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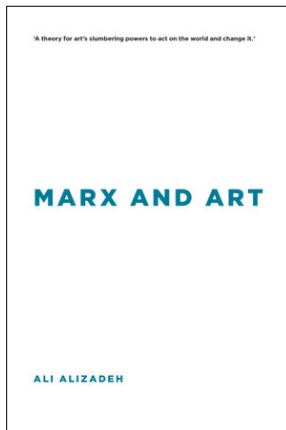
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TEXT Review

The labour of art

review by Nicholas Cowley



Ali Alizadeh

Marx and Art

Rowman & Littlefield International, UK 2019

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Ali Alizadeh's *Marx and Art* is a timely book. Its initial comments focussing on neo-liberal valuations of art have taken on a (more) sinister turn as COVID-19 has arrested the supply chains of global capitalism. Take, for example, what the Arts Council England has to say:

The value of the arts and culture to people and society outlines the existing evidence on the contemporary impact of arts and culture on our economy, health and wellbeing, society and education. (1)

It is not that this definition lacks meaning or coherence, because as Alizadeh points out there is little satisfaction to be had in highlighting the deficiencies of underpaid arts writers (ibid), but rather – as we are seeing – the poverty of thought regarding the value of the arts has real, material consequences. In Australia, a pointed lack of inclusion into support mechanisms for quarantine relief meant that artists were among the first on the economic chopping block. As the infrastructure for the arts in Australia crumbles in real time, it is important to remind ourselves that the value of art does not lay exclusively in its cathartic or distractive powers, especially at a time when those powers are in their ascendancy for so many of us. Alizadeh sets out to answer the question “what is the intrinsic value of art?” and the form that his response takes is a return to Marx’s works in the original and a recovery of the 19th century philosopher’s theorisations on the topic. Both the question that propels this book, and the form that it takes have an exigency in the current world. The value of art remains ill-defined and undervalued as a human labour, and Marx remains important to on-going critique of capitalism in history and our present moment.

For Alizadeh via Marx, labour has intrinsic value because it transforms the raw materials of nature into things that attend to human needs. Art is then the process that allows us as humans to understand and live with nature, either as an ecological realm, or as the realm of ideology. And, where it is such a process, perhaps even change our relationship to nature and ideology:

We satisfy this need for understanding, theorization, ideation and, finally, assimilation or integration with the world – and indeed, with nature – through practicing art (96-7)

This argument is necessary and pressing because art has suffered longstanding critiques and valuations exclusively on the basis of its extrinsic value, but perhaps, as Alizadeh’s book points out, this has at least something to do with art’s under theorised intrinsic value. The introduction offers a sharp summation of the most fully fleshed and current of those theories on the intrinsic qualities of art by Agamben, Badiou, and Ranciere, even as it points out their shortcomings. Alizadeh’s solution to those shortcomings is a reconstruction of Marx’s theory of art from his major and minor works. Alizadeh’s work provides a powerful theory of art that attends its revolutionary possibilities as much as its material necessities. As a result Alizadeh, via Marx, is able to reveal visions of what un-alienated labour might look like, at least in the labour of making art.

To get to this conclusion, Alizadeh does the work of tracing Marx’s thought back to Plato’s *Republic*. These introductory elements may not be as interesting to the weathered reader of Marx, but I consider them a practical refresher (or introduction) to Marx’s intellectual setting. The way that the book equips the reader with all the necessary tools to understand the pre-history of Marx’s ideas on art is admirable, and lends the text an utility to the academic reader as much as the non-academic, a feature of particular consequence given the

wide ranging import of the topic. One need not be an especially dedicated reader of Marx in order to take in Alizadeh's arguments because of how diligently and concisely he summarises Marx's philosophical precursors and personal development. I thoroughly enjoyed Alizadeh's close reading of Marx's juvenile poetry. Perhaps this speaks to my own literary interests, however I would like to credit Alizadeh's ability to situate even juvenilia into its broader cultural contexts of post-/romantic Europe and the young philosopher's interpersonal relationships. Similarly, I relished those passages where Alizadeh tackles Marx's literary criticisms of 19th century European novels, or Wagner, or Homer, or ancient Greek political stunts as concrete examples of Marx's theory of art as labour in action. By eschewing latter-day criticism in favour of Marx's own writings, Alizadeh is able to offer a fresh perspective on Marx as much as the issue at the heart of the book. As a consequence of this approach, the text also clarifies some myths about Marx's intellectual development, especially regarding his so-called break with the humanisms of his time. Rather, Alizadeh offers a novel interpretation on Marx's original writings, and a deft capacity to tease out those ideas Marx had left under-written on art and also romanticism, ideology and spirituality.

Where Alizadeh's argument hinges on the extraction of needs from nature through labour as above, it is not quite as thoroughgoing and well supplied as its other chapters. On the one hand, I thoroughly enjoyed how the text remained faithful to the archaeology of Marx's thoughts without hemming these ideas with the history of thought that was to come after or elsewhere. On the other hand, the conclusion of the book is clear about re-situating those ideas in the present moment, and does so with arch reference to both intersectional and environmental concerns. Considering the necessity of nature to both Marx's conception of concrete labour and to Alizadeh's reading of the production of art, I would have appreciated a rounder discussion of how Nature is conceived of by Marx and how it fits into his critique of capitalism. To some extent I can agree with the charlatany by which modern universities corrupt the critical functions of intersectional politics into the managerial notions of identity politics, or how those same universities pump out exorbitant expositions on the anthropocene by white scholars while in turn cashing in on coal investment on stolen land and continually side-lining indigenous people and their knowledge (Elam 2019, and Goldrick 2020). However, to eschew any and all ecological concern either in Marx or for right now seems like a missed opportunity. Whichever way that one may theorise the totality that we refer to as Nature, the capitalist mode of production has altered it in ways we must now contend with; in everyday life, in activism, in theory, in work, in play, and in art.

My concern here is not so much, as Alizadeh later says in his concluding remarks, that the concept of nature described in the book adheres to a "passé" (131) version of humanism, because the humanism that Alizadeh considers out of date is alive and well in such university propagated genres as the anthropocene (Todd 2016). Rather my concern is that

the ecological critique central to so much of Marx's work is not teased out with the same dexterity that the rest of the book treats Marx's ideas:

When what the worker has produced (an object, a service, etc.) is removed from the immediate sphere of production and is entered into the market of consumer demands as something with a price, its value becomes subject to the law of supply and demand – the higher the supply, the lower the demand – as a result of which the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. (93)

Alizadeh positions the moment of capitalist alienation in the removal of the labourer's work from their sphere of production but does not account for what that sphere of production means. Twenty years ago, well before the humanities' current fixation with the anthropocene, John Bellamy Foster published another return to Marx's original writings in *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. In doing so Foster drew out Marx's ecological basis for critique of capitalism; that capitalism restructures worker's relationships with their surrounding landscape *at the same time as* restructuring their relationships with the products of their labour. When Marx locates that original moment of capitalist estrangement in the removal of the worker's labour from their sphere of production, that sphere of production explicitly concerns the labourer's ecological setting:

Capitalist exploitation and accumulation, as Marx explains, ultimately depend on capital's usurping of nature's gifts for itself, thereby monopolizing the means of production and wealth in its entirety. (Foster 2018)

I have never considered Marx's reliance on gothic imagery to be a mere stylistic fixation but part and parcel of his need to accurately describe the carnage that capitalism wreaks, so when he says, 'capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx 1976: 926) it strikes me as literal. Land enclosure is of course the most famous case study of Marx's critique of capitalism. Territorial acquisition and control is the vanguard of capitalism, and the on-going genocidal tactics employed against indigenous peoples one of the chief ways in which capital is maintained. And if art is to become an awakened power for us to utilise against capitalism and its alienating properties, then by necessity it must involve a broader appreciation for land rights and ecological thought. Further I believe that Alizadeh's arguments would have been strengthened by just such an account of Marx's ecological arguments within the discussion of the production and necessity of art. I realise that the length of the book could only admit so much, and that it achieves a great deal in its tidy page count, but considering other archaeologies of Marx have pointed out the very ecological basis of Marx's critique of capital, it does seem an oversight at the very least in the current era. For instance, when Alizadeh conjures Adorno in the concluding chapters to attest to both the bleak reality out of which art extrudes

meaning, and the increasing difficulty that artists face when performing this labour (120), it echoes Marx's ecological critique of capital:

The fewer the number of natural wants imperatively calling for satisfaction, and the greater the natural fertility of the soil and the favourableness of the climate, so much less is the labour-time necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the producer. (Marx 1999)

Art may represent a labour that transforms ideology into practicable material, but in our current historical moment, the fertility of our ideological soil is so depleted by the on-going extractive measures of terminal capitalism that the labour we must invest in the endeavour is, as a corollary, made so much more onerous. This could have been readily folded into Alizadeh's summary of Marx and art; that the state of nature (as even a strictly humanist construction) under capitalist alienation is particularly depleted *in the same way and for the same reasons* that artistic labour is depleted by way of capitalist ideology. The culture industry of today is as built on rare minerals extruded from the earth as is the precariat workforce driving for Uber. Further, artists as labourers must pay heed to the extractive nature of capitalism as a core principle of Marxist revolutionary practice as much as they are human beings in the world.

This is perhaps the conclusion's greatest fault; that for all the momentum Alizadeh's argument generates, for all the urgency with which the production of art is granted as a human need and an actual human labour, it is not attendant to the ecological rapaciousness of capitalism and what that might mean for Marx and art, then and now. All that said, I am emboldened by its closing remarks that art has the capacity to offer us a vision of unalienated labour, however bleak our conditions, and however depleted that vision may be because of those conditions. The balancing act of avoiding outright nihilism in the face of terminal capitalism while also maintaining revolutionary sensibilities is no mean feat, and the energetic theorisations contained herein manage that balance capably. I am able to lay aside my concerns because this book provides a meaningful understanding of artistic production that can attempt just such an effort. Stripping back analysis of the value of art to Marx has an immense valence for readers of Marx, for critical readers more generally, and for artists even more generally. I am excited to see how this book is used in future art production and theorisation.

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