



Marx for Cats

A RADICAL BESTIARY

Leigh Claire La Berge



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For The Mitten and for Lion

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Finally, this book is dedicated to two cats in my life, past and present. First, to the memory of The Mitten, who really was a naughty kitten, and who accompanied me on numerous physical and intellectual voyages. His spirit was as present in writing this book as his furry, concrete self had been the writing of in others. And second, to Lion, for many reasons. Meow.

INTRODUCTION

Cat out of the Bag

*“To take ‘liberties’ with the signature of Marx is . . .
merely to enter the freedom of Marxism.”*

— PERRY ANDERSON, *PASSAGES FROM
ANTIQUITY TO FEUDALISM*



As she languished in a Berlin prison during World War I, Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg often thought of her cat: “At home so many times she knew how to lead me onto the right road with her long, silent look,” Luxemburg reminisced.¹ She had first encountered the feline some years before, while teaching at a socialist party school, and adopted her and gave her a Hebraic name, Mimi, which means both *rebellion* and *bitter*. While her imprisonment dragged on with the war, Luxemburg no doubt felt both senses of the cat’s name. Her voluminous

letters convey a sense of pain, yet Luxemburg never lost her rebellious disposition. She remained determined to continue the struggle and make the socialist revolution, which she helped to do upon her release, in Germany, in 1918–19.

Before and after her stint in prison, Luxemburg organized, taught, agitated, and theorized, and it was Mimi who was her comrade—a word whose derivation, from the Spanish *comrada*, for roommate, conveys here a distinct truth.² They lived together, read together, talked together, and received visitors together, including Vladimir Lenin, with whom Mimi “flirted” and who returned the affection. “I get up early, work, go for a stroll, and have conversations with Mimi,” Luxemburg wrote to one lover.³ “I kiss you, and so does Mimi,” she offered another. “Mimi and I are alone together,” she related to a friend. A student of botany, Luxemburg recorded that “we busied ourselves with the flowers, that is, Mimi and I, she is helping me skillfully the whole time.” Mimi, too, had an epistolary habit: “There is always a big celebration at my house when a letter from you arrives. Even Mimi sniffs at it lovingly (she calls that ‘reading the letter’),” she responded to a political ally.

Rosa Luxemburg led a revolutionary life. But so did Mimi. And while the former’s contribution to Marxist theory and practice is well known in the annals of radical history, the latter’s is considered as merely an accompaniment, if it is considered at all. *Marx for Cats* amends such tendencies. Moving beyond any individual episode, person, beast, or even mode of production, this book presents a feline archive for the theorizing and writing of economic history.

The gambit of *Marx for Cats* is that the history of Western capitalism can be told through the cat and that doing so reveals a heretofore unrecognized animality at the heart of both Marx’s critique and Western Marxist critique. That animality has most often been feline, and it has been present in how Marxists have represented what constitutes the economy and

imagined how the economy could be transformed from a site of exploitation into one of equality. From capitalism's feudal prehistory to its contemporary financialization, those seeking to maintain economic power as well as those seeking to challenge it have recruited cats into their efforts. Medieval kings and lords styled themselves as lions; dissidents from the medieval order were identified through their relationships with domestic cats, who likewise were considered dissidents. The first real capitalist empire, Great Britain, adopted a leonine symbol, while some of the most powerful worker actions against capitalism have been known as wildcat strikes. In the eighteenth century, French and Haitian revolutionaries were denigrated as tigers by the conservatives who opposed them; in the twentieth century, the Black Panther Party insisted that capitalism was a fundamentally racist system and demanded its overthrow.

Like any text in the Marxist tradition, *Marx for Cats* gestures in two directions at once. In asking how our society is structured and for whom, Marxism turns toward economic history. And with the materials it finds there, it begins to conceive of how the present might have been different and how the future still could be. In offering a feline narrative of our economic past, I argue that Marxism not only has the potential to be an interspecies project but that it already is one. And in using that knowledge and those histories, presented here in cat form, I suggest that we may collectively plot a new future together, one that recognizes the work that cats have always done for Marxists and one that wonders: What political commitments can Marxists make to cats? This is less a radical history of a single species than a history of how felines and humans have made each other radical—both radically progressive and radically conservative.

Beginning its history in the eighth century CE and moving forward into our own day, *Marx for Cats* should be understood as what the philosopher Walter Benjamin called a *Tigersprung*,

or a tiger's leap, into the past.⁴ For Benjamin, the recollection of a historical moment functions as a kind of return to it. In the most revolutionary eruptions of both feudalism and capitalism—the peasant uprisings of the Middle Ages, the Paris Commune of the modern age, the queer and communist movements of the twentieth century—in each of these radical reformulations of economic power and possibility cats were present; indeed, they were often used for said reformulation. But cats have also been called on to oppose such movements, and some of economic history's most rapacious and atavistic rulers have passed their days in private menageries, staring into the eyes of big cats in kin-like fashion.

For Marx, too, the figure of the leap was an important one. But, for Marx, capital does the leaping. And capital leaps into the future, not the past, as it remakes the world through industry, wage labor, and revolution. Marx returned to the leap in multiple texts, writing in his magnum opus, *Capital*, for example, “So soon, in short, as the general conditions requisite for production by the modern industrial system have been established, this mode of production [capitalism] acquires an elasticity, a capacity for sudden extension by leaps and bounds.”⁵ Numerous Marxists, from Leon Trotsky to Mao Zedong to C. L. R. James, would follow Marx and use the leap in their analyses of capitalism and its overcoming.

Domestic cats leap as well, and their sense of poise and balance as they do so has long distinguished them among animals that cohabit with humans. Perhaps that's why Red Emma Goldman claimed she was like a cat: no matter where she was thrown from and regardless of where she was forced to jump, she always landed, according to Goldman herself, catlike, on her “paws.”⁶

Marx for Cats combines these multiple figures and figurations of the leap in order to capture the moments in which cats and capitalism interact and intersect. In those interstices we may locate how felines have long been creatures of economic

critique and communist possibility. We need only a certain punctuated history of capitalism to realize this feline truth, and mine is an illustrative, not exhaustive, telling. I have found the required history in disparate times and places—in church edicts and newspaper advertisements, in the texts of both realized and failed revolutions, in high theory and children’s primers—and stitched it together. In presenting the past through this sometime disjointed feline narrative, I have followed Marx, who stressed the importance of understanding history not as a seamless continuum but rather as constituted by moments of break and rupture, of lurches forward and backward. If we are not careful to follow history’s meandering path, we wind up with a bland conception of history-as-progress that amounts to, according to Marx, a scene in which “all cats become grey since all historical difference is abolished.”⁷ But if we follow the cats themselves, history hardly appears monochrome; we are presented with a calico palette in which those on society’s margins and those fighting for a different social world have either sought out or been forced into the companionship of felines.

As a guide to capitalism’s past, *cat* is hardly a transparent category, and in *Marx for Cats* it assumes three distinct roles. First, cats are witnesses to and perhaps makers of history: they have different and sometimes competing designs and desires. Cats benefit from certain historical situations—being welcomed indoors, for example—and suffer from others, such as the cat massacres that roiled late medieval and early modern Europe. When a new historical order is heralded in or an old one is banished, cats always seem to appear on the scene, where they take positions as both vanguard and rearguard. One could be forgiven for wondering whether cats are to nonhuman animals what the proletariat is to all other classes, namely, midwives of a different world.

Second, cats mark economic history as both icons, or symbols, and as indexes, or material residues of a past that really

did happen. This is an archival project, and I could not find what was not there. When the first president of the United States, George Washington, styled himself as a new kind of leader during the American Revolution, he decorated himself with leonine sword. When radical printer Thomas Spence designed coins for a new socialist economy in eighteenth-century England, the one that celebrated freedom from slavery was stamped with a cat. The icon and the index can never be fully separated, and the symbolic feline history I uncover herein doubles as a material history in which those actors, both human and not, who undertook revolutionary activity left traces of a changed world in doing so.

And third, from Niccolò Machiavelli to Adam Smith, from Friedrich Engels to Louise Michel, from Rosa Luxemburg to John Maynard Keynes and, yes, Karl Marx himself, those who have studied the relationship between state power and economic power, who have contemplated and indeed instantiated how different that relationship could be, have used cats to do so. They have theorized using feline metaphors, they have recorded the delights and miseries of writing and organizing with feline companionship, and some of them have discussed their work with cats. I take my introduction's generic title from the specificity of Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, who titled his post-World War II essay on the loss of solidarity in socialism "Katze aus dem Sack": cat out of the bag.⁸

My project likewise began as a discussion with a cat.

While in graduate school, I had long conversations with my Maine coon, The Mitten, about the range of theoretical approaches to power that I was introduced to daily. We developed a little jingle about poststructuralism, or the philosophical idea that language constitutes one's reality.

I would say to him, "Mitten, Mitten, naughty kitten," as he pushed a glass off a table or used a window screen as his scratching post.

And he would retort:

I'm not naughty, no way
But you tell me that every day
Then the naughtiness doesn't go away
It's just here to stay and stay.

What a performance! He would argue that the words I had used to describe him made him naughty, not that he had acted naughtily and thus warranted my descriptions. Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray; together he and I tore through these texts—sometimes he did so literally.

In many ways, poststructuralism offers the most natural philosophical setting to host a conversation with and about cats. From Roland Barthes to Jacques Derrida to Guy Debord, this philosophical tradition has celebrated the feline since well before the novel field of animal studies emerged as a site of interdisciplinary academic concern. Indeed, according to some of this nascent field's best-known theorists, animal studies remains in debt to poststructuralism, and to Derrida in particular.⁹ And when Derrida presented his field-generating claim, in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," that humans need nonhuman animals to articulate themselves and to write the biography of their own species, he recruited cats into his efforts: namely his own beast, who appears in his text *in medias res* and who interrupts his philosophizing. As they stare at each other, a naked (he tells us) Derrida insists "the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn't the figure of a cat. It doesn't silently enter the room as an allegory for all the cats on the earth."¹⁰

Marx would have presented the situation differently. He would not have distinguished between a "real cat" and an "allegory for all cats" but would, rather, have suggested a pairing of an abstract cat and a concrete cat. And, crucially, he would have resisted the temptation to place the concrete cat conceptually