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## **Marxist Keywords for Performance: Performance and Political Economy**

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*Performance studies is awash with scholarship that examines performance in relation to its labor processes, modes of management, financial infrastructures, and so forth. But there remains a striking lack of shared critical understanding of what terms such as value or capital mean and how they can be applied when studying performance forms like theatre, dance, or live art. The range of meanings that performance scholars attach to the word commodity, or even the seemingly obvious entity of “the state,” for example, reveals more than a slight degree of imprecision or disagreement. It indicates a lack of systematic thought and, consequently, a need to interrogate the categories used for discussing performance’s political economy. An approach rooted in Karl Marx’s critique of political economy, but expanded to account for crucial absences in his own worldview, offers the analytical tools and political standpoint required for just such a task.*

*Given the complexity of these concepts and the specific challenges of applying them to theatre and performance, a collective and collaborative approach to research and writing is necessary. To this end, the Performance and Political Economy research collective has come together through shared discussions and events over the past three years. In addition to running a monthly reading group since the spring of 2018, we organized a study day in February 2020 to bring other artists and researchers into our discussion of the relation between political economy and performance studies. These engagements have led to our collaboratively written “Marxist Keywords for Performance,” which aims to define key Marxist concepts and explore how they can be applied to study performance.*

*Along with a prefatory essay that outlines the methodological aims of our intervention and describes how this project relates to and draws from interdisciplinary debates in political economy, we have provided entries for five keywords: capital, class, commodity, the state, and value. Each of our entries is designed to act as a self-contained reference material; for this reason, we have included suggestions for further readings but refrained from integrating citations within the entries themselves. Each entry can be read on its own, but there is also a rigorous consistency across them. References to the state in the entry on class, and to class struggle in the entry on the state, for example, complement each other. As a contribution to the critique of performance and political economy, our keywords are meant to offer more than terminological precision; they provide an integrated and systematic perspective on performance as it exists in capitalist society.*

*This research collective began meeting as a monthly seminar in London in May 2018, but now includes contributors located internationally. This iteration of our keywords project has nine contributors, but our collaborative research process involves input from the wider collective.*

## **Preface: A Contribution to the Critique of Performance and Political Economy**

Few people would deny that performance can be a site of economic activity. Neither a ticket-buying audience nor the performers paid to appear before them could convincingly claim otherwise. But many are those who would treat this self-evident economic fact as a vulgar distraction from the social function of performance to educate, to edify, to protest, or, more simply, to offer a good night out. A Marxist perspective on performance—of the sort we seek to contribute to here—insists it is necessary to examine together the economics and the social function of performance. Various approaches for studying the political economy of performance exist.<sup>1</sup> What distinguishes a Marxist method, to adapt a phrase from Marx, is the “ruthless criticism” of both the capitalist social conditions that make a performance possible and the capitalist society such a performance helps to reproduce.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit, then, our contribution is an attempt to scrutinize the very categories on which the political-economic study of performance has been built.

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<sup>1</sup> Some exemplars of particular methods for studying the political economy of performance include the following: for an historical approach, see Tracy Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage: 1800–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); for a cultural materialist approach, see Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); for an empirical approach, see William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts—The Economic Dilemma* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966); for a Bourdieuan approach, see Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Marx to Ruge, September 1843, Letters from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm).

Performance and Political Economy (PPE) is a loosely structured research collective that first came together in 2018 as a reading group in London. Our initial ambition was to explore how Marxist value theory can be used to study performance. As our numbers grew so too did our scope of interest, expanding out from the specifics of value theory toward a broader critique of political-economic thought in performance studies. Our conversations have covered a wide terrain, including but not limited to such topics as emotional labor, social reproduction, fossil capital, strikes and riots, and the gendered and racialized dynamics of primitive accumulation. Reading together has helped us shape shared understandings of important categories in political economy—the definitions of which we now circulate through this collaboratively written article.

Performance studies is awash with scholarship that examines performance in relation to its labor processes, modes of management, financial infrastructures, and so forth. But there remains a striking lack of shared critical understanding of what terms such as *value* or *capital* mean and how they can be applied when studying performance forms like theatre, dance, or live art. The range of meanings that performance scholars attach to the word *commodity*, or even the seemingly obvious entity of “the state,” for example, reveals more than a slight degree of imprecision or disagreement. It indicates a lack of systematic thought and, consequently, a need to interrogate the categories used for discussing performance’s political economy.

As a brief example of what we mean, consider the term *neoliberal*. This is, arguably, the most common word used by scholars to discuss the political economy of contemporary performance. *Neoliberal* was first coined to name the mid-century thought of a small group of economists who periodically gathered on the shores of Lake Geneva to lament the decline of European empire while dreaming up ways of legally

securing global economic flows by bolstering the political sovereignty of nation-states.<sup>3</sup> Today, the word *neoliberal* (along with the grander *neoliberalism*) saturates humanities scholarship, but its definition has become unmoored from the initial coinage. This loss of specificity, however, is less consequential than the fact that the term has become encrusted with competing layers of meaning and is now trusted to index varying and often divergent social conditions.

In theatre and performance studies, for instance, *neoliberal* has become a shorthand for explaining everything from the combined effects of marketization and funding cuts on theatres to the increasing pressure on precarious artists to become risk-taking entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup> Underpinning many critiques of neoliberalism in performance studies is a (sometimes explicit) desire for the kind of security and stability once promised by the postwar welfare state and its push for full (male) employment. Critiques of neoliberalism, thus, often reveal themselves to be less a criticism of capitalism as a historical system and more a nostalgia for a specific and geographically isolated moment in capitalist history. The nostalgic gaze that structures so many critiques of neoliberalism in performance studies risks overlooking all kinds of racist, gendered, ableist, imperialist, and homophobic oppressions on which the so-called golden age of capitalism was built. What writers like Sarah Brouillette have said of the popularity of *neoliberal* in literary studies applies equally as well to performance studies: “The term neoliberalism tends to index reluctance to name capitalism as the

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<sup>3</sup> See Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> A more consistent and compelling use of *neoliberal* and *neoliberalism* in theatre and performance studies can be found in research that deploys the term to describe a historically specific political-economic condition targeting the Global South and defined by capital-led international development and structural adjustment programmes. See, for example, Patricia Ybarra, *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018); Jisha Menon, *Brutal Beauty: Aesthetics and Aspiration in Urban India* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

culprit in the destitution and immiseration of people's lives."<sup>5</sup> We do not deny that a term like *neoliberal* can be useful for criticizing the political economy of performance; however, this term and the assumptions that guide its use also warrant criticism. An analytical approach and political standpoint rooted in Karl Marx's critique of political economy, albeit expanded to account for crucial absences in Marx's own worldview, is suited for just such a task.

Included here are the first five entries of what we intend to be a larger keywords project. Each entry outlines how a specific category, defined through a Marxist perspective, can be used to analyze performance. Compared to a more recent term like *neoliberal*, the keywords we have chosen to start with—*capital*, *class*, *commodity*, *the state*, and *value*—have a long history of use, and thus could be said to be foundational to general understandings of performance's political economy. We drafted this first batch of keywords during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the project began as an open study day that we organized in February 2020, just weeks before lockdown measures took effect in England. That event was structured as a series of discussions focused on specific keywords that circulate widely in performance theory and which are also fundamental to the Marxist critique of political economy. The chance to engage in conversation with fellow researchers and artists helped us recognize that our work on political economy could be useful to others in the field, and we settled on the mode of a keywords project to share our collective research.

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Brouillette, "Keyword: Neoliberalism," Presented at the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, Clemson University, November 2015. For an expanded version of this argument, see Sarah Brouillette, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald-Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 227–90.

Given the complexity of political-economic concepts and the specific challenges of applying them to performance, we decided that a collaborative approach to writing was necessary—especially one that made it possible for us to draw on the distinct knowledges, experiences, and standpoints of everyone contributing. The present work was created through the labor of nine people, but it owes much to the insights, ideas, and friendship of many others who participate in the PPE reading group.<sup>6</sup> Like any extended collaboration, writing these keywords—carried out over lengthy online meetings—was demanding; it was also invigorating to have a regular opportunity to engage in deep discussion with friends during the winter months of a global pandemic. Our approach to collective research has not followed any specific program, though we did take our cue from like-minded Marxist-oriented groups working in other fields, most notably the Warwick Research Collective (2020) and the Night Workers (2014). To work collectively in this manner has been both a welcome break from and a pointed riposte to the atomizing routines and individualizing norms that are entrenched in a field dedicated to studying collaborative creative activity.

The rest of this preface outlines the political and methodological aims of our intervention. After describing how this project draws from and critiques interdisciplinary debates in political economy, we explain why we chose to use the keyword genre. A short note discussing our approach to citations and offering recommendations for further reading then serves as a conclusion to this preface.

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<sup>6</sup> We thank the rest of those in the Performance and Political Economy reading group whose insights have fed into this project in different ways: Amy Borsuk, Lucy Freedman, Faisal Hamadah, Elyssa Livergant, Rebekah Maggor, Lynne McCarthy, Michael McKinnie, Louise Owen, Giulia Palladini, Nicholas Ridout, Alan Read, and Charlotte Young.

## **There Are Plenty of Businesses Like Show Business**

This project is meant as a contribution to the critique of performance's political economy. Our keywords aim to consolidate the growing critical attention within performance studies towards political economy but also to push it further. Existing approaches to studying political economy in the field tend to privilege reading performances as symptoms of economic transformations or reflections of capitalist ideology, rather than considering the position of these performances *within* capitalist production processes.<sup>7</sup> While careful analysis of aesthetics, semiotics, or embodiment can cast new light on the social function of a performance, here we advocate for a method that can more critically and substantively grapple with performance's participation in systems of capitalist production.

Instead of parsing the aesthetic or embodied differences among performance forms like theatre, dance, or live art, we propose examining them through their shared forms of economic organization and characteristics. To a certain extent, we take our starting point from the (decidedly non-Marxist) economists William Baumol and William Bowen, who declared over fifty years ago:

[It is] helpful to treat the arts, not as an intangible manifestation of the human spirit, but as a productive activity which provides services to the community; one which in this respect, does not differ from the manufacture of electricity or the supply of transportation or house-cleaning services. In each case labor and equipment are utilized to make available goods and services which may be

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<sup>7</sup> For instructive examples of this approach, see Judith Hamera, *Unfinished Business: Michael Jackson, Detroit, and the Figural Economy of American Deindustrialization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jasmine Mahmoud, "Space: Postdramatic Geography in Post-Collapse Seattle," in *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*, ed. Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish, and Brandon Woolf (London: Methuen Bloomsbury, 2019), 48–65; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).



purchased by the general public. In each case there is a technology whereby these inputs are transformed into a finished product.<sup>8</sup>

Our intervention is partly methodological, insofar as we propose examining the production of performance in the manner one might study other capitalist labor processes. But whereas the likes of Baumol and Bowen pursued their study of performance through the frame of bourgeois economics, our perspective rejects any form of thought that takes the existence of capitalist social relations for granted, let alone as desirable.

We are by no means the first to insist on the need to critically study performance's political economy. As Tracy Davis puts it:

To try to explain the quixotic outcomes of management, the visceral experience of theatre-going, the social significance of theatre-making, and the connections between the state and what aspire to be art without reference to economics—both in the circulation of theoretical ideas and the more tangible effects of capital—is to impoverish the history.<sup>9</sup>

We share Davis's sentiment, but our contribution here is different from much of what has come before. In addition to taking a Marxist position, we offer neither a history of the political and economic development of theatre (as Davis does), nor an attempt at analyzing or mapping the economic state of contemporary performance. Instead, we seek to scrutinize and, in doing so, clarify the categories that should serve as the groundwork for any critique of performance's political economy in a capitalist society. In this regard, we have a reliable set of guides, chief among them Marx, whose own

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<sup>8</sup> Baumol and Bowen, *Performing Arts*, 162.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*, 2.

engagement with the field of political economy in his own time amounted to nothing less than a categorical critique.

The field of political economy, in its classical form at least, emerged in the eighteenth century as a branch of moral philosophy. Unlike bourgeois economists of today, the founding figures of political economy were concerned less with the pricing of goods than with how to best manage their circulation, distribution, and consumption. Marx found in the books of writers like Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus a concerted attempt to explain how capital operated.<sup>10</sup> Yet the perspective they offered was fundamentally limited by the fact that in seeking to understand the laws of capital they took the existence of such laws as given. Classical political economists deployed what Susan Buck-Morss calls an anthropological approach to understanding the economic life of capitalist society.<sup>11</sup> They assumed that the production and exchange of commodities was almost natural, as if what distinguishes humans from animals was an inclination to approach the products of human labor as commodities that could be bartered or traded with others. Political economy glimpsed the importance of the commodity in capitalist society, but it never thought to question why the product of human labor should take such an alienated form.

Many readers of Marx, be they bourgeois economists or even (some) revolutionary socialists, have mistaken his work as an attempt to correct classical political economy.<sup>12</sup> This has led to myriad errors, from claims that Marx's critique of capital is outdated to the belief that his *Capital* provides the cornerstone for communist

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<sup>10</sup> For an introduction to how Karl Marx fits into the history of political-economic thought, see Richard D. Wolff and Stephen Resnick, *Economics: Marxian Versus Neoclassical* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 456.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of these tendencies, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2016).

economic planning. But Marx's aim was not to improve political economy. Instead, as Michael Heinrich puts it, "[Marx] wanted to criticize the *categorical presuppositions* of an entire branch of knowledge" and "the manner in which it poses questions, meaning the distinction between that which political economy aims to explain and that which is accepted as so self-evident that it doesn't need to be explained at all."<sup>13</sup> Over the past half-century, a proliferation of new readings of Marx internationally have emphasized the "distinction"<sup>14</sup> or "break"<sup>15</sup> that Marx made with classical political economy. Moishe Postone, for instance, insists that Marx provides "a critique of political economy, an immanent critique of the classical labor theory of value itself." Postone continues:

Marx takes the categories of classical political economy and uncovers their unexamined, historically specific social basis. He thereby transforms them from transhistorical categories of the constitution of wealth into critical categories of the specificity of the forms of wealth and social relations in capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

Recent philologically rigorous and historically grounded treatments of Marx like Postone's foreground the continued relevance in Marx's critique of what makes capitalism a historically specific system of social life. Marx's anti-capitalist critique is not a moral one that seeks to right some isolated injustice or inequality; rather, it recognizes the destructive tendencies inherent to the system itself and argues for its total abolition.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's "Capital,"* trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Jairus Banaji, "From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel's Dialectic in Marx's Capital," in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 2015), 36.

<sup>15</sup> Diane Elson, "Introduction," in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 2015), ii.

<sup>16</sup> Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56.

Marx's critique of political economy targeted the separation of politics from economics that defines bourgeois ideology. Marx, most notably in *Capital*, demonstrated how the economic exploitation of a worker by a capitalist is itself a kind of domination, albeit one that bourgeois society obscures by granting individuals legal "equality" and the "freedom" to sell one's labor power to someone else.<sup>17</sup> As historians from Karl Polanyi to Timothy Mitchell have argued, the professional field of economics, since its consolidation in and around World War II, has taken the lead from classical political economy in severing the "economic" from the "political."<sup>18</sup> But some Marxists have themselves avowed this separation, especially those whose economism assumes that political and cultural forms—from governments to theatres—are just the superstructural expressions of the economic base. Much "Marxism since Marx," Ellen Meiksins Wood writes, has perpetuated "the rigid conceptual separation of the 'economic' and the 'political' which has served capitalist ideology so well ever since the classical economists discovered the 'economy' in the abstract and began emptying capitalism of its social and political content."<sup>19</sup> Like Marx did, we start from the premise that economic exploitation constitutes all aspects of social life under capital—the theatres and universities at which we work are no exceptions. As Tithi Bhattacharya reminds us, the aim of any critique of political economy should be to "restore to the 'economic' process its messy, sensuous, gendered, raced, and unruly component: living

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002 [1944]); Timothy Mitchell, "Economists and the Economy in the Twentieth Century," in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 126–41.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 19.

human beings capable of following orders—as well as of flouting them.”<sup>20</sup> The critique of the political economy of performance, as we understand it, should have this same goal.

## **Our Keywords**

Of all the possible forms that our contribution to a critique of performance’s political economy could take, we have decided on a keywords project. In the introduction to *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams explains that his undertaking is motivated by the confusion that arises when people assume a shared meaning of words and by his own desire to interrogate the power relationships involved in the use of language, especially in how specific meanings are ascribed to seemingly everyday phrases.<sup>21</sup> More recently, John Patrick Leary’s *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism* examines buzzwords and corporate jargon, focusing on terms that a cynic might say mean very little but which nonetheless communicate insidious ideological claims.<sup>22</sup> Our project is slightly different from these, being concerned less with the elasticity of political language and more with providing concise, accessible introductions that can support the application of Marxist theory to performance in a rigorous and systematic way. In this regard, our contribution is more akin to recent Marxist interventions in other fields, like *Keywords for Marxist Art History Today*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tithi Bhattacharya, “How to Not Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press 2017), 70.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> John Patrick Leary, *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism* (London: Haymarket Books, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Hemingway and Larne Abse Gogarty, eds., *Keywords for Marxist Art History Today* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

To arrive at the five terms included here, we began by considering a much longer list of potential keywords that touched on various topics we had explored as a collective. Initial discussions took place about what shape each of these entries might take before we narrowed the project down to the five presented here. In addition to being foundational Marxist categories, these are also terms where the clarity offered by a keyword analysis could be valuable to those working within performance studies. Our plan is to build upon the keywords project over time, by eventually writing definitions for other terms we initially considered as well as others.

The keywords provided here—*capital*, *class*, *commodity*, *the state*, and *value*—are used in performance studies to mean many different things. This might entail, for example, the difference between social capital and economic capital, between regarding an artwork as aesthetically valuable and considering it as value that can be entered into exchange, or between treating class as an identity and recognizing it as a structuring relation of society. That a single term can mean many different things or point to multiple concepts is not a problem in itself—*value* necessarily has everyday connotations and a technical economic meaning. The problem we address is the lack of conceptual precision that arises from the slippage between these uses—such as when people start to judge claims about the economic production of value according to standards informed by, for instance, their specific everyday use of the word.

To define terms through the mode of a keywords project is to implicitly claim that the words we select need not be subjectively or idiosyncratically deployed as part of a robust system of analysis. Each of our entries is designed to act as a self-contained reference material; an individual entry can be read on its own, but there is also rigorous consistency across them. References to the state in the entry on class, and to class struggle in the entry on the state, for example, complement each other. As a contribution

to the critique of performance and political economy, our keywords are meant to offer more than terminological precision; they provide an integrated and systematic perspective on performance as it exists in capitalist society.

### **Engaging the Field of Performance and Political Economy**

Readers of our keywords will note the absence of citations. This is not meant to be a protest of academic conventions, nor are we trying to keep secret the writers to whom our thinking owes a debt. If anything, we are keen to share what we have been reading in the hopes that others might draw from them as well. We have excluded in-text citations, in part, to enhance the clarity and readability—and, thus, the usefulness—of our entries. In making this decision, we have followed the example of other keyword projects. An earlier draft of our keywords included extensive lists of sources associated with each entry, but even these were incomplete. They offered only partial acknowledgement of both what we consulted for this project and what has influenced our thinking, such that we came to worry these lists might be insufficient and misleadingly narrow. So instead of giving a list of works cited or further reading for each entry, we are providing here a short overview of recommended works that others interested in Marxism and performance could consult. This section is meant to be a rough field guide and is by no means an exhaustive account of what we read when writing these entries.

The premise of our keywords project is simple: any critique of performance's political economy should start with the writing of Karl Marx, specifically *Capital*. We expect (and hope) that this needs no explanation. The question of how we have read Marx is, however, less self-explanatory. Our own reading owes much to various heterodox interpretations of Marx that focus on understanding and outlining his theory

of value. Without wanting to give the impression that this constitutes anything like a uniform or even cohesive approach, the following guides are invaluable as a start: Isaak Illich Rubin, Moishe Postone, and Diane Elson.<sup>24</sup> And for its clarity and brevity, Michael Heinrich's introduction to *Capital* has no peer.<sup>25</sup> Much of the most vital elaborations on Marx's perspective have emerged from within strands of praxis like the Black radical tradition<sup>26</sup> and Marxist feminism,<sup>27</sup> as well as from Marxist theorists embedded in the Global South and Indigenous struggles.<sup>28</sup> For historical accounts of the origins and development of capitalism, the works of Giovanni Arrighi, Jairus Banaji, Harry Braverman, Robert Brenner, E. P. Thompson, and Ellen Meiksins Wood are essential.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, trans. Miloš Samardžija and Fredy Perlman (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008); Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*; Elson, "Introduction."

<sup>25</sup> Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's "Capital."*

<sup>26</sup> See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Black British Cultural Studies*, ed. Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16–60.

<sup>27</sup> See Bhattacharya, "How to Not Skip Class"; Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Hilary Creek (New York: Autonomedia, 1995); Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> See Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso, 2018 [1972]).

<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (London: Verso, 2006); Robert Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," in *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. T. H. Aston, and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 213–328; E. P. Thompson, *The*



The positive influence of performance studies is, admittedly, trickier for us to track. Our own interest in studying the political economy of performance certainly takes a cue from recent scholarship that examines performance and economics.<sup>30</sup> While this work ranges in its engagement with Marxist theory and methodology, it nonetheless provides a foundation within the field to build upon and develop into more thoroughgoing Marxist analysis. Moreover, there is much to be said for the increasingly rich elaboration on Marxist thought in performance studies, and which has informed our collective thinking in considerable ways.<sup>31</sup> But we have also found it necessary and useful to look further afield where the application of Marx's value theory to culture is, so far at least, even more robust and coherent. A starting point for many of us has been the legacy of Marxist cultural analysis associated with the Frankfurt School in

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*Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin 1991); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (New York: Verso, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> See Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2014); Harvie, *Fair Play*; Michael McKinnie, *Theatre in Market Economies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Derek Miller, *Copyright and the Value of Performance, 1770–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Marlis Schweitzer, *Transatlantic Broadway: The Infrastructural Politics of Global Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> See Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Michael Shane Boyle, "Performance and Value: The Work of Theatre in Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy," *Theatre Survey* 58, no. 1 (2017), 3–23; Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Giulia Palladini, *The Scene of Foreplay: Theater, Labor, and Leisure in 1960s New York* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017); Nicholas Ridout, *Scenes from Bourgeois Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Maurya Wickstrom, "Singing Slave Insurrection to Marx," *Theatre Survey* 58, no. 1 (2017): 68–85.

Germany<sup>32</sup> and subsequent Anglophone work on the relation of culture to late capitalism.<sup>33</sup> While indebted to these thinkers, we seek to move away from a focus on symptomatic readings and ideology critique and toward understanding culture through the categories of political-economic analysis in a way that actively engages with histories of racialization, queer of color of critique, and social reproduction. In this regard, it would serve performance studies well to engage further with more recent Marxist value theoretical work from disciplines like art history<sup>34</sup> and literary studies.<sup>35</sup> As people informed by the Marxist tradition, engaging scholarly writing is a worthy task

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<sup>32</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, ed. K. M. Newton (London: Palgrave, 1997), 161–71.

<sup>33</sup> See Buck-Morss, “Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display”; T. J. Clark, “On the Social History of Art,” in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9–21; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: B. Blackwell 1989); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” *New Left Review*, no. 82 (1973): 3–16.

<sup>34</sup> Historians and theorists of art have made the most rigorous applications of Marx’s value theory to culture so far. See Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art’s Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016); John Roberts, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London: Verso, 2006); Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Recent work in fields like English and comparative literature have made for the most diverse and exciting uses of Marxist thought in the humanities, ranging from engagements with queer of color critique and social reproduction theory to attempts to revise Marxist hermeneutics. The list of what we recommend could easily be much longer: Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Brouillette, “Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary”; Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018); Christopher Nealon, “Value | Theory | Crisis,” *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 101–6; Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Nat Raha, “Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction,” in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 85–115; Sam Solomon, *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism: Social Reproduction and the Institutions of Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

but should not be confused with our work in a deeper sense. We hope to keep the wider horizon of anti-capitalist struggle at the forefront of thinking, writing, and praxis.

### ***Capital***

Since it became a site of capital investment in and around the sixteenth century in Europe, theatre and other performing arts have been constantly transformed to better serve the needs of capital. These transformations have been made possible by tactics like rationalization, technological modernization, and increasing the divisions of labor. At least in this regard, the potential of artistic performance to be subsumed to capitalist production is similar to myriad other sectors of human activity that have been upturned by capital investment, most notably manufacturing and farming. Nonetheless, the exact relation of performance to capital remains difficult for scholars to pinpoint, owing as much to the discipline's ideological ambivalence towards the potential of performance to be subsumed to capital as to a lack of clarity of what capital actually is.

### **Defining *Capital***

Both the movement of capital and the meanings we assign to this term would seem to have no limit. A basic political-economic definition maintains that capital is wealth that creates more wealth. Typically, this happens when a capitalist provides to others the financial outlays they need to produce, transport, or sell things. In addition to this political-economic understanding of the term, which we develop in this entry, the term *capital* also appears in sociological writing to describe other kinds of investment geared towards accumulation, often by prefacing capital with an adjective. *Social capital*, for example, describes the networks of relations at an individual's disposal; *cultural capital* denotes individual privilege acquired through learning or aesthetic

cultivation; and *human capital* can refer either to an actuarial account of worker capability or an individual's personal investment in their own self-development, such as through higher education. These sociological understandings of capital, which are popular among theatre and performance scholars, tend to emphasize individualized social capacities that can be amassed, leveraged, or depleted. But these meanings of capital should not be conflated with or mistaken for the political-economic category of capital. When we talk of capital in political-economic terms, we are talking, instead, about a social process of wealth creation.

Marx called capital value in motion, describing the circuit of capital wherein a person or entity puts forward a quantity of money (M) to purchase a certain amount of commodities (C) with the intent of then selling commodities for more money (M). Despite their evident difference, both the money and the commodities in this circuit operate as capital so long as they remain in motion, constantly transforming into their other. However, neither money nor a commodity on their own are capital. For example, a capitalist can invest money in the commodities needed to produce a piece of theatre, such as a venue, lighting, costumes, and a backstage communications system. But, again, money is not inherently capital. If the money spent on these commodities in theatre is invested to make a profit, then it functions as capital; if the commodities needed for making theatre are simply bought and used to make theatre, without the aim of reaping profit, they are not a capital investment. The means of production in a theatre are economically like the raw materials and machines used in a factory: they have value but they cannot generate new value all by themselves. Marx refers to the money that is spent on these means of production as the "constant" part of capital, because its magnitude of value does not change and is simply transferred to the final product when expended as part of commodity production.

Only the commodity of labor-power is able to produce new value. The money spent on wages for an actor or technician is therefore the “variable” part of capital. Whereas the value of a commodity like costumes will be fixed once purchased for performance, there is immense variability in how and how much value can be extracted from labor. The gap between what a worker is paid and the value they produce by transforming raw materials with their labor is the source of surplus value. To return to the circuit of capital once more: a capitalist will use money to purchase commodities, in this instance, labor-power (actors) and raw materials (props). These actors will use the props and any other raw materials to produce a performance. To realize a profit, the capitalist will sell tickets to this performance for more money than they invested in paying the actors, extracting a surplus and gaining more money (M). Capitalist production, which relies on the surplus value generated by exploiting workers, is the dominant way that the production of goods and services is organized in our society.

### **The Subsumption of Labor to Capital**

Given that capital must always be in motion, grasping the fixed forms that capital assumes at any one time is less urgent than considering what happens to human activity when it is subjected to capitalist labor processes. Marx believed there were roughly two ways that labor becomes subsumed to capital. A capitalist could simply invest in an already-existing labor process, like an amateur theatrical production. They could introduce wages for those involved on the condition that they can sell tickets and claim any profits realized. The production proceeds, aesthetically, as it did before, but now there is a relationship of subordination, in which some workers become subordinated to capital. Marx calls this “formal subsumption” because the form of production remains unaltered. But in a competitive environment, the need of a capitalist

to maximize their return on investment will push them to transform the theatrical labor process. When a capitalist alters the real form of production, Marx calls this the “real subsumption” of labor to capital. The production process could now be reorganized to reduce costs with a codified and curtailed rehearsal period. A strict division of labor might be installed within the ensemble with the introduction of a director and stage manager. Money might be invested in an automated lighting system to both reduce their expenditure on variable capital and introduce the precision necessary to ensure performances last a determined amount of time. The list of labor process innovations a capitalist can apply to exploit workers is long.

When labor is subsumed to capital, both the ends and the means of production are qualitatively transformed to suit the needs of capital. If production were organized to satisfy human needs, it would be possible to reach a sufficient point and stop. Because the fundamental principle of capitalist production is to increase wealth, it has no internal limits. The continued accumulation of capital is the sole aim of capitalist production, regardless of the ambitions or beliefs of those involved, theatre artists included. The satisfaction of human needs, the improvement of production for its own sake, the simple accrual of money, and so on, are second order effects to capital accumulation. In a conveniently theatrical metaphor in *Capital*, Marx refers to the characters who appear on the economic stage as personifications of economic relations. He returns to this theatrical register later when he introduces the worker and capitalist as the dramatis personae of industrial capitalist production. Understanding people as avatars or personifications of the elements of capitalist production is not to deny the agency (or the culpability) of any of the actual people who in reality embody and enact these social relations. Rather, it is to recognize that an individual person can be a successful capitalist only insofar as they align their behavior with the internal logic of capital, by

following its lead and pursuing its ends. It is for this reason that Marx identifies capital as the “automatic subject,” the agent of motion in the capitalist system.

Today, most theatre could be said to be organized along capitalist lines, insofar as the managerial forms, divisions of labor, and labor-saving devices characteristic of a capitalist workplace saturate most theatres. But to say that theatre is generally organized along capitalist lines is not the same as saying all performance contributes to the circuit of capital accumulation. In fact, given the dismal box office returns of most theatrical productions and the obvious fact that most performance is not essential to the actual reproduction of labor-power, performance is better understood to be a drain on capital than a player in its accumulation. This raises a potential limit to a Marxist study of theatre, in that Marx ignored human activities that fall outside the circuit of capital, from domestic labor to the informal work on which much of the world’s surplus populations subsists on today. Marx’s methodological decision was, however purposeful, meant to reveal to us the world as capital sees it, allowing us to better grasp the absurd contradictions and exclusions on which it depends. But this approach should also allow us to view the extent to which capital can sully and distort even those human activities it does not deem always worth subsuming, like theatre.

### *Class*

Attempts to critically discuss class in performance are notoriously fraught. On the one hand, class division seems to sit at the heart of performance. “Elite” or “bourgeois” sensibilities often underpin the presentation of theatre, dance, and concert within well-funded and established performing arts venues. The traditional Western auditorium, too, would appear a stark representation of class society, where spectators are grouped together in different regions of the theatre based on how much they paid for

a ticket. On the other hand, performance industries are largely populated by people whose class positions are tricky to pin down. There are, to be sure, stark workplace divides in any given theatre, with laborers doing menial tasks for low rates of pay and impresarios boosting their cultural standing alongside their wealth through profitable investments. At the same time, the sector relies on an assortment of freelancers, casual staff, and self-employed contractors working for hourly wages, one-off fees, salaries, commissions, or even for free. In some areas, the rates of pay for creative roles are so low that only someone of independent means could reasonably be expected to even take them on.

Although work in performance is often poorly paid, precarious, and demanding, signifiers of class privilege—from levels of educational attainment to disposable wealth—are ubiquitous. This makes for an odd situation: in one moment, we might lament that working class people are unable to break into the sector, and, in the next, complain that venues exploit insecure staff on minimal pay. To understand the constitutive role of class in performance requires treating class as a set of relations and not just a static identity centered around implicit or explicit values of authenticity, or understood as predictive from consumptive habits reframed as questions of “taste.” Class is an essential structuring component of capitalist society that is determined by material positions within commodity production; it ensures the maintenance and reproduction of capitalism but can also contribute to its overthrow.

### **The Proletarianization of Performance**

Despite the complexities and nuances in how individuals can experience class society, class is founded on the fundamental opposition between the proletariat and the capitalist class that Marx described in *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx, writing with



Friedrich Engels, famously insisted that the movement of history is motored by a relation of struggle between a series of opposing groups, with one group having dominion over a social process of production. Precapitalist societies controlled the means of production more as a means of direct organization. Under capital, this logic of class relations acquires historical specificity as a relation of production. For the circuit of capital to proceed apace, there must be a class that owns property and a class that does not. In other words, there must be a group of people who commands access to the means of production on which everyone else relies.

Being property-less compels the class of workers to enter into a seemingly voluntary transactional relationship with the class of owners. This is the process of proletarianization. Proletarians are, unlike peasants or slaves, legally free: they are not directly forced to work and can enter into transactions with others at their own discretion. But, as Marx pointed out, they are also free in a second sense: they are separated from the essential things they need to live (and from the means to produce them). This double freedom leaves the proletarian with only one way to obtain the means to survive, which is to sell the only thing they have left: their ability to work (labor-power) on the market for money (a wage) with which they can in turn purchase goods. This is the condition of life for the majority of people in a capitalist society, and it is also the process through which the majority of goods are produced. By this determination, *proletarian* does not directly correlate to *working-class* in the cultural or sociological sense (it predicts nothing about tastes, habits, or ideology) or even to economic impoverishment. The class relation under capital refers, above all, to the relations of production in society, and a class by this definition designates a specific position within the social process of production.

Proletarianization does not only refer to turning people into proletarians. It also

describes a corresponding process of transforming different kinds of productive activity into proletarian jobs. The transformation of theatre under capital exemplifies the dynamic social and historical process of proletarianization, as the status and class relations of performance workers have shifted alongside the actual labor processes of theatre. For example, a cohort of actors working for wages in theatres they do not own or control emerged in the sixteenth century, though they performed alongside sharers who had a financial stake in the companies and apprentices being brought into the trade in the manner of a traditional craft. Many actors continued to enjoy a craft-like relationship to their work into the nineteenth century, with acting being an occupation typically taken up by those born into wealthy families who had the means to fund their own companies or troupes. These actors had a relatively high degree of control over their own labor and were often even involved in the design and running of theatrical productions themselves. As new divisions of labor became entrenched in the theatre around the turn of the twentieth century—perhaps most notably defined by directors assuming managerial roles and producers taking over financial responsibilities—the actor was recast from a craftsman, who owns the means of production, to a trained, skilled worker, who is employed by a producer. The expansion of conservatories opened up acting as a career for people from different backgrounds, but it also entailed a loss of creative and economic control for performers.

### **Performances of Class**

Although many kinds of performance have undergone proletarianization, this hardly means that everyone who works in performance recognizes themselves as a proletarian. It is hard to imagine that star performers, elite writers, jet-setting directors, or the professionals paid a pretty penny to manage companies experience their work in

the theatre in a proletarianized fashion. What's more, some of the most exploited and alienated workers might not view their experience as such—after all, theatre training programs generally cultivate an ardent faith in meritocracy, attributing the experience of exploitation and alienation to individual deficiencies in talent or attitude. The unspoken curricular aim of drama schools, dance academies, and conservatoires is to convince students to regard each other as competitors, and that they should be grateful for the opportunity to work at all. Grin and bear it, otherwise the ranks of an entire reserve army of performers are clamoring to take your spot.

Thus it might come as no surprise that theatre workers are sometimes presented as symbolic stand-ins in discussions of class and contemporary work. The actor is often precariously employed, on casualized or short-term contracts, working in a series of project-based jobs, which involve a high degree of affective and emotional labor without any long-term job security. Actors tend to work multiple jobs, while delivering on the expectation of personal and creative commitment to each production they are hired for. Comparisons are often drawn between this set of employment relations and what are considered to be changes happening to the broader working class in overdeveloped capitalist countries, who are seen as now being increasingly subject to similar conditions, with the rise of the so-called precariat. Recognizing the operations of this system, however, does not come naturally to many of us, and requires explanation, education, and agitation. How and whether theatre can contribute to this project remains a charged topic.

### **Performance and Class Struggle**

The class relation is inherently antagonistic: it is a relation of struggle above all else. Capitalist employers want as much work for their money as they can get, and

workers want as much money for their work. This essential antagonism of interests can never be resolved through goodwill on either side, nor can it be opted out of; it is incumbent on every worker and employer by virtue of their situation. Therefore, class conflict is not a question of individual morality. At the heart of class struggle is the struggle over the value of labor-power—not only in terms of wages but also what standard of living those wages can afford, as in struggles over food prices, housing conditions, and health care. On the part of workers, class struggle can include industrial action, riots, and protests, as well as less codified and coordinated activity, like absenteeism, work slowdowns, and pilfering. Employers, for their part, have in their repertoire tactics that range from pay reductions and workplace discipline to automation. Each side calls on the state to defend its interests. This struggle between classes takes place on several levels: workplace antagonism, wider social movements, as well as within hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces.

Even in the theatre, a workplace defined far more than most by enthusiasm, goodwill, and a sense of shared purpose, there is a perpetual tug of war over work hours, the intensity of labor, and safety measures, over which work duties are reasonable and which are not—in short, over how much effort and agency the worker must surrender to earn their pay. In addition to this struggle between classes, there also exists antagonism within classes. The capitalist class is defined by the constant competition for profit among individual capitalists. But instead of dividing the capitalist class, this competition, which forces them to find ever new ways to exploit workers, is the glue that holds them together. Workers, too, are also constantly at odds with one another, forced into competition by their shared circumstances—an antagonism that often takes xenophobic, gendered, and racialized forms.

Performance makers have engaged with class, class consciousness, and their

own class positions in many ways. Some artists might explicitly aim to raise class awareness and solidarity through performance. Many types of popular performance like musical hall or pantomime, while not explicitly political, function nonetheless to reinforce a sense of working-class identity and belonging. Performance can serve many purposes: it can rouse class consciousness, provide a release valve to diffuse militancy, or interrogate existing class relationships. However, any performance that engages with class, no matter how radical its aims, is equally shaped by the tension resulting from its own relationship to capitalist society, whether through questions of funding, institutions, and/or the working conditions of those who create it.

In revolutionary moments, however, when the abolition of class society has been a real possibility, the class nature of art has become a more live and urgent debate. During the Russian Revolution, for example, arguments arose over whether a strictly proletarian art was needed, and how bourgeois art of the past should be treated. Some, such as the Proletkult group, argued for an exclusively proletarian art and aesthetic, free from the influence of the inherited culture. Other revolutionaries, including Leon Trotsky, strongly opposed the pursuit of a purely proletarian culture, and argued for assimilating the artistic achievements of the past, asserting that the aim of the revolution was not to simply replace bourgeois rule with the proletariat as a new ruling class. Instead, revolutionary artists should be working towards the eventual abolition of classes altogether. Such debates underscore the stakes of class in performance.

Using class as a Marxist category, rather than a sociological or cultural term, points to several directions for theatre and performance scholarship. Researchers may highlight performances that unveil the historically contingent reality of class relations and how they are distinct from works that reify class as a static identity. Second, scholars can study the relations of production within theatre and performance,

discerning those who own the means of production and those who are hired as wage-workers. Understanding these material relations can clarify how class operates within theatre and generate scholarship that is less prone to mapping formal and aesthetic changes onto a reformation of class relations. Lastly, researchers can explore the political questions surrounding class consciousness and class composition. In what ways does theatre help workers see their material circumstances for what they are? How might theatre play a role in roping proletarians into fascist movements that betray their material interests? In what ways can performance participate in processes of class composition and furthering anti-capitalist antagonisms more broadly? Class, as a Marxist category, invites certain ways of posing questions about performance, which further research can take up and expand.

### ***Commodity***

In simple terms, a commodity is a useful thing produced to be exchanged. Whether performance is or can become a commodity has long been a contentious issue within theatre and performance studies, though it seems that concern over the commodity status of performance owes less to uncertainty about performance's usefulness or exchangeability than it does to suspicions of what happens to things like theatre and dance when they become commodified. Discussions of performance as a commodity tend to rely on hazy assumptions of what a commodity is and how performance relates to capitalist production and consumption, without considering the historical conditions and social relations that make performance's commodification possible.

Commodification is frequently equated with compromised artistic merit or political capitulation. For some, to call a performance a commodity is to criticize it for

being overly commercial or aesthetically derivative. Alternately, the potential of performance to evade its commodification is frequently championed as a moment of resistance to market domination. In this regard, then, the discourse around the commodity status of performance echoes criticisms of commodification more generally. The commodification of performance—like the commodification of certain public services (such as education or healthcare), or of abstract concepts or sentiments (such as identity or happiness)—is frequently understood to be a bad thing by those who use the term. This usage carries the negative connotation of mass-produced consumer goods: to be commodified is to be forced to conform to market logics and therefore robbed of uniqueness and autonomy. In the case of theatre, discourses against performance as a commodity, which treat commodification as an imminent threat to be warned against, rely on an ideal of performance that is pristine and unsullied by the grubby realm of exchange—a dream without reality in a world spun by capital.

### **Performance as Commodity**

Dispensing with these moral or aesthetic implications, we can say that when performance is undertaken on a commercial basis, for the purposes of delivering it to a paying audience, it is functioning economically as a commodity. What's more, if the performance is organized along capitalist lines, in which one person or group pays the upfront production costs, hires other people to work, and has control over the sale and proceeds of the final product, then commodified performance can be a source of profits. This is all true regardless of the scale of the production or how much money is invested in it. It is also true regardless of the aesthetic or artistic form of the performance: live art, for example, is in principle no more or less susceptible to commodification than a mainstream musical.

The commodity status of live performance has been specifically debated because performance does not take the form of a material product that can be stored and traded (unlike the many other commodities that can be bought in a theatre, from play scripts and DVDs to all kinds of merchandise and refreshments, like keychains, pretzels, or champagne). Instead, the product of theatre—a performance—is said to be fleeting and ephemeral. What the audience consumes is an experience or event that expires at the moment of its production. However, given that a performance can be bought and sold, it is evident that the properties of the commodity can extend to transient activities, processes, and events just as well as to tangible objects (Marx uses the term *useful effect* to describe this kind of product). For such reason, it should come as no surprise that performance is often taken as an exemplar of the kinds of work that produce services, affects, and feelings, and which are defined by direct interactions between people; these include hospitality, medicine, education, and sex work.

### **Commodities in Capitalist Society**

Things have been bought and sold throughout much of human history, but it is only in modern capitalist society that production is fully dominated by the necessity of bringing the products of labor into exchange. In this form, commodity exchange is more than localized bargaining between individuals; it is the system upon which the whole of society is organized, in which useful things are produced for the purposes of exchange (rather than directly for satisfying human wants and needs). The fact that, in capitalist society, almost all production of useful things is also the production of commodities and almost all distribution of products takes place through exchange gives rise to some specific features of the commodity form.



Theatre can function as a metaphor to grasp what Marx termed the “dual character” of the commodity. A commodity is, first and foremost, a useful thing (a “use-value”). In much the same way, an actor standing on the stage is an immediately present being of flesh and blood. But the actor also stands in for the character, an abstract idea which, having no material body of its own, attaches itself to that of the actor; actor and character move and speak as one. The commodity, too, is more than just the physical use-value; because it can be exchanged with all other commodities, regardless of their material form, it too has an abstract component: value. When we accept that an actor represents a character, we are engaging in a shared agreement with the rest of the audience that the physical being in front of us is also the bearer of an imagined but collectively agreed-upon identity. They come into relation with other characters and props, each of which share this dual representation that denotes more than what they physically are. Just the same, when we encounter manufactured goods we accept that they each have a price (the exchange value of a commodity as expressed in money). They can be compared to one another qualitatively, even though they physically may have nothing in common and are used to satisfy different needs. When we say that one commodity is worth more than another, we are saying that all goods stand in relation to one another. This relation is, in fact, a shared agreement between all people in a capitalist society. The seemingly natural relation of exchangeability that exists between commodities is, in reality, a social relationship between people. This is what Marx termed the “fetish-like character of the commodity.”

The system of commodities determines the conditions for producing performance in our society, just as much as it determines everything else—theatre and dance do not take place externally to it. Even if a given performance is not commodified, this does not mean it exists outside the realm of commodity exchange.

Performance that is not produced for the sake of profit, or even not exchangeable for money at all, generally still makes use of things that were produced for exchange and accessible only through purchase, from lighting equipment to wigs to transit vans. No performance in a capitalist society is immune to the commodity form. There is nothing inherent to performance that determines its commodity status; nor are forms for performance like theatre and dance inherently immune to commodification. By rejecting the baseless assumption that there is something unique to performance in a capitalist society that resists commodification, scholars can develop further analyses of how the production and exchange of commodities conditions, either directly or indirectly, the domains of theatre, dance, and live art.

### *The State*

The purpose of the state in a capitalist society is to secure the conditions that are necessary for capital accumulation. The performing arts, as a distinctly unprofitable sector of human activity, tend to be more of a drain on capital investments than a contributor to them. In recent history, performance often appears as one among many line items that have fallen victim to the neoliberal axe. Funding cuts to theatre, dance, and other performing arts might suggest that state interventions in social life have dwindled over the last half-century. But as intensifications of state activity make clear—from police militarization to border control expansions—the state is by no means in retreat. Within the neoliberal period, this seeming diminution of governmental activity has served to distract from the persistence of the state in shaping both citizens' lives and the performing arts. The dominant narrative that desirable state functions (notably, arts funding) have been stripped back in pursuit of a reactionary political agenda implicitly assumes that the nation state in a capitalist context is an instrument that, under proper

elected leadership, can serve the needs of its citizens rather than of capital. This faith, prevalent in theatre and performance studies, indicates the lack of a structural critique of the state as such.

### **What Is the State?**

The state is an institutional ensemble of activities, including regulation, law enforcement, militarism, taxation, and public services. The state is distinct from both the government (the administration of the state's institutions and exercise of its power) and the nation (an imagined social and cultural identity imposed upon or adopted by the subjects of the state's rule). The state rules over its people, cohering individuals with disparate material interests into an identifiable group. The state uses its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence to enforce certain social relations and behaviors on people, thereby making them its subjects. But its sovereignty does not always require brute force. Instead, a legal system mediates its power and guarantees the freedoms upon which the circuit of capital relies. In addition to coercion, the bourgeois state's legitimacy hinges on persuasion and complex forms of popular consent. Whether or not people approve of the specific actions of the state's agents, they broadly accept its position over them and their subordination to it, and this acceptance gives the state its legitimacy.

The state's continued existence depends on its capacity to preserve the necessary conditions for the functioning of the capitalist economy. Domestically, the state stands above a nation of people that encounter each other as legally free and with equal rights to own and sell private property, including their own labor-power. It uses laws, courts, and police to regulate how people interact and to protect private property. Where the state's subjects have competing material interests, the state makes the ultimate and

inviolable decision over who owns what. A bourgeois state maintains the class relation, not just by suppressing proletarian resistance but also by regulating capital's most self-destructive tendencies.

When considering the relation of the state to the performing arts, theatre and performance studies have generally focused on performance as a tool of propaganda, a site of censorship, and an instrument of nation-building. However, there are other, less closely examined points of interaction between the state and performance.

### **Industrial Regulation**

One of the ways that the state relates to the performing arts is by regulating industrial and commercial practices. Within established venues, the state entitles workers to minimum rates of pay, maximum caps on work hours, basic safety protections, and legal protection from discrimination. Businesses may also further curtail themselves, such as through collective agreements with unions and environmental impact commitments. If the state did not regulate employment in these ways, and there were no curbs on harmful working conditions, the result would be an unviable system that could not reproduce itself. For the same reason, the state also organizes public services and welfare, and, indeed, some public arts.

Theatre, specifically, has its own conventional repertoire of practices to circumvent both the letter and the spirit of employment regulations. Self-exploitation, goodwill, and individual passion play a key role in defining the working conditions within the performing arts. When engaging with industry regulation as a theme, theatre scholars frequently frame it as a negative imposition. The field tends to characterize state regulation, including workers' rights and public safety measures, as a bureaucratic shackle on the spontaneity of artistic inspiration and creativity (which it may well be).

Theatre and performance studies can develop more precise, dialectical analyses of how state regulation relates to the interests of workers within performing arts.

### **Copyright and Licensing**

Beyond regulating working conditions, the state stipulates that those within the performing arts must respect the ownership of private property through copyright and licensing. Intellectual property law is a key legal regime through which the state upholds private property. In Britain, for example, this regime exists as a collection of rights. Automatic and unwavering, moral rights offer the right to authorial credit and protection against false accreditation or mistreatment—by adaptation or destruction—of the work. In conjunction with copyright, moral rights offer authors and performers the protections necessary to regulate the production and reproduction of their performances. Copyright is not only about permission, but the guarantee of payment. Copyright, therefore, upholds and enforces relations of exchange. Unless otherwise stipulated by their owners, performances have a price, both for consumption and (re)production. Those who fail to pay this price (out of the subversion or ignorance of property rights) can be subject to the force of the law. The state can intervene to seek financial damages and even destroy unauthorized copies, as well as holding the decision-making power about what work can be produced. In addition to property rights, specific countries have licensing laws that further control the production and circulation of performance. In these contexts, the state must sanction any public performance before it can be produced. Performance is not simply a site of activity on which the state acts or imposes its will; it has been a crucible for the state to develop and hone legal tools useful for securing private property rights over artistic and ephemeral products.

## **Censorship and Subsidy**

The state exercises some amount of influence over what gets performed, most directly through censorship. The state most frequently bans content that violates the protections that it guarantees its citizens, such as by inciting violence or promoting hatred for protected groups. The state influences the content of theatre far more directly through decisions about which work will and will not receive state funding. This dynamic can produce a soft censorship, in which artists impose parameters on themselves in line with what they think the state (or a private funder) will approve. The state administers its funding through dedicated bodies that make explicit and implicit declarations about their priorities. In understanding the motivation of the state to supply funding for the arts, we can identify a clear political agenda connected to core functions of the state within capitalism. For example, the state can use arts funding as a part of urban and regional development strategies. The state justifies these subsidies on the grounds that creative industries produce strong returns for the national economy. This funding thus functions as a tool for real estate speculation and boosts the hospitality and tourism sectors. In such circumstances, arts funding is a mechanism for public money to be turned into private profits.

We can see another dimension of how the state uses funding to further its aims by examining imperialist dynamics between states. For example, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, an initiative created as the French empire declined in the 1960s in order to promote and sustain Francophone education and culture in (mostly) formerly colonized states, and whose remit to this day is heavily invested in supporting cultural initiatives. This example draws our attention to how states use cultural funding, including performance, to manufacture a joint heritage, and thus sympathy for the former colonizing power, in view of drawing on this cultural prestige

to maintain privileged access to resources and materials. France is not alone in this: the Goethe Institut, British Council, or Instituto Cervantes emerged out of similar motivations.

Not simply a sign of good governance or commitment to the arts, cultural subsidies are an attempt to protect the legitimacy of a market society built on private property and imperial extraction. As market forces cannot reliably support the arts, the state must intervene to ensure their existence, therefore becoming an arbiter of what gets produced. Theatre subsidies, like a subsidy for any commodity, reveal the limits of a free market to provide on its own everything a society desires for reproduction. The state uses funding for the arts as a means for securing the market against market logic. Arts funding shows a key function of subsidies in general: they are not altruistic gifts from the state to its citizens, but rather a tool to prop up industries and sectors that the capitalist market itself undercuts.

### **Nationalism**

The state provides citizens with access to entertainment, cultural stimulation, and artistic expression to reproduce a well-adjusted and compliant population. While this “bread-and-circuses” argument may appear crude or even implying a conspiratorial agenda, the state itself frequently champions the arts’ restorative powers and capacity to promote social harmony. It understands spectatorship as isomorphic to the function of citizenship in liberal democracy, which comes into sharpest focus when the state celebrates national belonging through performance.

The state uses art as a supplementary mediator of class conflict, interpellating individuals through particular cultural representations. As the state presides over the competing interests of its subjects, mediating their antagonisms without resolving them,

its rule nonetheless unifies them into a singular entity, bringing together many persons into “the people.” The specific capacity of theatre to abstract disparate individuals into a collective whole replicates one of the state’s core functions.

This unification under state rule is articulated through the nation. As evident in the proliferation of national theatres and the large amounts of state funding injected into festivals of national pride, the state makes declarations about its national identity, culture, and capability with various modes of performance. Through the appeal to nationhood, these spaces and events foster a unified sense of identity, buttressing the similarly mediating concept of nation that seeks to overcome class antagonism through an appeal to the transcendent category of citizenship. These cultural events function to promote a sense of national pride and belonging, subsuming antagonism in the pursuit of social unity. This is not a covert plot, but is commonly stated in government press releases—we only need to take them at their word.

### ***Value***

The word *value* presents a problem in that it has both a specific technical meaning in political economy and myriad everyday connotations, and these frequently get blurred together in critical writing. Economists, elected officials, bureaucrats, art administrators, academics, and artists routinely speak—sometimes in the same breath—of the value of art both in humanistic terms (as a facilitator of human understanding and community formations) and economic terms (as a site of economic activity in local, regional, and national contexts). In other words, references to *value* in discussions of performance often slip between multiple meanings of the term, thus obscuring the distinct concepts that the term points to. Here we outline what value means in the context of Marx’s critique of political economy so as to apply it to discussions of value



in theatre and performance studies. The conceptual precision of Marx's value theory can clarify the connection that performance has to capitalist production. But performance, as an object of political-economic study, can also help explain crucial limits and exceptions to what capitalism deems to be of value.

### **Abstract Wealth**

Different kinds of society have different relationships to material wealth. A capitalist society treats all material wealth, regardless of its kind or usefulness, as one category of wealth in the abstract. If something has value, then it is part of this abstract wealth. How much value it has corresponds to the portion of total social abstract wealth it represents. When, for example, we say that a sports car is more valuable than an orange, we are first of all saying that these two things have something in common qualitatively, the fact of their both being a part of society's total wealth. A sports car and a piece of fruit may have entirely different physical properties and uses, but it is on account of their shared contribution to the total of society's abstract wealth that their relative value can be compared quantitatively.

Things that possess value are commodities—products brought into relation with each other through market exchange. Because value is the relationship between the individual commodity and the total wealth of society, the value of one commodity can only be expressed through its comparison to other commodities; one play text, for instance, is worth the same as two tubs of interval ice cream. This quantification of value in terms of what it can be exchanged for is called *exchange value*. The primary form that exchange value takes is price—that is, the value of commodities as expressed in money. This is what money is, first and foremost: a social expression of value.

Since value is abstracted from material wealth, it is not given up or exhausted in exchange but merely transformed. A publisher who sells a play text for £5 and then uses that money to buy £5 worth of printer ink has at no point given up ownership of a portion of value equivalent to £5. This value has merely changed its form of appearance (“metamorphosed,” in Marx’s phrasing)—from a play text into money, from money into printer ink. Because any object or service made by human labor can in principle be sold as a commodity, any kind of labor has the capacity to produce value. It is therefore not the physical specifics of an activity or even the resulting product that defines it as productive—hammering, acting, typing, singing, cooking, manicuring, writing, or digging are all potential sources of value. Marx refers to these different kinds of activity as “concrete labors.” But, just as value is wealth in the abstract, its source is not any one specific form of labor but labor in general—abstract labor.

### **The Production of Value**

The value of any given commodity is not intrinsic to the actual commodity itself. Value, for example, is not a natural property of a wooden chair in the way that the hardness of its wood is. The source of a commodity’s value is the labor that went into making it. But because, when speaking of value, we are talking about labor in the abstract, and not any specific type or instance of concrete labor, the only way to quantify it is by duration. Every minute spent making something represents a portion of the total productive capacity of society. This means that when all of the products are compared with each other, the ones that take longer to make represent a greater portion of society’s output than the ones that can be made more quickly. Therefore, they are worth more, or have more value. This is not worked out at the individual level, but at the level of the whole society, taking all the producers together. A slow manufacturer who only

makes fifty ballet shoes in a day does not (necessarily) produce more valuable products than a quick rival who makes one hundred. It is not the time taken to produce an individual commodity that determines its value, but the time necessary to produce commodities of its type in this society.

If the value of commodities is determined by the “socially necessary abstract labor time” (as Marx terms it) required to make them, it is clear that this value will change as the speed of production changes. Crucially, value itself also influences the speed of production. Continuing with the previous example, the manufacturer who made one hundred ballet shoes not only has more value to exchange than the manufacturer who made fifty, but their higher rate of productivity (making more stuff in a given amount of time) also gives them a commercial advantage. They have more shoes to sell, and they can reduce their prices to undercut their slower rival and ensure they sell all their shoes. Either the slow manufacturer will have to speed up, or they will eventually go out of business—either way, making one hundred ballet shoes in a day will become the new social standard. But there is no reason for it to stop there. Other competitors will continue finding ways to gain an edge by producing more quickly, and all existing producers will have to either speed up or give up, once again leading to a new, even quicker social average being established. When production is undertaken for the sake of exchange, it has a fundamental, inescapable, and limitless drive to increase productivity. Producers, be they individual craftspeople or capitalist firms, are subject to a constant pressure to intensify the rate of production. Marx terms this the “law of value.”

Not all labor is productive in a capitalist sense. Nonetheless, a capitalist society depends on countless hours of work performed outside the so-called real economy, and which take the form of care, domestic labor, and other essential activities frequently grouped together as social reproduction. Furthermore, as the productivity of labor

constantly increases, a smaller and smaller portion of the waged workforce is engaged directly in producing goods and a greater portion is employed in the necessary but unproductive work of management, distribution, transport, storage, and sales. While various leftist political movements have sought moral or political pride in being either a productive or unproductive worker, there is little to be gained from emphasizing this distinction: productive workers, be they actors or engineers, are not more essential to the reproduction of life than unproductive workers, and unproductive workers are no less enmeshed in the reproduction of capitalist society. Indeed, the same worker may produce value on a given day and in a given job and not the next day in another job. The question of value production is, however, useful for understanding the relationship of performance to capital, and the role of exploitation within it.

### **Performance and Surplus Value**

The purpose of capitalist production is to generate not only value but, more crucially, a sum of value that exceeds what was initially invested in the production process itself, otherwise known as surplus value. Labor is the source of this surplus value, and extracting it requires a specific social relation of production based on the exploitation of workers by capitalists. A capitalist invests money in the production process, buying the materials and tools necessary to make a ballet shoe. But instead of making the shoes themselves, the capitalist hires workers to do the manufacturing. As the investor providing the outlays necessary for production, the capitalist owns the ballet shoes that their workers produce and seeks to sell these products on the market for a greater sum of money than they initially invested, also known as profit. The realization of profit from a capitalist production process is only possible because the capitalist paid their workers a sum of value in wages that is less than the value that the workers

conferred to the final products through their labor. The extraction of this surplus value from workers is called exploitation. Such a social relation of production can be found in many kinds of labor processes. While one capitalist entrepreneur invests capital to produce ballet shoes, another might choose to invest in a production of *Swan Lake*. Likewise, all kinds of workers can be subject to exploitation in a capitalist society, be they an assembly line of cobblers or an ensemble of dancers.

But as with any production process, a ballet performance that does not generate surplus value is not considered productive. If you pay someone £20 to perform just for you, no new value has been created. If, however, you pay them £20 to perform, and charge someone else £30 to watch them, you have turned the performance into a vendable commodity and your initial money into a profitable capital investment. The same holds true for the shoemaker. If a dancer pays someone to make them a ballet shoe that they then use to perform in instead of selling it on to someone else for a profit, no surplus value is created. Whether or not a performance or manufacturing process generates value depends entirely on the purchase and sale of the labor involved and the final product.

Commodified performance is less susceptible to the kinds of productivity gains possible for mass produced objects—performers cannot simply increase their productivity by acting or singing more quickly—and so the aforementioned processes described are less pronounced. However, the law of value is by no means absent from the world of performance. Producers are constantly motivated to reduce the number of total labor hours invested in the production of a performance prior to the event, such as by cutting rehearsals or technical installation time, and during the event, by employing fewer people onstage, behind the scenes, or front of house. Moreover, the production of all the things necessary to make performance, from plywood to cosmetics to computers,

is subject to the same dynamics. Even a performance that is never intended to turn a profit (such as an amateur or student production) is shaped and disciplined indirectly by the law of value. The labor of performance is neither inherently value forming, nor does performance have any special capacity to evade the expansion of capitalist wealth.

Using the term *value* in a more precise political-economic sense has several key implications for the study of performance. It can help scholars distinguish the relationship (either direct or indirect) that a performance has to capitalist value production from its aesthetic form or content. A performance may have radical political themes while also continuing to play the same material role for capitalist accumulation. Conversely, it is entirely likely that a commercial musical theatre production can fail to generate surplus-value. A political-economic lens clarifies that what is of “value” is valuable for capitalism. Performance scholars may therefore decide to resist making a case for the “value” of performance or for performance to be more valued within this society. Rather, researchers can make a distinction between capital’s rubric for what is valuable and another potential rubric for value, which might include meeting basic human needs, preventing climate catastrophe, and supporting everyone to have sovereignty over their time. This points to considering the limits of what capitalism values and questioning the terms of what is offered within this society. By using a precise definition of *value*, the impoverishment of a social world organized around the needs of capital and the imperative to abolish such a mode of production becomes more legible.