



Gulliver as Swift's Every-Proletarian

Dehumanization, Alienation, and Labor

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In this analysis of *Gulliver's Travels*, Genevieve Gordon argues that Jonathan Swift's satirical narrative presages and illustrates Marxist ideas about the exploitation and alienation of laborers, offering a powerful critique of mercantile capitalism. This essay was written for British Literature I with Dr. John Bruce.

KARL MARX DID NOT WRITE his theories on capitalism, alienation, and labor estrangement until over a century after *Gulliver's Travels* was published, but much about the latter text's remarkable social and economic foresight can be gleaned by comparing Jonathan Swift's satire with Marx's social and economic philosophies. While Swift isolates Gulliver in his many voyages to make the reader discover the unpleasantness of human nature through satire, the everyman protagonist also stands in as the every-proletarian; the feelings of dehumanization and alienation Gulliver experiences are exaggerations of the plight of the worker in a system in which all humanity has been stripped by materialism, greed, and capitalism.

Although the industrial revolution that inspired much of Marx's theory in the nineteenth century had not yet fully taken hold, Swift's economic context embodied growing trends away from simple,

agrarian lifestyles and towards a more complex, global economy. The economic theory of Mercantilism prevailed rather than full-scale capitalism, but the advents of workhouses and widespread colonialization efforts foreshadowed the values expressed in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published 50 years after *Gulliver's Travels*, spurring a general "proletarianization of the working class" (Murphet 659). A century later, Marx points to this as a key juncture in the process by which a bourgeoisie and a proletariat are formed, wherein the former control the means of economic production and are sold the labor of the latter. When a working-class proletarian works for a capitalist owner, Marx says, the work they do no longer belongs to them, and the product of their labor becomes something alien to them, causing their estrangement from it. To Marx, work is part of the uniqueness of humanity, so the estrangement from work is a subsequent dehumanization of the laborer that alienates them from themselves and from other people, allowing the bourgeoisie to more easily exploit them ("Estrangement" 70-81). Estrangement and dehumanization occur in any circumstance where wealth is prioritized over sustenance, so this method of corruption is certainly among the list of Swift's grievances expressed in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Gulliver's first voyages, to Lilliput and Brobdingnag, focus primarily on the disgust to be found in human society from both perspectives: minuscule and gargantuan. These incredible satirical insights, however, hinge upon the fact that Gulliver is isolated as the only person of his kind. This leaves him vulnerable by creating a power imbalance, even among the diminutive Lilliputians, because it allows Gulliver to be dehumanized and treated as a spectacle and, as Marx would put it, a commodity. The name given to him by the Lilliputians, "Quinbus Flestrin," translates to "Man Mountain," and illustrates that he is seen as nonhuman from the moment of his arrival, which aids in the exploitation of his labor (Swift 13). In Lilliput, the natives make use of Gulliver's stature for means of labor and war, but the loftiness, decadence, and trivial materialism of the Lil-

liputian civilization causes Gulliver to be exiled rather than appreciated. His ability to extinguish the palace fire with his urine is lifesaving yet serves as the grounds for his banishment.

In giant-ridden Brobdingnag, Gulliver is treated much less as a physical utility and more like a performative commodity for entertainment. The man who finds him upon his initial arrival parades him around as a novelty, charging others to watch Gulliver drink alcohol, recite speeches, and perform physical tasks. Gulliver's narration reflects his self-perception as a marketable, dehumanized object; "My master gave publick notice, that he would shew me again next Market-Day," he says (Swift 66). "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces," Marx writes ("Estrangement" 71), but Gulliver observes, "the more my master got by me, the more unsatiable he grew" (Swift 67). Despite the fact these trials persist until Gulliver is "half dead with weariness and vexation" and "almost reduced to a skeleton," he is complacent (Swift 65, 67). "I bowed down," he narrates, "and humbly answered, that I was my master's slave" (68). Gulliver's seemingly complete mental rationalization and normalization of the behavior of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians is part of what makes this effective satire, but it also speaks to the perennial self-delusion of any oppressed laborer. As a result of estrangement from his labor, Gulliver "begets the dominion of the one who does not produce," or the bourgeoisie (Marx, "Estrangement" 78). This is also what happens at the end of Gulliver's time in Lilliput, as he accepts the ridiculous grounds for his exile as entirely normal, just as Marxist doctrine asserts that the proletariat is often duped into believing that capitalism has their best interests in mind.

A Marxist reading is especially useful in discussing Gulliver's excursions in the highly intellectual Laputa, particularly Swift's seeming disdain for science and technology in the descriptions of the Academy at Lagado. The pointed parody of invention and innovation, in the form of the "Projectors," seems like a jab at the developing utilitarianism of Swift's context and a condemnation of all

technological advancement and attempts at progress. Most essential, however, is the text's criticism of a culture obsessed with efficiency to a highly damaging point. Before even entering the Academy, Gulliver hears about this preoccupation from Lord Munodi, whose mill has been destroyed by a group of Projectors promising to increase his water yield by building a large, overly complex contraption. As Munodi tells him, however, "after employing an Hundred Men for two Years, the Work miscarried" (Swift 131). This utilitarian effort to increase production is shown as a disturbing waste of human time and labor and leaves Lord Munodi with fewer means by which to support himself, all while the Projectors project "the Blame intirely upon him" (131). In Marxist theory, technology that increases any kind of yield or production can only bode poorly for the working class, but the bourgeoisie "cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production" ("Manifesto" 476). Not only, then, are the inventions at Lagado pointless and fruitless, but they also propagate a harmful system of control and exploitation. As Gulliver observes at the Academy, the inventions also entirely change the nature of work; Marx writes that this is key to the alienation and dehumanization of laborers. In an age of advanced machinery, Marx insists, "the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character," making the laborer only "an appendage of the machine" ("Manifesto" 479). In the name of efficiency, the Projectors' devised means of writing through an overly complicated system of moving letter parts does precisely this. The machine requires the work of 40 laborers whose work is as meaningless as the results it produces. The act of writing, a uniquely human type of work, is dehumanized while simultaneously used to exploit the labor of many people.

The basic philosophies expressed by Marx and Swift, especially their considerations about the "good" or "bad" essence of humankind, may at first seem incompatible. Despite the quite dismal nature of much of Marx's writing, his perception of humanity is

primarily positive; he asserts that a man is “*made*, by his own activity, into what he is at any given time” (Mészáros 148). This means that to Marx, the pervasion of capitalism and labor exploitation does not just corrupt society economically and politically, but it perverts the morality of all of humanity. At first glance, Swift seems to view human nature as much less dynamic; *Gulliver’s Travels* illustrates what Julian Murphet describes as a stark “inhumanism,” by which the text renders most of humanity “contemptible” (Murphet 659). The ridiculousness and brutishness of Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Lagado, and the land of the Houyhnhnms should force the reader to confront the Hobbesian elements inherent in their own selves and surroundings. However, it is possible to read Gulliver’s trials and misfortunes as consequences not necessarily of humans as individuals, but of social codes and institutions which allow for the worst of human behavior to be expressed. Perhaps Swift takes issue less with humanity and more with “the very state of being human in a world of systematic blasphemies against human beings” (Murphet 659). For Marx, this “world” is capitalism.

The themes of estrangement and dehumanization that allow Gulliver to represent an oppressed proletariat culminate ingeniously in the fourth part when he is forced to literally confront his own humanity among the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos. His place and status in this new, foreign setting are so befuddling because he cannot identify with either species; what Swift considers to be the “best” human attributes are bestowed upon horses, while the “worst” qualities remain with the Yahoos, who better resemble wild animals (Murphet 660). The Houyhnhnms are superior to humans in that they are less corrupt; they do not lie, they have no concept of violent war, and they do not understand the greed implied when Gulliver informs them that “the rich Man enjoyed the Fruit of the poor Man’s Labour” (Swift 189). Economically, however, the Houyhnhnms are also admirable because they are reminiscent of a time for which Swift is nostalgic; they represent an idyllic, self-sufficient society free of the need for trade and materialism (Landa 45). This is also a

figure of Marx's utopia, because it does not necessitate a hierarchy of power that leads to inequality, and it mimics similar anti-industrial sentiments as Gulliver's voyage to the Academy of Lagado.

When workers are estranged from their labor, Marx argues, they are dehumanized to the point where they lose contact with their "species-being," that is, what constitutes their sense of human self. The worker, then, "no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal," and, as a result, "what is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal" ("Estranged" 74). This perfectly summarizes the position of the Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels*; the Yahoos are indeed humans, with human characteristics, but they are more specifically humans under capitalism. The Yahoos possess a notion of greed that the Houyhnmns do not; they are "violently fond" of shining stones, which Gulliver's Houyhnmn master calls an "unnatural appetite" (Swift 196). Although the humor of this section of the novel is that Gulliver does not entirely realize how his species' behaviors align with the Yahoos, his ability to distinguish himself from them is the ideological climax of the entire text; Swift distributes a dire warning that humans, specifically workers, must be able to assert their humanity and their species-beings to avoid being reduced to Yahoos. In *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka makes a similar argument: the reader is disturbed when Gregor becomes a cockroach, and they can point to the difference between pre- and post-metamorphosis Gregor, but Kafka aims to show that because of his treatment as a worker under capitalism, he is essentially the same. If humans want to believe they are more sophisticated, moral, and intelligent than Yahoos or roaches, they must stop supporting a social system that exploits them as though they are not.

For *Gulliver's Travels* to be truly effective satire, it must allow an avenue for improving the society it mocks, rather than exclusively, pessimistically condemning all its participants. It may not be accurate to label Swift a proto-Marxist, but a reading where Lemuel Gulliver represents the plight of the working-class allows the text an additional layer of relevancy to the pending economic anxieties of

its original context. It allows the satire to not only criticize the greed and materialism of humanity, but to also suggest a move away from capitalism as a potential answer to those defects. By placing Gulliver in increasingly bizarre worlds where he faces increasing alienation and dehumanization, the progress of capitalism can be followed to exaggerated ends to express the urgency and ridiculousness of Swift's surroundings. Marx's dynamic view of human nature ultimately lends *Gulliver's Travels* the possibility of an optimistic conclusion, or at least a call to action for readers to reestablish their humanity and their dignity as laborers and proletarians. ▶▶

▶▶ WORKS CITED

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