

ALIENOCENE – DIS-JUNCTION

DREAM WORK / WITCH MOTHER



LENORA HANSON

What haunts the dreams of communists?

Is it the specter of witches or fantasies of machines? Dreams seem insignificant to the practical work of politics, but their history may have something to do with the decisions we make about that work as a struggle over the equality of work or the refusal of standardization.

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin offers an image caught between destruction and futurity, one that resonates with his writing on dreams elsewhere in the *Project*. Citing Marx on the autonomy achieved by mechanical production (by real subsumption), Benjamin attributes to it an innovation in temporality:

“Simultaneity, the basis of the new style of living, likewise comes from mechanical production: ‘The collective machine, now an organized system of various kinds of single machines and groups of single machines, becomes more and more perfect the more the process as a whole becomes a continuous one’ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1 (Hamburg, 1922,) p. 344 [K3,2]”

Not one to affirm pure progress, Benjamin here nonetheless follows Marx’s tendency to equate commodity production with the engine of historical transience—more specifically, to understand productive labor as fixing and ordering the experience of simultaneity through continuity rather than discontinuity, organization rather than ephemerality. Simultaneity is a strange term

to find in Marx and Benjamin. Spontaneity, perhaps. Mediacy, certainly. Contradiction, of course. But what is a Marxist notion of simultaneity? Partial to invoking “at the same time” as a way to apprehend contradiction, Marx often invokes that temporal relation in order to hold multiple temporalities together at once. But here, instead, we can read through Benjamin a slight penchant for uniformity and continuity, an investment in the production of the collective through machines in the disciplinary manner Silvia Federici describes: “For Marx, modern industry is not only the means to reduce ‘socially necessary labor,’ but is also the very model of work, teaching workers uniformity, regularity, and the principles of technological development” (*Re-enchanting the World*, 159).

Marx’s fascination—and fascination is, I think, the right specular term—with the continuous simultaneity of automation is a repetition of the inaugural figure for the living body in the eighteenth century:

In order that we might grasp the particular action of each of its parts better, we compare the living body to a swarm of bees, which gather together in a cluster and hang together like a bunch of grapes...*they combine to form a very solid body yet each has its own separate action...*Applying [this metaphor] is straightforward: the bodily organs are joined together...*The relation between these actions, and the harmony that results, is what constitutes well-being.*

Théophile de Bordeu

Marx's machine presupposes a body fit for the kind of socially-necessary labor on which capital runs. In Bordeu we can locate the preconditions for this uniquely capitalist mode of labor in the coordination of bodily organs rather than in the automation of labor through the machine or in the intensification of global trade—or, in other words, that it was in living bodies and their motions that exchange-form first appears.

The repetition of the simultaneity of the living in the simultaneity of the machine dislocates the innovation attributed to production by Benjamin. The origins of such innovation are not within modes of production but principles of reproduction. Bordeu's figure is, after all, an argument for sensibility as the autonomous capacity of reproduction, one stimulated not in an automated (irritated) fashion but through the sympathy or affinity of forces. Marx's collective machine inherits this figure, displacing that capacity from bodies to technology, locating a transition where there is deep continuity.

How did this displacement come to take place? This is exactly the question Marx will pose in *Capital's* sections on "so-called primitive accumulation" to classical political economists whose fetishistic accounts of exchange value take it to be a transhistorical feature of economies. so-called primitive accumulation. The equivalence or equality expressed by commodities on the market cannot, he argues, be accounted for through the developed exchange

that we witness in a bourgeois economy. In order to do so, we have to understand how it came to be the case that social means of reproduction became dependent upon exchange value.

A similar dislocation structures the repetition of the living body within mechanical production. In order to understand the ways in which collective machines could come to operate in that continuously simultaneous manner that, as Adam Smith will also tell us, fascinates and pleases onlookers, we have to understand how it came to be the case that the function of living bodies become automated.

And in order to understand such automation, we have to turn to dreams. Along with the continuous simultaneity of living bodies as proposed by Bordeu, and many others, another experience of it appears in treatises on living bodies that turn to the matter of dreams. The problem here was that the simultaneity experienced in dreams was of a discontinuous and anachronistic kind, in contrast to the harmonious organization of waking life:

One of the most remarkable properties of dreams, is that we have no idea of time or place, or sometimes of our personal identity; in consequence of which we commit the most *ludicrous anachronisms, imagine ourselves dead and alive, or in two places, at the same time...*

John Hunter, *Principles of Surgery*, 1786

If they rise up quickly and vividly one after another, as subjects, predicates, and other associates, use to do, they will be affirmed of each other and appear to hang together. Thus *the same person appears in two places at the same time; two persons appear successively in the same place coalesce into one; a brute is supposed to speak...*

David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 1749

Dreams are the limit case of harmonious simultaneity. In stark contrast to the neat division and composition of Bordeu's living body above, dreams dis-join subjects and collapse time. Dreams are a space of surplus experience that does not correspond to the time of waking life, in which actions are separate and continuous. In dreams, multiple bodies inhabit the same space at once, two people become one, and the arbitrary sounds of animals take on meaning. Dreams express the extreme non-sensibility of sensation, the superfluous and unorganized impressions that might otherwise threaten to destabilize the proportionate relation of parts. In this sense, dreams are the lumpen of living form.

But they are necessary:

The wildness of our dreams seems to be of singular use to us, *by interrupting and breaking the course of our associations*. For, if we were always awake, some accidental associations would be so much cemented by continuance, as that nothing could afterwards disjoin them; which would be madness.

David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 1749

Dreams introduce a necessary disjointedness, a disruption of a sensible equilibrium, thus providing a requisite interruption of the otherwise continuous processes of waking life. Even within the measured body made ready for entry into Marx's collective machine there is an internal dislocation. In this sense, dreams embody a structuring exclusion of capital—the non-standardized, non-work of value, that “problematic truth individual capitalists try to elude, but capital as a whole cannot: in order to work, you must remain alive even though you are not working. This is the final ‘externality’ of capitalist production. It is the pollution of nonwork.” Dreams operate as a necessary refusal of labor within a body that otherwise regulates impressions continuously, the body that was needed to divide productive from unproductive labor.

Between that body and its dream, we have a physiological formula for value, the difference between a form of equivalence or equilibrium and the heterogeneous relations required for its production. Dreams here do the unpaid labor of maintaining the body as an exchange value. They hold the place of so-called primitive accumulation within living bodies, functioning as a set of simultaneities that *productively* function as outsides to the measured regulation of the body, and by extension to those bodies suitable to the conditions of wage labor. They constitute the incalculable or unmeasurable stuff of sensation, functioning as a “frontier zone” for the waking, working life, that zone

in which the operations of reproduction are not entirely subsumed under the equilibrating calculations of the exchange-form.

Benjamin seems to intuit something about the non-identical physiology of dreams in *The Arcades Project*, where he links dreams not to the effects of capitalist modes of production and consumption, but to bodily sensation: “...just as the sleeper—in this respect like the madman—sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his own body, the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation...generate, in the extravagantly heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion of dream imagery...”

Dreams register both the transience and stasis of social transformations under capital, not through commodities but through a collective unconscious deposited in the body. The accumulation of such experience in the body introduces a counter-accumulation, in which resources from the past pile up and remain potentially accessible, to awaken working class hatred. But if the experience of life under capital accumulates in the dream-space of bodies, along with what capital renders obsolete or neutralizes as superfluous, then Benjamin also here registers an archive of so-called primitive accumulation. Such accumulation sits ambivalently at the intersection of those accumulation of differences that Silvia Federici locates as the originary and repeating gesture of so-

called primitive accumulation, in which the essential mechanism of capital accumulation is the historically-specific process of creating internal differences within labor power along the lines of what is oftentimes conceived of as identity.

But, perhaps in the language of dreams, we can hold these accumulations and counter-accumulations together simultaneously in order to, as Benjamin suggests, create the ‘basis of the new style of living.’ And it is here that we would begin to dream of witches.

In her 1912 essay “Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being,” Sabrina Spelrein conjures a collective unconscious in the play between the figure of the Mother and the myth of the witch:

A young girl reads stories of witches with great joy; as a child, she often played at being a witch; analysis shows that the witch in the girl’s fantasies represents the mother with whom the girl identifies...The witch stories would not be pleasurable for the girl without the experience of the mother...In this sense, ‘all passing things’ are only allegories, perhaps of unknown primal experiences, that seek analogues in the present. Thus, we experience nothing in the present.

Here, too, there is an echo of the simultaneous—the witch is also a mother; the present collapses into the past. It is not the sensation of the matter-machine, but of the dream-space. In the story of the witch, an “unknown primary experience” of identification with the

mother is impressed. Spelrein capitalizes on the disjointedness of time, not to bring the witch into the present, as we might expect, but the Mother from “perhaps unknown primal experiences.” This Mother, as Spelrein elaborates, is the figure and feeling of the unconscious.

Relying on those dream-sensations of 18th century sensibility, we might wonder if the unconscious could be structured like labor in this instance—and, in particular, like that labor of a heterogeneous and unmeasured kind. This return of the Mother, of the unconscious, through “stories of witches” is interesting for the constellation it forges with dreams, as those accumulated sensations that exceed a sensible system that might be put as Father, waking life, and wage form. “In this *sense*,” as Spelrein says, this allegory holds together a persistent counter-accumulation to that accumulation of differences that Federici locates at the disjointed center of capital accumulation.

But we can go further—it is in the early modern witch hunts that Federici first located the logic of so-called primitive accumulation as a process of differentiation and distribution. It was in the witch hunts that she first traced the centuries-long processes through which a certain kind of labor—reproductive, domestic—become constitutive of and divided from another—productive, waged. Intersecting with the first wave of the slave trade, colonialism, and the expropriation of indigenous labor in the Americas, the witch hunts were significant

for the ways they sorted between the kinds of work that could be rendered into a form of exchange and those that could not, between the motions that resisted commodification due to their affective nature and those that could be standardized more readily.

Such a history leaves us with a difference between dream-work and machine-work, witch mothers and factory fathers, the future of work and the refusal of labor.

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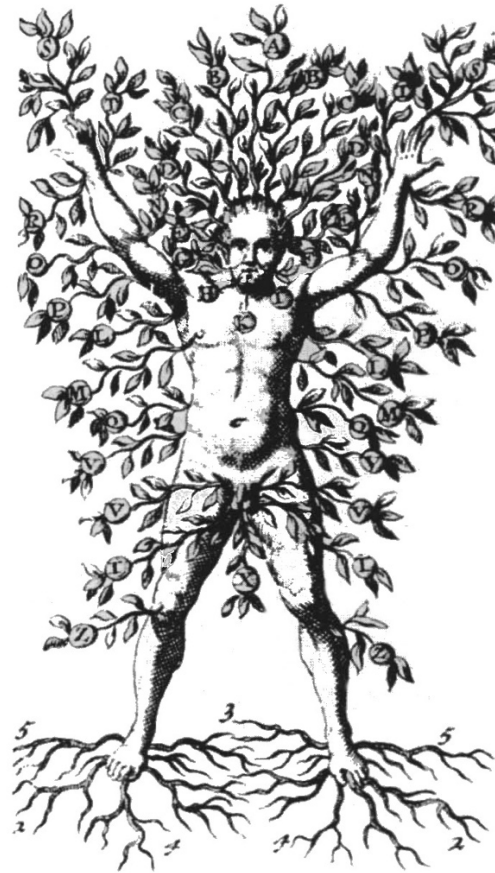
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J. Case, *COMPENDIUM ANATOMICUM* (1696).
In contrast to the "mechanical man" is this image of the "vegetable man,"
in which the blood vessels are seen as twigs growing out of the human body.

...“we can see that the development of the “human machine” was the main technological leap, the main step in the development of productive forces that took place in the period of primitive accumulation” (Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, Automeia, 2004, 146).