

Tal Meir Giladi*

Why Would a Monarchist Vilify the Rich? Marx and Engels on Balzac

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Abstract: Engels explained his admiration for Balzac by pointing to an apparent discrepancy between Balzac's literature and his politics. Despite his sympathies for the French nobility, Balzac's realism "compelled" him to portray this class in unflattering terms. In this article, I challenge Engels's reading, arguing that Marx's scattered remarks on Balzac take us in a different direction. Specifically, I argue that in his remark on Balzac's *The Peasants* Marx pinpointed the author's preoccupation with the spread of bourgeois ideology into the nobility. Building on this remark, I analyze several of Balzac's works showing that insofar as Balzac lambasted the nobles, his critique was primarily directed towards nobles who had adopted bourgeois ways. In this light, and against Engels's observation, Balzac's critique of the nobles appears to stem from his sympathy to aristocratic values rather than conflicting with them. In showing that affinities between Balzac, Marx and Engels did not depend on Balzac expressing anti-noble sentiment, I argue that the admiration the fathers of communism had for the monarchist's prose exemplifies a partial, yet typical convergence between socialists and conservatives in their critique of modern bourgeois society.

Keywords: Marx; Engels; Balzac; communism; conservatism

In 1888, 5 years after the death of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels wrote a letter to socialist writer Margaret Harkness. In his letter, Engels provided a brief, powerful and highly influential assessment of the literary work of Honoré de Balzac.¹ After attesting to his admiration for the author of *La comédie humaine*, who depicted French society with the force of his elaborate realism, Engels pointed to an alleged discrepancy between Balzac's literature and his politics. For Engels, Balzac's realism, which drove him to depict the decline of the French nobility, "compelled" him to go

1 Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Margaret Harkness", in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1975ff), vol. 48, pp. 166ff (henceforth: MECW); *Marx-Engels-Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1956ff), vol. 37, pp. 42ff (henceforth: MEW).

*Corresponding author: Tal Meir Giladi, Philosophy, Université Paris Nanterre, Nanterre, France, E-mail: talmeirgiladi@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5390-7963>

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Why Would a Monarchist Vilify the Rich?

Marx and Engels on Balzac

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In 1888, five years after the death of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels wrote a letter to socialist writer Margaret Harkness. In his letter, Engels provided a brief, powerful and highly influential assessment of the literary work of Honoré de Balzac.¹ After attesting to his admiration for the author of *La comédie humaine*, who depicted French society with the force of his elaborate realism, Engels pointed to an alleged discrepancy between Balzac's literature and his politics. For Engels, Balzac's realism, which drove him to depict the decline of the French nobility, "compelled" him to go against his right-wing sympathies for the old elites. Though Balzac the political thinker was supposed to praise the nobles, his realist tendencies forced him to document their flawed and at times pitiable conduct. Engels's interpretive frames, which was later adopted by prominent figures such as George Lukács, remains the classic Marxist reading of Balzac.

I intend to challenge Engels's reading, arguing that Marx's scattered remarks on Balzac take us in a different direction. After reviewing the prominent Marxist interpretations of Balzac's prose, I will proceed to elucidate Marx's own relation to the author. I will show that, on many

¹ Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Margaret Harkness", in *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1975ff), vol. 48, pp. 166ff (henceforth: MECW); *Marx-Engels-Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1956ff), vol. 37, pp. 42ff (henceforth: MEW).

occasions, Marx referenced Balzac's characters to illustrate the moral corruption both men associated with bourgeois norms and values. Following that, I will claim that in his remark on *The Peasants*, Marx identified Balzac's preoccupation with the process by which bourgeois culture spreads throughout society, posing a threat to the aristocracy. Building on Marx's remark, I will suggest that insofar as Balzac lambasted the nobles, his critique was primarily directed towards nobles who had adopted the bourgeois ways, especially those who had succumbed to what he labeled the "the principles of money" (*le principe Argent*).² In other words, contrary to Engels's observation, I will contend that rather than castigating the nobles against his political convictions, Balzac criticized them based on his loyalty to aristocratic culture – and in this respect, at least in the texts that will be examined, Balzac's literature and his politics were aligned.

(1) Marxist Readings of Balzac

Balzac is an author Marxists hold in high regard. Marx and Engels wrote about him with admiration, and prominent Marxists followed. In the 20th century, George Lukács, Pierre Macherey and Fredric Jameson are arguably the most influential Marxists to have applied themselves to the task of interpreting Balzac's oeuvre.³ Though their readings diverge on key points, all three approach Balzac by taking Engels's letter to Margaret Harkness as a major point of reference.

(1.1) Engels's Letter to Margaret Harkness

In his letter to Harkness, a fellow socialist and novelist, Engels defended the principle that the "more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art".⁴ His example is Balzac, whom he praises for teaching him more about French society than "all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together".⁵ Subsequently, Engels turns to an alleged discrepancy in Balzac's work, the gist of which is found in the following passage.

² Honoré de Balzac, "Melmoth Réconcilié", in *La comédie humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), vol. 9, p. 269. All references to Balzac's works are to the *Pléiade* edition (henceforth: CH). Translations are my own.

³ It is noteworthy that Balzac scholars give considerable weight to Marxist interpretations, with the latter being recognized as one of the classic approaches to Balzac's oeuvre. Following Lukács on many points, Pierre Barbéris has done much to establish this reading in France. Compare: "Notes sur une édition récente des Paysans", *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 65/3 (1965), 494–502. For a more comprehensive picture: Pierre Barbéris, *Le monde de Balzac* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973). Compare likewise to the central place given to Marxist readings in more recent surveys of Balzac's work, for instance M.E. Thérenty and B. Lyon-Caen (eds.), *Balzac et le politique* (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, Christian Pirot, 2007) and Michael Tilby (ed.), *Balzac* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ Engels, "Letter to Harkness" (MECW 48, 167; MEW 37, 43).

⁵ *Ibid* (MECW 48, 168; MEW 37, 44).

Balzac was politically a Legitimist [namely, he was a monarchist who supported Bourbon restoration]; his great work is a constant elegy on the inevitable decay of good society, his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply – the nobles [...] That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he *saw* the necessity of the downfall of his favorite nobles, and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found – that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac.⁶

Engels pointed to a twofold discrepancy: (a) Balzac castigated the nobles, despite his sympathy for this class; (b) he depicted the inevitable rise of the bourgeoisie, despite his antipathy for this class. For Engels, Balzac was driven to his positions by virtue of his unrelenting realism which crops out “in spite of the author’s opinions”.⁷ This means in turn that Engels presupposed, as one might expect, that the nobles are deplorable and that the rise of the bourgeoisie is inevitable. Such is the reality Balzac was applauded to have been able to see despite his political prejudices.

(1.2) Lukács, Macherey and Jameson on *The Peasants*

Lukács, Macherey and Jameson followed Engels by providing Marxist interpretations to Balzac’s work. Since all three paid special attention to Balzac’s novel *The Peasants*, and since Marx also referred to this novel, I will begin with a short summary.

Written in 1844, *The Peasants* depicts country life but does not idealize it. Rather, Balzac portrays the French countryside as torn in ruthless class-struggle. He tells us the story of one of Napoleon’s retired generals, Montcornet, who buys a large estate in Burgundy with the intent to make it into a tight and well-run operation. Crucial to this project is suppressing contested rights enjoyed by the peasants. Especially, Montcornet focuses on their right to collect brushwood in his forests and to glean in his fields and vineyards.⁸ Soon enough, the general encounters major

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid (MECW 48, 167; MEW 37, 43).

⁸ Jean Bastier provided a concise account of the historical context of *The Peasants*, with a particular focus on the right to gather wood and glean (compare: Jean Bastier, “Les paysans de Balzac et l’histoire du droit rural”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 25/3 (1978): 396–418). Intriguing parallels between Balzac’s narrative and

opposition from the members of the rural bourgeoisie, who covet Montcornet's estate, and from the peasantry. Montcornet's life is threatened, and his faithful guard Michaud is ambushed and killed by embittered peasants. Montcornet eventually backs out, selling the estate which is split among the locals. For Balzac, Montcornet's defeat typifies the failure of the French landed aristocracy to preserve its large estates and the high culture Balzac associated with them.

(1.2.1) Lukács

In an essay dedicated to *The Peasants*, Lukács observed a “discrepancy between intention and performance”.⁹ While Balzac intended to write the tragedy of the nobles, he ended up depicting the tragedy of the peasants. In addition to the suppression of peasant rights, Lukács had in mind the story of Courtecuisse, Montcornet ex-guard, who burned “with the desire to become at last a landowner and bourgeois”,¹⁰ bought two acres with money borrowed from Rigou, the usurer, and plunged into miserable debt following “almost all peasants bitten by the demon of landownership”.¹¹

For Lukács, much like for Engels, the tragedy of the peasants, along with that of the nobles, coincides with the inevitable rise of the bourgeoisie. In tracing these historical tendencies, Lukács echoes point (a) from Engels's letter. Lukács also reiterates point (b), suggesting that Balzac exposed the nobles' “internal decadence” and “moral deterioration”,¹² even though his sympathies were with the aristocracy. However, it's worth noting that Lukács did not provide specific examples from *The Peasants* to support this point. Instead, he affirmed generally that “Balzac definitely takes sides with Montcornet.”¹³

(1.2.2) Macherey

Macherey also contended that *The Peasants* is made of the contrast between two opposite poles, which he labels “ideology” and “fiction”. Ideology represents Balzac's commitment to the monarchy. Fiction is his intention to depict the real world. Macherey's primary insight is that,

Marx's writings on wood theft could not be addressed in this article. They certainly warrant independent examination.

⁹ George Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Universal Library, 1964), 21.

¹⁰ Honoré de Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH 8, 128.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 189.

¹² Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid*.

while promoting monarchist ideology, Balzac reveals a different narrative that contradicts his own ideology. Balzac writes against the people, yet his descriptions allow them to speak.¹⁴ For Macherey, this is exemplified by Fourchon's speech, where the conniving loafer openly expresses his hatred of the nobles,¹⁵ sharing relatable feelings of defiance with the reader. Macherey believed that such depictions align Balzac's prose with Marx's project. In this, Macherey follows Victor Hugo, who stated in his eulogy for Balzac: "Unwittingly, whether he liked it or not, whether he consented or not, the author of this immense and strange work belongs to the strong breed of revolutionary writers".¹⁶

In exposing Balzac's text as "uneven" and "disparate",¹⁷ Macherey resonated with the views of both Engels and Lukács but provides a more nuanced interpretation. Among other points, he argued that Balzac represents various social classes through a wide range of characters, producing complex and contradictory depictions.¹⁸ From this perspective: (b) Balzac simultaneously castigating some nobles while sympathizing with others is unproblematic. Macherey was also less rigid regarding Balzac's view of the bourgeoisie, suggesting (a) that Balzac reluctantly depicted its triumph but did not consider it inevitable.¹⁹

(1.2.3) Jameson

In reading *The Peasants*, Jameson diverged sharply from both Engels and Lukács. Where the two saw "necessity", Jameson saw a "merely conditional" failure.²⁰ He stressed that since Montcornet was "only ambiguously aristocratic",²¹ the legitimacy of his authority remained uncertain. Consequently, Montcornet's failure could potentially be averted by landowners of more noble origins who would have better chances of success.

¹⁴ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge, 1978) 276. In Eagleton's words: "a text in saying one thing, will reveal other possibilities, other statements and insights, which it is ideologically prohibited from realizing" (Terry Eagleton, "Marxist Literary Criticism", in *Contemporary Approaches to English Studies*, ed. H. Schiff (London: Heinemann, 1977): 101).

¹⁵ "You want to remain masters, we will always be enemies" (Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH 8, 83).

¹⁶ Victor Hugo, "Funérailles de Balzac", in *Oeuvres Complètes De Victor Hugo* (Paris: Hetzel et Quantin, 1882), vol. 1, p. 532.

¹⁷ Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 264.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 272, 283.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 267.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), 156.

²¹ *Ibid*, 155.

The disaster of *Les Paysans* [...] is thus emptied of its finality, its irreversibility, its historical inevitability, by a narrative register which offers it to us as merely conditional history, and transforms the indicative mode of historical “fact” into the less binding one of the cautionary tale and the didactic lesson.²²

I find Jameson’s suggestion plausible, and not only for the reasons he put forward. Beyond his origins, Montcornet’s behavior played a significant role in his downfall. Instead of carefully navigating of turbulent waters of the French countryside, he humiliated Gaubertin, who oversaw his estate, as well as Courtecuisse, who guarded it, turning them both into formidable adversaries. Balzac highlighted Montcornet’s indiscretion when he noted that “civil life and its countless precautions were unknown to this general”.²³ But more on this shortly.

(2) Marx’s Remarks on Balzac

After reviewing several of the most influential Marxist readings of Balzac, I turn to Marx’s own comments on the author. In his *Reminiscences of Marx*, Paul Lafargue recalled that Marx had intended to write an essay on Balzac, which, regretfully, he never did.²⁴ Instead, we find brief mentions scattered throughout Marx’s writings and correspondence. Marx references Balzac at least sixteen times: three times in published works, once in the manuscripts and the rest in his correspondence.²⁵ These references mostly appear when Marx discusses handling money, especially when fraud, greed or status-seeking are involved. In other words, Marx is reminded of Balzac when confronted with unflattering personifications of what could be labeled a bourgeois pursuit of profit.

²² Ibid, 156.

²³ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH 8, 100.

²⁴ Paul Lafargue, “Reminiscence of Marx”, in *Marx and Engels Through the Eyes of Their Contemporaries* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 33.

²⁵ In his *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), Marx mentions Célestin Crevel from *Cousin Bette* (MECW 11, 196; Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (Berlin: Dietz, 1958ff), vol. I/18, p. 66 (henceforth: MEGA). In an article from the *Neue Oder-Zeitung* (1855), Marx speaks generally of the Balzacian drama as involving “murder, adultery, legacy hunting and fraud” (MECW 14, 31; MEGA I/14, 144). In a letter to Engels (1856), Marx alludes to *César Birotteau* (MECW 40, 69–70; MEW 29, 73). In another letter to Engels (1867), *Mercadet*, *Melmoth Reconciled* and *The Unknown Masterpiece* are mentioned (MECW42, 347–348; MEW 31, 278). In the corrected editions of *Capital I* (1875 and later), Marx speaks of Gobseck (MECW35, 584; MEGA II/7, 511, later in MEGA II/8, 553). In the manuscripts of *Capital III* (1868), Marx comments on *The Peasants* (MECW37, 44; MEGA II/4.3, 395, MEGA II/15, 43). In a letter to Engels from the same year, *The Village Priest* is mentioned (MECW43, 189; MEW 32, 233). In eight letters to Engels (1868–1870), Marx alludes to Gaudissart (MECW43, 85, 106, 121, 275, 430, 436–437, 440, 531; MEW 32, 136, 156, 174–175, 315, 444, 448, 450, 521). In a letter to Jenny Marx (1878), he is reminded of Balzac in the context of deception (MECW45, 324; MEW 34, 344).

In this section, I will examine Marx's most telling remarks, illustrating how he employed Balzac's characters to convey his distaste for the normative corruption he associated with the bourgeoisie. I will then delve into a discussion of Balzac's *The Peasants*. Against the background of his other remarks, Marx's short remark on this novel will allow me to challenge Engels's suggestion that Balzac criticized the nobles "against" his political convictions. Rather, I will argue that this critique is compatible with Balzac's politics insofar as it is directed towards nobles who adopted the bourgeois spirit both Balzac and Marx rejected.

(2.1) Balzac's Aversion to the Bourgeoisie

Like many conservatives, Balzac expressed an antipathy towards bourgeois norms and values which is visible throughout his oeuvre. This sentiment may be illustrated with reference to texts that were undoubtedly familiar to Marx: *Melmoth Reconciled* and *Gobseck*.

(2.1.1) *Melmoth Reconciled*

A letter Marx wrote to Engels in early 1867 contains three mentions of works by Balzac.

I can write you but a few lines at this moment, as the landlord's agent is here and I must play opposite him in the role of Mercadet in Balzac's comedy. Apropos of Balzac, I advise you to read his *Le Chef-d'Œuvre Inconnu* and *Melmoth reconcilié*. They are two little *chefs d'œuvres* full of delightful irony.²⁶

First Marx mentioned Balzac's play *Mercadet* (1840) for evident reasons. As the landlord's agent comes to collect rent, Marx, who was often short of money, was reminded of Balzac's *Mercadet*, a bankrupted businessman who makes a mockery of his creditors. Then, in a side note, Marx recommended two other works by Balzac which are filled with "delightfully ironic": *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1837) and *Melmoth Reconciled* (1835).

Melmoth Reconciled offers insight into Balzac's frame of mind. In this short story, Balzac explored the familiar theme of a pact with the devil, as Castanier, the bank teller, succumbs to the temptations of crime. The money Castanier deals with daily drives him over the edge. The opening

²⁶ Karl Marx, "Letter to Engels", MECW42, 347–348; MEW 31, 278.

lines of *Melmoth Reconciled* contain some of Balzac's most lucid observations on the social predicament in post-Napoleonic France.

Strange civilization! Society rewards virtue with a hundred *louis* of rent in old age, an apartment on a second floor, unlimited bread, a couple of new scarves, an old wife with her children. But as for vice, a little boldness [...] and society will sanction the theft of millions, shower it with ribbons, stuff it with honors and overwhelm it with high regard [...] Our civilization, which since 1815 replaced the principle of honor (*le principe Honneur*) with the principles of money (*le principe Argent*).²⁷

In anticipation of Castanier's transgression, Balzac commented on the pitiable state of those bank tellers who resist the temptation of theft and stay faithful to their employers. The irony in Balzac's portrayal is evident. Irony occurs when something is humorously or mockingly contrary to our expectations. In this case, Balzac's irony is rooted in a moral judgment. He believed that virtue should be rewarded with honor. However, since 1815, specifically since Napoleon's downfall, he reckons that only greed is rewarded.

(2.1.2) *Gobseck*

A short remark made by Marx in the first volume of *Capital* is likewise relevant. In a passage dedicated to capitalist accumulation, Marx noted how odd investment appears when compared with the age-old aristocratic habit of hoarding gold. Instead of hoarding, investment presupposes that to make money one must spend money.

Exclusion of money from circulation would also exclude absolutely its self-expansion as capital, while accumulation of a hoard in the shape of commodities would be sheer tomfoolery. Thus for instance, Balzac, who so thoroughly studied every shade of avarice, represents the old usurer Gobseck as in his second childhood when he begins to heap up a hoard of commodities.²⁸

Marx mentioned Gobseck, the protagonist of Balzac's short story of the same name (1830). A usurer, Gobseck accumulates riches by properly handling his fortune. But weakened by old age,

²⁷ Balzac, "Melmoth Réconcilié", CH9, 269.

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume I*, (MECW35, 584; MEGA II/7, 511, later in MEGA II/8, 553).

Gobseck hoards commodities, which eventually rot in his Parisian apartment. Balzac mentioned old Gobseck's hoarding to illustrate how unsuitable older ways of managing one's estate have become under capitalism.

Focusing on Gobseck's heyday will allow us to gain further insight into Balzac's attitude towards the bourgeoisie. In the following scene, Gobseck pays a visit to a wealthy countess whose adulterous adventures have led her into debts she cannot repay. The countess is not at home, and Gobseck speaks with the maid:

“My name is Gobseck, tell her my name. I'll be here at noon”, and I went away, leaving traces of my visit on the carpet which covered the staircase. I like leaving mud on a rich man's carpet, not out of petty resentment, but to make them feel the grip of necessity.²⁹

Gobseck seems to be administering justice. The countess, in her reckless behavior, appears to him as deserving of some form of punishment. Gobseck departs, leaving behind a subtle token of his presence – a trace of mud on her carpet, serving as a reminder of who wields power in this situation. It's not her, nor her social status, but his money. Soon after, Gobseck steps outside.

In the courtyard I found a horde of servants, brushing their uniforms, waxing their boots or cleaning sumptuous carriages. This, I told myself, is what brings these people to me! This is what drives them to respectably steal millions, to betray their country. To keep mud off his boots when walking down the street, the great lord, or one who apes him, bathes in mud once and for all”.³⁰

The mud motif recurs. The rich need money to hire coachmen for their carriage, ensuring they do not soil their shoes. However, in their pursuit of money, they find themselves metaphorically mired in a different kind of mud. They become debtors, losing their dignity. The mud serves as a symbol of the shame associated with the relentless pursuit of money, of aristocrats embracing bourgeois values. Yet, it also represents the stain carried by those who falter in this pursuit, eventually losing their esteemed position in society. Balzac's disdain for the nobility is evident here – disdain for playing the bourgeois game and disdain for losing it.

²⁹ Honoré de Balzac, “Gobseck”, CH2, 631.

³⁰ Balzac, “Gobseck”, CH2, 634.

(2.2) Marx Alluding to Balzac's Aversion

Though he did not share Balzac's vision of the ideal society, Marx could relate to Balzac's distaste for the bourgeois pursuit of material gain. In many instances, he used Balzac's characters to illustrate what he considered to be the laughably corrupt nature of certain individuals. By drawing on Balzac, Marx could designate the typicality of specific behaviors that he considered characteristic of the bourgeoisie, making it easier to communicate his critical assessments.

A good example for this use is Marx's first allusion to Balzac. In his *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), in characterizing the group that helped Louis Bonaparte be elected president, he wrote that one can visualize them clearly "if one reflects that Véron-Crevel is its preacher of morals". In a footnote, Marx explained that "In his novel *Cousine Bette*, Balzac delineates the thoroughly dissolute Parisian philistine in Crevel, a character based on Dr. Véron, owner of the *Constitutionnel*".³¹ By means of this analogy, which plays on both Véron and Crevel being newly-rich profiteers, Marx portrayed Véron, and with him the other Bonapartists, as a group of corrupt fortune hunters and status seekers.³² With similar overtones, Marx and Engels often alluded in their correspondence to their associate Sigismund Borkheim as Gaudissart, drawing a parallel to another of Balzac's recurring characters. In this way, they painted Borkheim as a shameless cheat.³³ On three other occasions, Marx invokes Balzac when confronted with stories of "murder, adultery, legacy hunting and fraud".³⁴

(2.3) Marx on *The Peasants*

³¹ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, MECW11, 196; MEGA I/18, 66.

³² Sarah Maza described Crevel faithfully: "The vain and self-satisfied Célestin Crevel is one exemplar of many "bourgeois" characters who populate Balzac's *comédie humaine* [...] he understands the world in narrowly material and commercial terms, as a place ruled by money and driven by greed, competition and revenge, and he is baffled by any higher motivation". She further affirms that Crevel's character is instrumental in depicting the "philistine values of a money-grubbing bourgeoisie" and "exposing the moral ugliness of a quintessentially bourgeois society". (Sarah Maza, "The Social Imaginary in Balzac's *La Cousine Bette*", *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 19/2 (2001): 22).

³³ For Marx's remarks: MECW43, 85, 106, 121, 275, 430, 436–437, 440, 531; MEW 32, 136, 156, 174–175, 315, 444, 448, 450, 521). It should also be noted that Engels's remarks on Borkheim bear the mark of a colloquial, yet highly unfortunate antisemitism: "Gaudissart becomes increasingly amusing [...] As a Jew he simply cannot stop cheating" (MECW43, 126; MEW32, 177).

³⁴ For Marx, "murder, adultery, legacy hunting and fraud" are the basic components of the Balzacian drama (MECW14, 31; MEGA I/14, 144). This is also the makeup of a story about Moses Hess and his wife which reminds Marx of *The Rise and Fall of Cesar Biroteau* (MECW 40, 69–70; MEW 29, 73). See also MECW45, 324; MEW 34, 344.

We saw Balzac's aversion to the money-grubbing he associated with bourgeois culture as well as Marx's use of Balzac's characterization to typify certain behaviors. Against this background, I turn to discuss Balzac's novel *The Peasants* to show that Marx's remark on this novel leads us in a different direction than both Engels's letter and Lukács's essay. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx discussed the "unthinking" (*gedankenlose*) notion that surplus-value comes from selling commodities above their value. Upset by Proudhon who defended this notion, Marx made the following remark.

In a social order dominated by capitalist production, even the non-capitalist producer is dominated by capitalist ways of thinking. Balzac, who is generally remarkable for his profound grasp of reality, aptly describes in his last novel, *Les Paysans*, how a petty peasant performs many small tasks gratuitously for his usurer, whose goodwill he is eager to retain, and how he fancies that he does not give the latter something for nothing because his own labour does not cost him any cash outlay. As for the usurer, he thus fells two dogs with one stone. He saves the cash outlay for wages and enmeshes the peasant, who is gradually ruined by depriving his own field of labour, deeper and deeper in the spider-web of usury.³⁵

In its immediate context, Marx's remark explained how Proudhon, a socialist, could adopt capitalist notions about the origin of surplus value. Like those peasants who believed their work costs nothing, Proudhon failed to recognize that surplus value is a product of surplus labor. But Marx's remark also reveals that he had identified a crucial element of Balzac's novel. Though *The Peasants* is rich with depictions class-struggle, Marx draws our attention to Balzac's portrayal of the domination of all struggling classes "by capitalist ways of thinking". An analysis of this novel will confirm the accuracy of Marx's assertion, which is also put in the mouth of Sibilet, Montcornet's estate manager: "self-interest inspires horrors everywhere".³⁶

(2.3.1) The Principles of Money

In *The Peasants*, briefly outlined in section (1.2) above, Balzac portrayed the French countryside as consumed by greed. The bourgeoisie was the most profoundly affected. Rigou, the usurer,

³⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume III*, MECW37, 44; MEGA II/4.3, 395, MEGA II/15, 43.

³⁶ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 302.

excelled in “the science of egoism”.³⁷ Gaubertin possessed “an excessive eagerness for gain”,³⁸ a trait Balzac defined as characteristic to “the cruelest of misers”.³⁹ At one point, the mud motif resurfaces, as Gaubertin seeks out business partners with hearts filled “with mud wishing to be baked by scorching thoughts of legal theft”.⁴⁰ Balzac stressed that this greed was not rooted in necessity when he remarked that Gaubertin acted like “a man with an empty stomach”, despite having full one.⁴¹ Gaubertin’s lust for gain was thus portrayed as pure, self-propelling, and Balzac emphasized that it was not merely an individual vice, stating, “you kill men, you don’t kill self-interest”.⁴²

However, as Marx astutely observed, the gist of *The Peasants* lies in the pervasiveness of greed across all social classes. This becomes especially apparent when examining the peasantry. Balzac explained that since the French Revolution, even the peasants had developed a taste for personal gain: “Self-interest has become, especially since 1789, the only driving force behind their ideas”.⁴³

In the novel, Balzac depicts two ways for peasants to pursue riches. Courtecuisse, Montcornet’s ex-guard, typifies the honest way. As I already mentioned, he burns “with the desire to become at last a landowner and bourgeois”,⁴⁴ but plunges into miserable debt following “almost all peasants bitten by the demon of landownership”.⁴⁵ Courtecuisse’s story conveys Balzac’s recurring message that one must play dirty to win. The Tonsard family typifies the unscrupulous but effective way to pursue riches. Balzac described them as the epitome of corruption, stealing “almost their whole living”.⁴⁶ Their preferred type of thievery is abusing the customary rights to glean and collect wood. Historically, impoverished peasants were granted the right to gather dead wood in forests owned by the local nobility. They were also permitted to gather leftover grain after the harvest. This was still the case in early 19th century France. But the Tonsards exceeded the boundaries of their rights. Driven by profit and departing from tradition, they regularly felled living

³⁷ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 208.

³⁸ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 271.

³⁹ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 191.

⁴⁰ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 110.

⁴¹ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 271.

⁴² Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 124.

⁴³ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 54.

⁴⁴ Honoré de Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 128.

⁴⁵ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 189.

⁴⁶ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, xxxx.

trees. They also sold the wood, which explains why collecting large quantities was worth their while.⁴⁷

But the punch in Balzac's depictions of the Tonsards lies in the fact that he does not judge them more severely than he does the local bourgeoisie: "Rigou overlaps with Tonsard; one lived on thefts in kind, the other grew fat on legal plunder. Both enjoyed living well, it was the same nature in two kinds".⁴⁸ For similar reasons, after Fourchon came by some money by means of a shady swindle, Balzac had him exclaim: "I'm becoming a capitalist".⁴⁹

(2.3.2) Montcornet

While Balzac never compared Montcornet to Rigou, Gaubertin or the Tonsards, he portrayed Montcornet's pursuit of status and profit as the underlying cause of his downfall. Montcornet's troubles began with his plan to raise the estate's yearly revenue by fifty percent from forty to sixty thousand francs. Then he found a way to do it. Sibilet, his manager, informed him that his estate suffers comparable losses due to wood theft: "the losses you suffer, Monsieur le comte, amount to more than twenty thousand francs a year".⁵⁰ At this point Montcornet's focus turns to the peasants. His goal – to keep them out of his woods and out of his fields.

Montcornet intended to achieve this by combating abuses and restricting rights. He believed that by doing so he was administrating justice, a viewpoint Balzac seems to share. But Balzac also depicted a growing sense of disenfranchisement among the peasants, who were on the eve of losing "what they called their rights".⁵¹ The rural bourgeoisie exacerbated these feelings by conveying the message that the nobles want "to crush to people".⁵² One peasant defiantly declared: "We will glean, like before".⁵³ An old peasant woman, glaring at the Montcornet's gendarmes, cried out: "They are the thieves!".⁵⁴

Though Montcornet may have had formal justification in pursuing his interests, Balzac suggested time and again that doing so in the face of strong opposition would be misguided and

⁴⁷ In making this distinction between collecting wood for its use value and collecting it for its exchange value, Balzac demonstrates his acquaintance with what Marx identified as the driving force behind the shift from feudalism to capitalism (compare for instance: MECW 28, 426, MEGA II/1.2, 405).

⁴⁸ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 214.

⁴⁹ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 58.

⁵⁰ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 77.

⁵¹ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 137.

⁵² Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 131.

⁵³ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 217.

⁵⁴ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 281.

ultimately disastrous. Sibilet urges the general to turn a blind eye to the excessive collection of brushwood. When Michaud objects, emphasizing that “the law must be strictly executed” and that “the peasant should obey as soldiers do”, Sibilet replies: “If you do not exercise tolerance, you will do bad business”.⁵⁵

Particularly significant is Montcornet's disregard for the King's attorney's advice, which Balzac portrayed as the only effective policy the general could have followed. This advice is straightforward: when enforcing one's authority risks blood and losses, “it is better to close your eyes than to open them”.⁵⁶ However, Montcornet fails to heed this advice, resulting in disastrous consequences. Balzac noted that in taking this approach, Montcornet revealed “his bourgeois nature, determined not to be deceived again”.⁵⁷

(3) Back to Engels's Letter

Engels highlighted a twofold antagonism in Balzac's work: (a) he castigated the nobles, despite his sympathy for this class; (b) he depicted the inevitable rise of the bourgeoisie, despite his antipathy for this class. Lukács reiterated point (b) regarding *The Peasants*. Concerning point (a), Lukács was inconsistent. He reiterated Engels's observation about Balzac's general criticism of the nobility but affirmed, in contrast, that “Balzac clearly aligns with Montcornet”.⁵⁸

Marx's remark on *The Peasants* offers a corrective lens to Engels's interpretation. Engels read Balzac through the prism of class struggle. Marx, however, saw in *The Peasants* a portrayal of ideology transcending class distinctions. Notably, Marx alluded to Balzac's depiction of the way bourgeois norms and values spread throughout society, gaining ground within the peasantry as well as among the nobles. In tandem with Macherey, Marx's insight facilitates a nuanced interpretation of the social reality of *La comédie humaine*, in which social classes are not solely in conflict with each other but become arenas for clashing ideological and practical dispositions.

When considering this issue, Jameson's suggestion that *The Peasants* is a cautionary tale gains credibility. If Montcornet typifies the failure of the French landed aristocracy to preserve its large estates, this failure is attributed to the incursion of bourgeois ideology into its ranks. But beyond Jameson, it should be noted that, in addition to his bourgeois background, Montcornet

⁵⁵ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 86.

⁵⁶ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 153.

⁵⁷ Balzac, *Les Paysans*, CH8, 128.

⁵⁸ Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 35.

epitomized a particular type of nobleman driven by a self-serving interpretation of justice. Had Lukács looked more closely, he would have recognized that even though Balzac never directly compared Montcornet to Rigou, Gaubertin, or the Tonsards, he portrayed his unwavering resolve to exhaust the profit-making potential of his fields and forests as the root of his tactical blunders.

If this reading holds true, neither Engels's interpretation nor its echoes in Lukács can be sustained. If Balzac's scorn is primarily directed at those nobles who replaced aristocratic mores for bourgeois norms, then it aligns with his sympathy and commitment to aristocratic culture. If, for Balzac, the aristocracy's decline hinges on the nobles embracing bourgeois principles, then this downfall and the triumph of the bourgeoisie become contingent and possibly reversible. In this respect, at least in the aforementioned texts, Balzac's literature and his politics do not seem contradictory.

(4) Conclusion

Finding affinities between Balzac and Marx is unsurprising.⁵⁹ They represent an example of parallels that may readily be found between conservatives and socialists when it comes to the critique of modern bourgeois society. Michel Houellebecq's lampoons of the atomized and commodified individuals of late capitalism may be cited as a contemporary example of conservative literature, which resonates with a broad audience, including progressive critics of capitalism. What is surprising is to find in Marx's scattered remarks on Balzac a rebuttal of Engels's influential assessment of the author of *La comédie humaine*.

Marx's remark on *The Peasants* casts doubts on some of the alleged contradictions Engels found in Balzac's prose. Balzac lambasted the nobles, as Engels rightly observed, but this would contradict Balzac's politics only if he had perceived entire classes as the enemy. Since Balzac aimed his criticism at the "principles of money", censuring the nobles who yielded to these principles does not conflict with his dedication to aristocratic culture, but is instead rooted in it. But in this remark, Marx did more than just correct Engels. In alluding to Balzac's concerned depiction of the dissemination of bourgeois norms in 19th century France, Marx suggested that Balzac's novel may be read in light of a well-known Marxist precept, namely that the dominant

⁵⁹ "Balzac, with his social and political conservatism, is a good illustration of what has often been remarked: that the two political extremes are in many ways analogous, since both of them have the same object of criticism, the middle-class universe" (Fredric Jameson, "La Cousine Bette and Allegorical Realism", *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 86 (1971): 253).

ideology in society is the ideology of the dominant class. Balzac's *The Peasants* may thus be read as anticipating central notions in 20th century Marxist critique of ideology, such as Adorno's understanding of the universal domination of society by exchange value⁶⁰ or Negri's insights into the subsumption of social relations under capital.⁶¹ While they cannot be explored within the confines of this article, these suggestions can and should be the starting point for additional research.

⁶⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 178.

⁶¹ Antonio Negri. "Workers' Party Against Work" in *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (London: Verso, 2005), 51ff.