religion is the general theory of the world – its encyclopedic compendium, logic in popular form, spiritualistic point-d'honneur, its enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*), its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general consolation and justification." (Marx 1976a, 378).³

What would Marx mean here by referring to religion as the enthusiasm of the world? His own vocabulary in this passage seems particularly abstract. In its totality of form and spirit, Marx presents religion with a force that is undeniable. As he continues, "Religious misery is at once the expression of true suffering and also the protest against true misery. Religion is the sigh of the desperate creature, the heart of a heartless world, the ghost of a spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people." (Marx 1976a, 378). Here, in this famous passage, Marx illustrates the potency of religion's force. There is a double, liminal quality to religion; religion appears to be both something and nothing – both pain and the protest against pain, heart and heartlessness, spirit and spiritlessness. Significantly, this double quality becomes a vehicle for bourgeois forces. Capital – so easily dressed in religious disguise – deploys such forces to exploit, with the consequence of deep-seated alienation. In naming enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*) as central to this double quality of religion, Marx highlights for us his thinking on this phenomenon. He sees enthusiasm as something of a passage between the presence and absence of reality – a sort of threshold between illusion and true reality.

2. Enthusiasm and Interest

Marx's early language on enthusiasm demonstrates that this phenomenon might

be caught between abstracted and material realities. This is especially clear in his pairing of the concepts of enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*) and interest (*Interesse*). Reflecting on the dangerous bourgeois logics he sees as apparent in earlier modalities of revolution, Marx explains, "If the [French] revolution was a failure, it was not because the masses were 'enthusiastic' and 'interested' in the revolution, but because the most numerous part – the part distinct from the bourgeoisie – was not really interested in the principle of revolution, did not have a peculiarly revolutionary principle – only an 'idea' – and so only an object of momentary enthusiasm and apparent uprising." (Marx 1972b, 87). Marx's use of the idiom enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*) seems to borrow from the Greek etymology – to be inspired, possessed by a god. Interest, by contrast, conveys the importance of something – that which is of interest is that something which would make a difference (from the Latin *interesse* – to be between, "inter" and "esse", to be of difference). Joining enthusiasm and interest together, Marx highlights a notion of enthusiasm as that affect which "makes a difference" or at least that feeling that "a difference" is being made. This is consistent with several instances of Marx's use of enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*) in his thought, prior to 1848. As Marx summarizes, "No class of civil society can play this [transformative] role without arousing a moment of enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*) in itself and in the masses... a moment in which it is truly the social head and the social heart." (Marx 1976a, 388).⁴ The moment of enthusiasm matters; though Marx seems, at least in his early work, unclear as to why.

In Marx's early uses of the term "enthusiasm" he seems to simply recapitulate the religious affect, even in political contexts. But such an expression of enthusiasm risks the agency of those who experience it. I propose that, at least within his terminology, we see an anxiety regarding the utilization of enthusiasm. If enthusiasm is an affect that shows us difference, what is the moment of difference, and who is making it? Attention to Marx's changing language on enthusiasm highlights a resolution to this problematic. Indeed, in his later writing, we see a rethinking of enthusiasm, such that it might become possible to counteract the illusionary qualities latent in the previous "religious" conception.

3. New Possessions

As his work progresses, Marx begins to deploy a new vocabulary for enthusiasm. This shift in his language and his thinking is most obvious in the *Communist Manifesto*, where the language of the “spectre” (*Gespenst*) highlights a move in vocabularies away from revolution as confrontation, and towards a language of haunting through occupation.⁵ The work of the *Manifesto* highlights another form of political power – a “public” power – that lies in collectivity itself. This collectivity is best conceived as a spectre, haunting the living, coopting the ghostly power of capital from itself. This spectre becomes the “true democracy” to be fulfilled, where free development of each and all is possible. As Marx explains,

The bourgeoisie, when it comes to rule, has destroyed all the feudal, patricidal, idyllic conditions. It has mercilessly torn the multicolored and variegated feudal ties that bound humanity to any natural order and left no other link between man and man than pure, naked interest. It has drowned the holy shudders of pious fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*), of chivalrous enthusiasm (*Begeisterung*), of petty-bourgeois sadness in the icy waters of selfish calculation. (Marx 1972c, 464-65).

At this crucial moment in the *Manifesto*, when Marx is explicating the logic of “overturning” essential to the bourgeois activity of revolution, we see an important edit. The bourgeoisie have eradicated zealotry (*Schwärmerei*) and chivalrous enthusiasm (*Begeisterung*) in the icy waters of calculation. At first gloss, the emphasis here appears to be on calculation. But a close reading must also account for the specificity of Marx’s language, and what is present and absent: why *Schwärmerei* and *Begeisterung*, and not *Enthusiasmus*? Why this shift in vocabulary?⁶

The shift we find illustrated here highlights for us a change in Marx’s own thinking. *Enthusiasmus* may be left out precisely because it was the centerpiece of the bourgeois revolutions. Marx’s use of this new synonym for enthusiasm – *Begeisterung* (which we might read etymologically as *mit Geist erfüllen* / filled with spirit/ghost) – is crucial, for it allows him to move away from the language of religion and divinity and towards the language of haunting. Here, enthusiasm is

transformed, precisely at the moment where the word disappears. Enthusiasm-as-*Begeisterung* becomes with spirit, with ghosts, enlivened with inspirations; a clear shift away from thinking on enthusiasm as “god within”. The *Manifesto* makes possible that shift by its claim to embody the specter that haunts (*Gespenst* / *Geist*). Here, Marx introduces us to embodied ghosts, beyond the bourgeois lifeworld and the means of production. This goes to the center of the bourgeois anxiety of production – all that is solid melts away. This shift from “being with god” to “being with spirits” offers a new affective vocabulary that helps to make manifest the activity of occupation (the haunting of capitalist systems of power). Taking over and occupying the networks of bourgeois power, and accelerating those networks – networks of communication, networks of transport, networks of power – enthusiasm as haunting (*Begeisterung*) becomes the means of countering the illusions manifest in bourgeois enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*). Revolution, in a moment of enthusiasm, is no longer overturning; revolution is occupation.

Conclusion

Marx’s shift in language – a shift which perpetuates throughout most of the remainder of his writings after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* – traces a contrasting transformation in his thinking. *Begeisterung* brings us within enthusiasm. Now enthusiasm-as-*Begeisterung* has become the affect of revolutionary occupation, not simply the desire for abstraction or revolutionary overturning. “Enthusiasm” seems to be an affective threshold for Marx, residing on the boundary between the religious fantasy of human reality and the affective motivation of true human emancipation. In this way, we can read Marx as beginning a new political enthusiasm.

Notes

1] For an excellent and ranging history of this concept, see for example, Fenves 1997.

2] Recent work on the concept of revolution, especially that of Ypi, attempts to draw Kant and Marx closer together. See Ypi (2014, 7) for example. I argue, counter Ypi, that Marx rethinks enthusiasm from within revolution, as opposed to that of the standpoint from without. This makes sense of Marx's changing language from "enthusiasm" to "Begeisterung", as I explain below.

3] All translations of Marx are my own.

4] Ypi is also concerned with this transformative affect in Marx's thinking on revolution. For instance, she claims "In this moment of enthusiasm, Marx continues, the claims and rights of this agent 'are truly the claims and rights of society itself' and the actions it produces are those of society's 'social head' and 'social heart.'" (Ypi 2014, 9).

5] Here I follow on Derrida's famous analysis. "What for the moment figures only as a specter in the ideological representation of old Europe must become, in the future, a present reality, that is, a living reality. The *Manifesto* calls, it calls for this presentation of the living reality: we must see to it that in the future this specter-and first of all an association of workers forced to remain secret until about 1848-becomes a reality, and a living reality. This real life must show itself and manifest itself, it must present itself beyond Europe, old or new Europe, in the universal dimension of an International." (Derrida 2006, 126).

6] It was an important late German enlightenment debate as to whether or how we might distinguish between *Enthusiasmus* and *Schwärmerei*. The worry here was that, without some affect of inspiration, the very notion of "enlightenment" might collapse into a cold and calculating reason. Marx's language seems very attuned here to these historically informed worries.

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