

# Postliberal Agency in Marx's *Brumaire*

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*In this essay, I read Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte as an attempt to articulate a theory of agency despite a lack of adequate concepts. Exhibiting a discomfort with the dueling possibilities of a liberal voluntarism and a structuralist determinism, Marx upsets this supposed dichotomy with an exaggerated use of metonymy. He thus demonstrates the reductive nature of the process of identifying coherent and autonomous subjects, and brings attention to how conventional discourse compels such reductions. Revealing both the inadequacy and the indispensability of established concepts, he tinkers with linguistic convention as a means to open the possibility of thinking and writing beyond them. As these concepts restrict the form of political narratives that can be spoken, he contributes to an enriched political discourse better able to inform political action without succumbing to the liberal tendency to fetishize the individual.*

**Key Words:** Agency, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx, Judith Butler, Metonymy, Liberalism, Heroism

The autonomous and coherent subject of liberalism has been established as a fixture in political thought. While liberals disagree as to whether this model of the subject is grounded in ontology or politics, its critics tend to reject both while claiming that ontology is politics. In this light, we might see *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as Marx's most onto-political work. Ostensibly a journalistic account of the French coup d'état of February 1852, close reading reveals the essay as Marx's most painstaking attempt to trouble the presumptions of liberalism while simultaneously maintaining the imperative for political action. The form and the content of the *Brumaire* present a challenge to widely entertained notions about the possibility for political agency. They also show Marx and other intellectual workers producing texts and introducing novel problematics, demonstrating how ideological categories both mediate our experience of the world and condition our ability to act in it.

The primary target of the essay is thus not any particular bourgeois regime, but rather, a couplet of ontological and political presumptions about social causality and political agency. While the essay demonstrates a hostility toward structural approaches to history which provide little or no role for human agency, it more directly attacks a liberal theory of agency which identifies singular actors as the immediate causes of events. Marx reveals the liberal approach as reducing complex convergences of historical forces to unified actors, a practice that finds rhetorical manifestation in the metonymical process of naming. Marx's abundant use of

metonymy in the *Brumaire*, I argue, indicates the inadequacy and the unavoidability of liberal concepts we prosaically employ to register and make sense of the world.

The essay demonstrates not only the limits of liberalism, but also the historical effectivity of language and the possibility of a meaningful role for intellectual workers in the production of history. Marx, in other words, engages two rival approaches to agency (liberal voluntarism and structural determinism), exploits their weaknesses, and emerges with a sketch of an alternative, collective, postliberal theory of agency. Though Marx's writing betrays a frustration with the adequacy of the concepts that he is afforded, postliberal thinkers in his wake have advanced the project of rethinking these limited concepts.

### Liberal, Structural, and Postliberal Agency

Political thought of the past two centuries exhibits a very seductive dichotomy. On the one hand, various liberalisms posit the autonomy of subjects and the voluntary character of individual action. On the other, assorted structuralisms assert the construction, coercion, and even determination of these ostensibly autonomous subjects by macrolevel social forces. Of course, this debate is not only about the value of individualism as political philosophy, but is fundamentally one about agency. Driving this debate is a concern over whether subjects can act in a manner undetermined and unintended by the conditions in which they exist.<sup>1</sup> The debate, therefore, has immediate and profound effects on our ability to hold actors responsible for events, for our ability to diagnose and prescribe resolutions for undesirable situations, and even for our ability to contribute to history.

Fred Dallmayr (1981) has discussed this dichotomy, identifying voluntarisms and their complementary individualist politics as arising from possessive individualism (from Hobbes to Nozick) and transcendental humanism (Descartes through Sartre). Forming the contours of modern liberalism, these approaches are committed to the notion that individuals have both the capacity and right to act freely in the world; they explain historical events with reference to individual actors, maintaining that we can presume individuals to be in large part the authors of "their" actions. By contrast, we have also seen in the past two centuries a series of theoretical attempts to disrupt this notion of autonomy. This is most visible starting in the middle of the nineteenth century with Marx and Weber, continuing through their rich legacies, and leading to the various constructivisms of recent years. This dichotomy is often painfully obvious in individual thinkers, as, for example, in Will Kymlicka's (1991) claim that subjects exhibit "autonomy" so long as they are not absolutely determined by a singular and monolithic force. Superficially compelling, this ignores the possibility that subjects might be *overdetermined* (to use Althusser's term) by a litany of discordant forces and that resistance to a dominant cultural structure might express rival cultural forces instead of an insufficiently colonized self. More than

1. This phrasing is drawn from Judith Butler, who defines agency as the "assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power" (1997, 15).

anything else, Kymlicka's claim betrays an all-too-common belief that the poles of the dichotomy exhaust the possibilities.

However, while liberalism offers us a language that allows agency to stem only from individuals (its relatively autonomous subject seems today the *sine qua non* of political agency) and structuralism tends to discard the baby with the bathwater (eliminating the concept of agency in its dismissal of the liberal individual), various philosophies have attempted to work beyond this dichotomy by wresting the concept of agency from the presumptions of liberalism. Dallmayr reads this tradition as evidence of the bankruptcy of the others, and as its exemplars he points to Althusser, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Adorno, Foucault, and Derrida. Neither liberal nor structural—troubling the premises of individual autonomy without succumbing to the rival tendency to deny agency, attempting to release the concept of agency from its grip by liberal voluntarism—these philosophies might be labeled postliberal.<sup>2</sup>

While Marx is nominally absent from Dallmayr's list, one would be hard pressed not to notice that it is almost entirely a reflection of his influence. Conceivably, Dallmayr excludes Marx because he sees the contribution of these theorists to lie in their working *beyond* Marx's relatively straightforward abandonment of the subject. (Indeed, of those he does discuss, Dallmayr clearly finds Althusser to be the least valuable since he remains closest to Marx in his attempt to completely erase the subject from history.) However tempting and historically popular the reading of Marx as an effacer of the subject is, I argue that this does a disservice to his complicated approach to subjectivity.

In the coming section, I will discuss what happens when Marx endeavors to produce a theory of agency that avoids the Scylla of voluntarism and the Charybdis of structuralism. Marx's account of Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état operates as a contribution to such a postliberal theory of agency, demonstrating how the hegemonic categories of liberalism are inadequate to our phenomenal experience. Marx thus suggests a rethinking of these categories, and gestures toward an alternative possibility.

### Making a Hero

Early in 1852, Marx produced a series of seven articles for an American periodical exploring Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état of February of that year. Collected, these articles form *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,<sup>3</sup> the central essay in a

2. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) encounter this same dilemma in describing Foucault's approach to the social sciences. Ultimately, they declare that because he refuses both the theory of "autonomous discourse" and the drive toward interpretation, Foucault is "beyond structuralism and hermeneutics."

3. Louis Bonaparte, nephew to Napoleon I, dubbed himself Napoleon III. The title of Marx's essay playfully evokes this family connection, since 18 Brumaire (1799) is actually the date of the uncle's coup, not Bonaparte's. Marx reportedly complained when the essay's first edition was printed with the title *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

trilogy often identified as Marx's clearest demonstration of the value of historical materialism for interpreting current events.<sup>4</sup> The essay represents an attempt to narrate historical events without reinscribing the problematic categories of individualism through which events are conventionally told and comprehended. In a preface to the second edition of the *Brumaire*, Marx explains this dilemma as he distinguishes his narrative from two other portrayals of the coup: Victor Hugo's *Napoléon le petit* and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *La Révolution sociale démontrée par le coup d'état du 2 décembre*. According to Marx, Hugo "confines himself to bitter and witty invective" and "sees in [the coup] only a single individual's act of violence," while Proudhon "seeks to portray the coup as the result of the preceding historical development" and thus presents but "a historical apology for its hero" (1973, 144). Marx rejects the former for being too liberal and the latter for being too structural. He thus sets for himself and the reader the task of telling history in a manner that avoids the seductive dichotomy in which previous accounts are caught.<sup>5</sup>

Marx, in other words, seeks to tell this story without using the dominant and inadequate theories of agency. As such, the *Brumaire* is not only *the* essay most difficult to reconcile with traditional marxisms organized around base/superstructure (Jameson 1998; Bové 1992; LaCapra 1983; Coombes 1978), but it also disrupts the logical coherence of the liberal model of the autonomous subject. When Marx declares, in the second paragraph of the essay, that people "make their own history, but not of their own free will [*aus freien Stücken*]; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted" (1973, 146), he rejects both ostensibly viable alternatives. Subsequently, as Marx guides the reader through Bonaparte's election to the presidency of the "bourgeois republic" in December 1851 and the establishment of his "bourgeois monarchy" in February 1852, he talks of a long procession of class alliances, insurgencies, and counterinsurgencies in a manner that emphasizes how individual and collective subjects embody relations that allow their actions to become historically significant. The essay is, in short, an examination of the political production of subjectivity via the consolidation of social forces in unified beings that can act seemingly autonomously.

Rejecting Hugo's individualist and Proudhon's structural accounts of the coup that reify, respectively, Bonaparte's will and historical circumstance, Marx announces that he aims to show "how the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and relations which allowed a mediocre and grotesque individual to play the hero's role" (1973, 144; emphasis in original, translation modified). For Marx, it is the practices to which we are subjected (through which we are subjectified) that make agency a possibility; agency is not transcendence or avoidance of the conditions with which we find ourselves confronted, but is their preservation, cancellation, and sublation (*Aufhebung*). Rejecting the presumptions of both liberalism and structuralism, the

4. The surrounding essays of this trilogy are *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850* (written in 1851) and *The Civil War in France* (written in 1871).

5. Vološinov (1973, pt. 2) makes this same argument in a discussion of Marx's relationship to established linguistic theories.

essay conveys first of all how structural forces (the class struggle) provide the very possibilities of agency (heroism).

But I think this statement from Marx merits closer attention. Specifically, I want to ask: What does it mean to “play the hero’s role”? In a philosophy wholly critical of the presumption of an autonomous and unified self, could *playing the hero’s role* be the same as *being the hero*? Or does it suggest that individual heroism is something that we, as good liberal subjects, look for and actually demand from political figures? That we inhabit a historical condition that compels us to identify individuated actors as the authors of historical events? As I read this statement, the class struggle produced not only a moment of historical possibility on which Bonaparte was able to capitalize, but also a set of historical categories through which subjects of nineteenth-century France were obliged to grasp their world; the ideology of liberal agency directed them to talk about events as the willed product of individuals. This understanding of history allows Bonaparte to become a revolutionary agent; liberalism’s model of the subject provides the interpretive categories that mediate our experience, allowing and even compelling heroes to emerge in the popular consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

The very concept of heroism reduces the complex movement of history to the voluntary actions of extraordinary individuals, and thus trades in the alienated and autonomous subject that Marx eschews. But while the exceptional subjects held out as heroes offer a particularly striking example, Marx demonstrates how *all* subjects are produced through conscious or unconscious consolidation of a panoply of inputs into a coherent and autonomous space. Such cognitive shortcuts would seem to be unavoidable in any attempt to make sense of our experiences, and Marx exposes this largely unconscious process through his use of metonymy: the reduction of complex and multiplicitous subjects (e.g., the political-military apparatus) to mere parts (“the sword”). Throughout the *Brumaire*, subjects are constituted by historically imposed categories wherein a single locus of identity is afforded the ostensible autonomy of a “whole.” This is, I argue, much more than mere rhetorical free play.

Since liberal autonomy is a historically produced myth (since a name is precisely a manufactured label for an artificially and ideologically fixed subject position, since subjects are political constructions), a discussion of Bonaparte’s rise to power and focus on “his” agency remains, by definition, a simplification of the historical process via metonymic consolidation of a multiplicity of forces under a single banner: “Bonaparte.” The present case offers a particularly strong example of this, since Bonaparte *really did* affect a name (“Napoleon”) as a means of invoking a historical legacy and thus bestowing upon himself a complex narrative of personal will and heroic ability. Marx shows how liberal ideology and the trope of heroism constitute a curtain behind which this process of consolidation is hidden.

Hayden White (1973) similarly points to Marx’s use of metonymy as demonstrating his ambivalent relationship to the liberal subject. But White is committed to the

6. This argument that liberal ideology mediates experience is anything but new. For other examples, see Bowles and Gintis (1986), Jameson (1981), Foucault (1977), and White (1973).

thesis that Marx reduces the complex processes of history to a manageable mechanism, and he thus retains the dichotomy that Marx is trying to avoid. Because Marx is clearly not Hugo, White casts him as Proudhon (1973, 315). Despite this, White's discussion of metonymy as a reductionist mode of narration is quite helpful. Marx is not mechanistic, but he is committed to writing reductively (metonymically). Marx's approach to telling history indicates and illustrates a recognition that metonymy is *the only way* to talk about subjects with capacities for agency; positing a coherent subject position from which to act *requires* denying or ignoring the unstable multiplicity of historical forces that form it. In other words, White misses how Marx's metonymy actually troubles the dichotomy. Marx does displace the individual subject, but White stops his analysis here, whereas this displacement is only half the story Marx is telling.<sup>7</sup>

Marx certainly does test the limits and adequacy of a logic of heroism as he troubles the ostensible hero's putative autonomy by explaining him (Bonaparte) as an assemblage of historical forces (constituted, bound, and enabled by historical consciousness and material conditions just like the rest of us utterly nonheroic tourists). But he also avoids any simple implication of this displacement, as Bonaparte is not merely an unwilling pawn in the power game of emergent capitalism. Quite the contrary. This game invested his figure with a political power: it enabled him to play a key role in the production of history. Indeed, the ideological categories of liberalism are essential to the form of political institution that Bonaparte would come to embody. The metonymical categories of liberalism actually contribute to the possibility of novel and historically productive forms and sources of agency; the reductionist project of understanding history as the product of individual will allows not only the illusion of Bonaparte as a hero, but actually does increase his capacities for agency. Metonymy is productive in-deed.

Whereas liberalism focuses on the causal force of individual will and structuralism concentrates on the directive of abstract force, Marx consistently indicates that these possibilities are mutually constitutive. Agency in this story consistently stems from artificially stabilized subject positions: a "mediocre and grotesque individual" stands in for the products of class struggle (1973, 144, 170–1). Bestowing the title "President" upon Bonaparte creates a new subject who, legitimized as an institution, embodies an entire political apparatus (162); "puffed up into a statesman," the bourgeois "becomes a higher being" able to engage in all manner of practices previously inconceivable (205–6). A multiplicity of aggregates identify themselves as unified subjects, consolidate varied manifestations of historical force under a banner with a singular voice, and thereby become new historical agents—classes (239 and *passim*). Marx presents numerous other condensation points—themselves direct products of labor—as having capacities for agency, showing how this capacity inheres not in autonomy but precisely in its absence. He attributes agency to historical coagulations in the form of memories, interests, and industries (146, 148, 149, 160,

7. Indeed, displacement is *always* half of Marx's story. The contradictions of *Capital*, for example, are always displaced (never reconciled), and continue to operate in their displacement (Harvey 1999).

223); revolutions and other events (150, 163, 171, 182); and even inanimate objects such as weapons and articles of clothing (162–3, 168, 175, 183). The *Brumaire* consistently demonstrates how identifying subjects is an inherently metonymical operation.<sup>8</sup>

This argument that subjects are metonyms can be found in various other sources. We see it, for example, when Guy Debord claims that John F. Kennedy was able to eulogize himself (1977, §61). Because the administrative machinery that produced the figure of the president remained largely intact after his death (especially the speechwriters who produced his public countenance), the political agent that was Kennedy continued to speak after the somatic organism that was Kennedy died. As Debord puts it, the “agent of the spectacle placed on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual.” So, for example, Janet Jackson is not an individual agent, but is rather a multimedia conglomerate which embodies the sum total of the labors of songwriters, producers, musicians, choreographers, stylists, trainers, marketers, and, of course, surgeons. Add to these the constitutive discourses of race and gender; a celebrated genealogical legacy; and technological and social powers of production, distribution, and consumption of sounds and images and the identification of an autonomous or coherent subject that we can identify as Ms Jackson becomes increasingly mystifying.

As other examples, see Anne McClintock’s claim that embodiments of Victorian womanhood (with all its class connotations) were made possible by the unseen labor of various members of the female working class (particularly in making, fitting, and installing clothing) (1995, 95–8). I also noticed this listening to a friend’s radio show. Amazed at the vast quantities of knowledge she wielded over the air, it was only later when I learned that “her” knowledge—and the position of authority she was able to convey over the air, her on-air subject position—comes in the form of a format book that collects artist history and trivia drawn from the amassed knowledge of the entire radio-station staff and label-supplied publicity materials. The disc jockey, like the movie critic who uses promotional literature provided by studios to write impressively knowledgeable reviews, produces authority and the capacity to act by obscuring the collaborative project that is their existence. The individual disc jockey, like the author and every other producer in an age of widespread cooperation, exists by virtue of reification.<sup>9</sup>

Marx uses metonymy to announce this reification, to illuminate the inadequacy of the concepts we use to grasp our phenomenal experience and how identifying subjects means (perhaps consciously, but usually unconsciously) ignoring their production. Whether we posit an autonomous subject acting upon an object, or an object (e.g., economic structure) acting upon subjects, we run the risk of undialectical reification—the risk of being either Hugo or Proudhon. As Gibson-Graham (1993) notes, marxisms have tended to take the latter route, fetishizing

8. In a fascinating and complementary discussion, Jacqueline Stevens (1999) shows how ostensibly discrete dimensions of identity such as family, race, nationality, religion, and ethnicity form “metonymic chains” which, upon investigation, become impossible to untangle.

9. Marx points to the role of cooperative labor in devastating notions of individuality in chapter 13 of *Capital*, Vol. 1.

capitalism in a manner that ignores the subjective production of markets and consumers. But given the categories available to us for understanding historical causality, given the ideological constraints endemic to our historical conditions, can we avoid this double threat? Marx does not endeavor to create new categories to sidestep this dilemma. Rather, with his exaggerated use of metonymy, he works with the established categories and demonstrates how they are both inadequate and unavoidable. He proliferates reified sites of agency in such a way as to highlight how we are daily compelled to do so, how our ability to grasp historical events and forces depends upon such reductions and reifications.<sup>10</sup>

As Marx uses metonymy to demonstrate the production and reification of subjects, he simultaneously presents us with an unrelenting barrage of literary, dramatic, mythological, and historical allusions. He thus meticulously situates his own work within a fertile context and challenges to the humanist self by invoking the multiplicity of inputs embodied in the liberal figure so easily characterized as an autonomous and unified subject (Marx). He therefore emphasizes the mediation of our experience of the world by knowledge and interpretation as well as the complicated role of an author in a world in which resignification constitutes a political contestation (Bové 1992, 82–3). He further demonstrates the productive power of language and the inadequacy of his available concepts through generous use of irony in the essay. Signaling that “straight” discourse is inadequate to convey his intentions, this indicates an inability to communicate his ideas transparently (Seery 1988). It is only ironically that Marx can even begin to articulate a theory of agency that transcends the language of liberal individuality available to him. Marx uses literary position and irony, in other words, to highlight his metonymy.

All this raises a pressing question for marxism: Does even a putatively marxist invocation of Marx as individuated subject problematize Marx’s project by reifying the category whose disruption stands at the center of marxism? Unless we recognize that *naming is always and precisely metonymy*, we run the risk of believing in the appellations we assign to concentrations of historical force; unless we pay specific attention to the processes of subjectivation, we remain blind to ideology. By regularly conflating particulars with collective forces that they embody, Marx points out how subject positions are both produced and contingent, artificial and temporary. This provides us with a way to talk about “Marx”—and to hold on to something we might call marxism, despite Marx’s own fears of the label (“*je ne suis pas Marxiste*”)—while simultaneously foregrounding the elusive and illusive character of attempts to fix a subject under the marker. A metonymical discussion of agency facilitates and supports an explanation of Marx as a collection of forces with a historical effectivity, far from independent of the relations that form them. Marx is an overdetermined rather than autonomous being, a postliberal subject individuated by virtue of liberalism’s hegemony rather than his innate abilities or achievements. Neither a mere cog in the mechanical processes of History nor an individuated

10. This complements Avineri’s (1968) claim that Marx does not so much reject mechanistic materialisms as read them as expressions of an alienated existence. Marx problematizes the reductions of liberalism but, given existing society, we could only ideologically claim to abandon them.

subject transcending his sociohistoric context, Marx becomes a revolutionary political icon whose marks have been and are subject to a multiplicity of contradictory interpretations and representations (humanist, scientist, philosopher, revolutionary, demagogue). These are the Marxes that have achieved historical significance, though they all work under the metonymical banner of “Marx.”<sup>11</sup>

Marx thus presents a theory of agency in terms that would trouble its transparent and unobstructed reception. When we identify Marx as the author of the *Brumaire*, we are encouraged to recognize not only the typical reduction of Marx and Engels to “Marx,” but the reduction of the entire constellation of forces embodied in Marx (and Engels) to a singular, coherent, and autonomous subject. Illuminating how this bears the ideological marks of liberalism, the *Brumaire* suggests how agency might occur as a deployment of desires and abilities which precede, constrain, and exceed the subjects to which will be attributed. This is how Marx surpasses his corporeal status as individuated subject without forfeiting the promise of transformative political agency. “Marx” exists to the extent that “he” contributes to the production of the world as we know and experience it. Reading Marx as an autonomous subject engaged in philosophically or theoretically “pure” thinking, allowing Marx to play the author’s role, accepting the metonymy as anything less than the effective category that it is, means alienating Marx from his object of study and the products of his labors. It means denying the social nature of existence and the constituent forces of culture. It means conceding to the presumptions of liberalism. It also means *alienating ourselves* from texts and practices that inform *our* wills, abilities, and enduring possibilities of existence.

By inviting the reader into the processes through which meaning is produced, the *Brumaire* highlights the productive nature of texts and directs us to consider how interpretive categories are constructed and maintained. It thus draws our attention to our own capacities for agency. It is emblematic of Jameson’s (1981) argument that encounters with texts are never pure but are always contaminated by historical baggage different from that of the author, and also of Barthes’s (1977) claim that reading involves overcoming the supposed privilege of the text. The essay demonstrates the effective power of texts by suggesting an examination of the ideological categories used in reading and interpretation (of texts most broadly defined). By articulating the ideological and rhetorical bases of supposedly stable subjects and subject positions, it actually contributes to their disruption and emphasizes our own role in their preservation or contestation.

Highlighting the philosophical component of challenging liberal ideology from within liberalism’s hegemonic codes, Marx shows how subjects are always produced. With a preemptive strike against opponents worried about the possibility or desirability of remaking humanity, Marx declares that we already do this every day, liberals no more or less than anybody else. The *Brumaire* does not abandon the subject, but identifies any subject as the product of political labor; it thereby contributes to the interpellation of *self-consciously* artificially stabilized positions. It recommends that

11. For more on the historical cargo carried in an author’s name, see Foucault (1977, 122–3).

though we may be compelled to use liberalism's reductive concepts, we should be careful of the tendency to assign to them any sort of ontological weight.

### Performativity and Postliberalism

The logic of metonymy in the essay demonstrates a commitment by Marx not to a logic of voluntarism or one of determinism, but to one of overdetermination. In this model, the forces of subjectivation are many and historically variable. One of these forces consists of the ideological categories that mediate our experience, as the tendency to see history as arising from the willed actions of individuals inspires a belief in the capacities of subjects to act. This reveals the material nature of discourse, and suggests that we act in part because we embody a historical location in which the hegemonic ideology is one of individual action. In this way, Marx's model of the subject invites comparison with Judith Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997) theory of performativity, which similarly rejects both ends of the established dichotomy. Focusing on the production of historically effective subjects at the level of ideology, the *Brumaire* clarifies the workings of politics in a world in which humanity is both educator and educated, producer and produced.

Like Marx, Butler is unsatisfied with the conventional alternatives of liberal voluntarism and structural determinism. In fact, the tendency to reduce alternatives to one of these poles has allowed Butler to build a career out of responding to her critics. Accused of arguing that we are completely determined by an inescapable web of power *and also* that we have the ability to change identity as we might change our socks, Butler apparently provides us with both too much and not nearly enough agency (see Kaufman and Martin 1995; Ebert 1995; Fraser 1995; Benhabib 1995; and most [in]famously, Nussbaum 1999).

Butler clearly does not abandon the subject, but she does abandon conventional notions of autonomy. Subjectivity, she argues, arises from identification with and citation of a compulsory set of norms; subjectivity is produced through (indeed *is*) "a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and [which] in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'" (1993, 234). This issue of intentionality distinguishes what Butler is calling performativity from mere performance; some liberal subjects (e.g., actors) willingly engage in the 'bounded acts' of *performance*, but the postliberal logic of *performativity* undermines such a notion of will by subordinating it to a host of productive and infective social practices. The norms being performed actually work to produce the subject that performs them; the conditions of our subjectivity "precede, constrain, and exceed" us. Neither a liberal voluntarism nor a structural determinism, this is a postliberal approach to subjectivity which situates human agency in a social project of subject formation. Agency, in other words, is ripped from the grips of liberal individualism and inserted into a postliberal theory of the subject rooted in a set of conditions which are both constraining and enabling.

Obviously predating this theory of performativity, Marx nevertheless deploys one of performance with dramaturgical rhetoric that runs throughout the *Brumaire*. On nearly every page, French history is a staged performance complete with actors,

roles, costumes, scenes, curtains, stages, and extras. The coup is a “farce” and “a parody” of an earlier program: the empire of Napoleon I (1973, 146, 234). And both of the text’s openings—the prefatory criticism of Hugo and Proudhon as well as the opening declaration that we make our own history under inherited conditions—suggest that agents act in a world in which material/ideological structures of power “precede, constrain, and exceed” them. This positioning of subjects (similarly accomplished through a more familiar language of preservation, cancellation, and sublation [*Aufhebung*]) certainly problematizes conventional notions of intentionality. But Marx obviously does not believe that this entails a rejection of the agency of that displaced subject; we *do* make our own history.

Butler has consistently argued that hers is no simple decentering that reduces the subject to an expression of its constitutive forces. It is, rather, a politically enabling logic that suggests the transformative power of subversive performance. For Butler, as for Marx, our continual (re)constitution through engagement in social and historical practices actually allows subjects to engage in the production and reproduction of those very practices. In particular, while liberalism throws us into at times paralyzing conditions of isolation and alienation, it also suggests the possibility of individual heroism (like Bonaparte’s) that can be conducive to political engagement. As Marx puts it, an ideology of heroism can inform a democratically enabling notion of subjectivity: despite its obvious restrictions, the army is “the peasant himself transformed into a hero” (1973, 244). The theme of heroism that permeates nearly every page of the *Brumaire* represents *both* a possibility of transformative political action and also a barrier to a postliberal politics.

Performativity, then, announces the glorifying logic of heroism as the definitive moment of metonymy. But while its postliberal approach troubles the inclination to ascribe such amounts of agency to ostensible heroes, it does not deny the ability to act. It circumscribes this ability by declaring how we cannot be held to be the authors of our desires and abilities, while it simultaneously highlights how social orders (e.g., liberal capitalism) often produce subjects with desires and abilities to act, and provides resources (i.e., ideology) through which to experience and interpret events. It thereby recognizes how subjects are enabled by particular orders (through, for instance, the institutions of representative democracy, industrial cooperation, and an ideology of individual efficacy) and refuses to fetishize the subjects that emerge from these orders. It thereby refuses the dichotomy of liberalism and structuralism—the former for privileging an autonomous site of agency that we’ve rejected, and the latter for affording no possibility for agency. Instead, it forges new territory by attending to the truncated though crucial capacities that are brought together through metonymical processes of liberalism, and provides the capacity to challenge a hegemonic order through seditious performance and rearticulation.

Bonaparte, in other words, is not only the farcical reproduction of his uncle, but is a collection of historical factors that appears as a hero by virtue of liberal hegemony. Marx tells us that the little man behind the curtain is no wizard (1973, 151, 248), but that he appears one because this curtain (ideology) conceals the vast and inherited mechanisms being manipulated to give the illusion of superhuman strength and understanding. Butler, like Marx, demonstrates how theories of agency mediate our experience of history, thus drawing the reader’s attention to the production of

historical-political agency. They thereby show how we are always already engaged in the production and reproduction of modes of subjectivity and also introduce a role for human (and particularly intellectual) agency in the political struggle of history. This suggests a means by which we could begin to understand that liberalism's ontological shorthand remains a linguistic and historical convention that might be overcome.

### What Is an Intellectual?

Just as Marx's theory of agency rejects the established dichotomy of liberalism and structuralism, his writing is similarly difficult to squeeze into the established categories of intellectual work. Dominick LaCapra (1983) argues that this dual status of subjects as producers and products is reflected in Marx's "double voicing," which is both "positivistic" and a "critical problematization." The *Brumaire*, as both description and an intervention, similarly refuses the consonant dichotomy of intellectual work. In testing the limits of these categories with the form and content of his writing, Marx presents not only a theory of agency, but performs a particular type of agency—that of intellectual workers.

The form and content of the *Brumaire* suggest that, for Marx, intellectual workers should not, contra Lenin, guide myopic masses through the obstacles of history toward earthly salvation. Rather, and as Gramsci grasped, their potential lies in the possibility of contributing to the production of human subjects willing and able to engage critically in the material practices of everyday life. That is, critical intellectuals engage the ontological and political categories through which the world is grasped, produce alternative understandings, and thereby produce novel possibilities for agency. While Marx writes from within the division of mental and manual labor that characterizes the modern age, he writes against this division and the liberal language that grounds it. With the metonymic and ironic rhetoric that guards against its passive reception, the *Brumaire* does not provide readers with conclusions so much as it announces the inadequacy of established categories. Marx, as an "initiator of discursive practices" (Foucault 1977), shaping the way in which we grasp the conditions of our lives, points toward new, postliberal categories through which we can experience the world. As Barthes (1977) declares that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author," John Coombes (1978) reads the *Brumaire* as a contract on the life of the author, working against the vanguard theory of intellectuals by showing how "only the questioning of [texts] is radical."

As the content of the *Brumaire* articulates the dangers and potentials of a logic of heroism, its form demonstrates the role of intellectuals in a period of historical crisis. It draws our attention to the restrictive forms of agency we reify and depend upon for self- and social awareness while suggesting possibilities for their overcoming. Articulating the possibilities for historical agency through the example of Bonaparte and those subjected to his rule (who remain *anything but* passive throughout the document), Marx performs this possibility not merely through telling an account of French politics that might incite dissent, but by suggesting that the categories used for apprehending the events, essentially bound with the present order, may be inadequate for guiding genuine transformation. Indeed, the *Brumaire* suggests the

political value of contesting our interpretive categories and alludes to the possibility of alternative formations to facilitate and navigate a transformed sociopolitical terrain.

This intervention is of particular value today, as a presidential administration attributes an ongoing war to the actions of “evildoers” who have neither explanation nor history. Of course, this official characterization of autonomous individuals contrasts vividly with the administration’s ongoing and aggressive campaign to produce national and evangelical subjects who might legitimate the actions in Iraq; its uncompromising control of information betrays a clear recognition that sympathy and hostility towards U.S. foreign policy are *produced*, not found. That is, as the administration simultaneously argues that individuals caused 9/11 and attributes the subsequent war to a unified coalition of autonomous states, we see a demonstration of how a large part of politics is establishing the subject through which events will be seen. The obvious inadequacy of understanding 9/11 as the isolated product of nineteen demented souls, coupled with the obviously productive attempt to force an understanding of the war as transcending religious and national identities, illuminates the metonymical activity of politics. At the same time, the unofficial resistance narratives (of an autonomous Bush acting out a private fantasy of religious salvation or personal vendetta against “the guy who tried to kill [his] dad,” or of Cheney trying to enrich himself and his Halliburton cronies) trade in these same liberal categories. Though the financial argument might certainly highlight how international economic pressures transcending subjective wills, its public articulations, thoroughly steeped in moral indignation and personal criticism, seem firmly trapped at the level of the individual.

In her reflections on 9/11, Judith Butler (2002) argues that there are two recognizable types of narratives regarding horrific events: the liberal narrative in which somebody did it, and the structural narrative in which nobody did it. Therefore, she continues, explanations of the conditions which give rise to the possibility for international terrorism are heard as so many exonerations of the actors involved. In other words, Butler sees the debates over 9/11 restricted to the poles of the dichotomy identified throughout this essay: we can have a liberal explanation that singular individuals are responsible for the attacks, or we have attacks that arise from a set of anonymous conditions. Butler expresses frustration in this piece that alternative approaches, such as examining how U.S. foreign policy continues to produce conditions and subjects in which terrorism is a likely possibility (her preferred diagnostician here is Arundhati Roy), falls largely on deaf ears since it does not correspond to either of the dominant notions of subjectivity and causality. Here, she illustrates the necessary role for intellectual labor that might assist in the presentation and reception of narratives that betray the inadequacy of the familiar styles.

It is difficult to avoid the temptation to call Operation Iraqi Freedom the farcical reproduction of Operation Desert Storm. And yet, it is the attribution of the war to Bush II as shorthand for American vengeance that seems the more effective seduction. Like the perpetrators of 9/11, Bush is allowed to play the hero’s (or villain’s) role because we metonymically reduce the practice of war to a personal vendetta or spiritual arrogance, as supporters justify the war with reference to Bush’s

moral courage and critics chalk it up to Bush's revenge for Hussein trying to kill his dad. And yes, attempts to situate the war by invoking the production of subjects through cold war militarism, evangelical Manicheanism, and American exceptionalism are heard as the only possible alternatives: exonerations in which nobody can be held responsible for the situation. Because this narrative will be reduced to the recognizable (if unacceptable) category of structural apology, dissent takes a more familiar tack: Bush's own personal vendetta stands in for this condition because of the iterability of the conventions of personal conflict.

With this latest coup, we find ourselves navigating the same dilemma as Marx. Notably, while Marx's rhetoric suggests that we are unable to speak postliberal alternatives, Butler suggests 150 years later that they are spoken all the time but that we are unable to *hear* them. Of course, Butler is writing in the wake of 150 additional years of postliberal thought in which theorists such as those identified by Dallmayr have aggressively criticized the presumptions of both liberalism and structuralism. But if Butler is right, then great strides have been made. People are speaking beyond liberalism; now the project is to get others to listen.

## Conclusion

From the opening of the *Brumaire*, Marx alerts us that the goal of the text is to articulate a theory of agency that avoids the double threat of liberalism and structuralism. His narrative challenges the presumptions of both of these dominant modes of understanding the human condition. Highlighting how subjects are produced through the metonymical process of naming, it encourages us to recognize that we are neither autonomous nor reducible to the relations which confront and form us. As the essay stresses the production and proliferation of subjects, it highlights the revolutionary potential of intellectuals who engage the social relations of existence, exploiting the evident inadequacies of hegemonic ideologies that mediate our experience and inform conservative politics.

This is to say that Marx rhetorically engages the structure of our thought because he recognizes how the categories that we are historically obliged to employ mediate our experience and action in the world. As these categories (indeed, any categories) constitute a reductive approach to represent phenomenal experience in thought, Marx demonstrates this process of reduction so as to denaturalize and politicize it. Thereby illustrating the limited capacities of both liberalism and structuralism, Marx invites us into his essay, demonstrating how agency is not something we find in a text but is something we bring to and might take from it. He suggests how the relations of production that we embody are carried in the performative adherence to a set of codes, investing the reader with a recognition that subjectivity is inherently contestable. Marx's willingness to engage these codes—to demonstrate and embrace the power of metonymy rather than avoid it—suggests his own recognition that while we cannot merely make new codes out of thin air [*aus Freien Stücken*], we can work to defetishize those available.

We cannot, alas, think the world other and force its transformation. We can't, this reading of the *Brumaire* suggests, even adequately do the former. But neither can we

deny the essential role of intellectual labor in the invigoration of a political imagination. The *Brumaire* suggests how our labors can test the limits of historically situated consciousness and expand beyond the categories of thought most consistent with (and therefore most amenable to) the contemporary division of labor and distribution of wealth. Illustrating the limits, implications, and manufacture of the liberal subject, Marx points toward the possibility of something beyond: a postliberal politics.

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