

A Marxian Critique of Death within Capitalism

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As an expansion of the 'green revolution', there is a new movement of 'green burials.' These are natural burials usually "a simple return to the elements, in a natural setting, using nothing more than a minimal casket or cloth shroud"¹ The simplicity of green burials serves to highlight the extravagant resource consumption and pollution involved in traditional funerals. Typically, a traditional funeral includes (in goods, not services): an embalmed body, a coffin made of metal or wood, and a grave liner, made of cement and steel, all buried underground in a cemetery.

Each year, the funeral industry in the United States uses over 1.5 million tons of reinforced concrete (burial containers), 104,000 tons of steel (grave liners and caskets), 2,700 tons of bronze and copper (caskets), and 45 million board feet of lumber (caskets), as well as 825,000 gallons of embalming chemicals,² all with the expressed purpose of burying underground. This also does not take into account the countless gallons of lawn chemicals and gasoline to run the lawn mowers needed to keep cemeteries perpetually maintained and attractive. Considering these statistics, "the local cemetery begins to look less like a peaceful resting ground than a landfill of hazardous and largely non-biodegradable material."³ Moreover, traditional funerals are also extremely expensive, costing about \$6,000 and sometimes over \$10,000.⁴

However, when we consider the actual purpose of a funeral—aside from filling an emotional need—as the disposal of a body, which will inevitably decay, it is bizarre that we are almost blindly willing to buy into the excessiveness of the traditional funeral. This is probably because most of us are under the impression that these practices—embalming, casket burial,

¹ 1. Mark Harris, "A Natural Return," *Vegetarian Times* (October 2007) Issue 153 pg 84-87.

² Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: a journey through the modern funeral industry to a natural way of burial*. (New York: Scribner, 2007). 7-47

³ Ibid

⁴ Federal Trade Commission, "Funerals: A Consumer Guide," Federal Trade Commission website, <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/funeral.shtm>

etc.—are required by law, and completely unaware that they are not.⁵ Still, the funeral industry continues to make a profit off of these misunderstandings.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a Marxian analysis of death within the contemporary United States, focusing primarily on the funeral industry. I will explore the issue in four separate sections, in accordance with the major topics of Marx's critique of capitalism: Ideological Reflexes of Capitalism, Fetishism of Commodities, Alienated Labor, Money, and Class. I will then conclude the essay with some self-criticisms, as well as a few comments on alternate ways to dispose of remains, which is the one objectively necessary thing in death we cannot avoid.

Death and the Ideological Reflexes of Capitalism

For Marx, even our deepest ideas about the meaning of life, the nature of death, and how to grieve and mourn, ultimately all come about and develop through our material, economic conditions. It is important to note that we mourn for the death of our friends loved ones or family. These relationships too, are not abstract or innate to human nature, but constructed through capitalism, and in no way can escape Marx's scathing critique.

For Marx, the most powerful underlying force in society is the economic system. All of our ideas and values are concrete reflections of material forces:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of man, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. of a people. Men are producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is

⁵ Steven W. Kopp and Elyria Kemp, "Consumer Awareness of the Legal Obligations of Funeral Providers" *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, Vol. 41, no. 2, 2007

their actual life-process. ...and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process⁶

In a modern society, we usually first encounter death through the experience of a funeral, not merely as an abstract concept. Funerals are remarkable social facts because although they are *about* the deceased, they are *for* the living.⁷ The set up of funeral ceremonies is to talk about the departed in terms of their specific accomplishments, particular life choices and goals, valuable characteristics and charisma, their meaningful or successful personal relationships, etc. We focus on their life, not their death. Our choice as to what to talk about in regards to a person's life, what is worthwhile and meaningful, is largely dependent upon what we socially value within capitalism.

When we grieve for the death of another, there is a varying degree of tragedy in terms of the loss of opportunity and productivity, depending on their age and the conditions under which they passed. For example, when a man dies in the 'prime of life', leaving behind a wife, family, a home and a solid job, there is a larger element of tragedy and loss than an elderly man, whose children have grown, who dies in a nursing home, because although he has contributed, he is no longer a productive member of society. This is, of course, not to say that we do not mourn the death of the elderly, but it is not a mere coincidence that we hold deep cultural values of autonomy and productivity.

Our ideas of death itself, and our fears of it, also reflect those of libertarianism, as a loss of autonomy, meritocracy as loss of opportunity, and capitalism as a loss of productivity.

People seem to fear not only the physically destructive aspects of death, but also the expected loss of consciousness and self-control that it implies, as well as the

⁶ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology", in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 175-207

⁷ David G. Mandelbaum, "Social Uses of Funeral Rites," *The Meaning of Death*, ed. Herman Feifel, (New York: McGraw-Hill 1965), 212.

loneliness and stamp of failure to which it dooms them. Others fear the forfeiture of their identity, their past and future, in addition to their present⁸

When we imagine our own death, we fear not only that we lose all that for which we have worked so hard—house, car, family, job—but also that there is a possibility that all our work—extra hours we spend at our job just to make a little more money to afford luxuries and comfort—might be in vain because death could come at any second and life is precious. Of course, this idea that we sacrifice part of our life now by working extra so that it will ‘pay off’ later is more directly related to Marx’s account of alienated labor, and will be discussed to a greater extent in that section.

Death in the case of terminated life-support is viewed differently because usually the patient had been unconscious for an extended period of time. However, loss of consciousness is a type of death because it is synonymous with loss of autonomy and rationality. Our reliance on life-support technologies—mechanical ventilators, Intravenous therapy, incubation for premature infants—is widespread in medical care. With the ubiquity of life-support, however, we develop an increasing need and desire for it and it is used to sustain life well beyond hope of restoring autonomy. This is where the debate over euthanasia comes in. Contributing factors are conflicting libertarian ideas of autonomy, religious appeals to “the sanctity of individual human life,”⁹ together with our technophilia explain why the dispute is ongoing. Even when we observe failure of medical technology as a cause of death, we see this merely as a lack of technology. On the other hand, technological innovations can threaten to compromise our ideas of autonomy, so that “the specter of being kept alive through artificial means terrifies numerous people into supporting legislation that gives them the power to choose the time, manner, and place of their deaths.”¹⁰

Freedom of choice over one’s own death also plays a key factor in suicide. Although we typically judge the suicide of others as rooted in irrationality, inability to control emotional stress

⁸ Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, *The American View of Death: acceptance or denial?*, (Cambridge: Shenkman Publishing Co. 1972), 12-18.

⁹ Ian Dowbiggin, *A Concise History of Euthanasia: life, death, God, and medicine*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2005), 5-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and psychological incapacities, in some sense, we can see that committing suicide *is* an autonomous choice, albeit a selfish one.¹¹ Furthermore, our aversion to suicide is essentially religious, in the ideas of human life as sacred and of God as He who gives life and takes it away. If we are not religious, however, libertarian notions of freedom of choice and the body as personal property take precedence. In the latter case, suicide is a viable option when we cease to maintain control over the external circumstances in our lives. Then again, this option is in direct conflict with the notion of meritocracy and the ‘boot-strap mentality,’ so that in addition to being selfish, suicide is seen as a weakness.

When someone dies as a result of a long-term illness, we most frequently hear the relief that the person’s suffering has ended. The person may have been no longer productive in terms of employment, but likely was either a direct or inspirational advocate for raising money to cure the disease that would later claim her life. Her death becomes less tragic and more heroic, the more in life she overcomes her own pain and transforms it as an ability and opportunity for leadership and achievement. The degree of tragedy in her death is shifted by appealing to the notions of meritocracy.

Although few of us are willing to admit it, “viewing a funeral may alter our attitudes toward our own deaths.”¹² Attending a funeral reminds us of our own mortality. When present at a funeral, we cannot help but imagine our own funeral, and whether those in attendance will be *as sad* when we pass. These feelings are a reflection of our deeply internalized sense of competition and egoism. Through competition, the funeral ceremony becomes less about the person who died, and more about the number of people in attendance and their display of grief. It is not a mere coincidence that we think it especially sad and pitiable when we see a funeral or burial with only a few, solemn, unemotional attendees.

Grieving death is typically applied on two bases: religion and psychology. Appeals to religion typically come in the form of God determining how and when someone dies for reasons we cannot possibly understand, and in a way that is completely out of our control. For Marx, religion, too, develops out of material conditions, because religion provides a way to ease the

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Richard G. Dumont and Dennis C. Foss, *The American View of Death: acceptance or denial?* (Cambridge: Shenkman Publishing Co. 1972), 12-18.

suffering, which is a consequence of the unequal distribution of resources in the economic system. He compares religion to opium because it not only disguises pain but also takes away our ambition and desire for change.¹³ Psychology, and specifically grief psychology, works in a similar way as an opiate because it serves as a way to relieve suffering and maneuver through painful feelings, such as anger, guilt, anxiety, denial, loneliness, disbelief, etc.¹⁴ Neither religion nor psychology scrutinizes the actual causes of death, either on an individual or societal basis.

The lifestyle of modern capitalism is distracted by consumerism and alienated and fragmented from the hazardous byproducts such an economic system creates. Faced with such overwhelmingly complex problems, it is easier to concern ourselves mostly with our individual lives and needs, and mourn for the individual deaths of others.

Death and Commodity Fetishism

In this section of the paper, I will discuss the commodification of death in the funeral industry. Specifically, I will explore Marx's analysis of commodities as having magical value, namely in the embalmed corpse, which is the center piece of the funeral.

Within capitalism, even death is profitable. In the United States, the Funeral Industry is an \$11 billion-dollar industry,¹⁵ and, with slightly less than 2.5 million deaths in the U.S. each year, it is probably because funerals are typically an extremely expensive purchase. According to the Federal Trade Commission:

Funerals rank among the most expensive purchases many consumers will ever make. A traditional funeral, including a casket and vault, costs about \$6,000, although "extras" like flowers, obituary notices, acknowledgment cards or limousines can add thousands of dollars to the bottom line. Many funerals run well over \$10,000. ...A "traditional" funeral...usually includes a viewing or visitation and formal funeral service, use of a hearse to transport the body to the funeral site and cemetery, and burial, entombment or cremation of the remains. It is generally the most expensive type of

¹³ Karl Marx, as quoted on the "Marx, Feuerbach, and Religion Worksheet" by Nick Smith

¹⁴ J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Co. 2002), 12-16.

¹⁵ National Funeral Directors of America "NFDA Fact Sheets" National Funeral Directors of America website <http://www.nfda.org/nfdafactsheets.php>

funeral. [...]The costs of a casket, cemetery plot or crypt and other funeral goods and services also must be factored in.¹⁶

Strangely enough, the cost of the traditional funeral *does not include* the cost of the cemetery plot. Cemeteries are a separate industry. Both traditional cemeteries and memorial parks may be operated on a for-profit or not-for-profit basis.¹⁷ The average cost of a cemetery plot in the United States is \$3,000,¹⁸ but price varies greatly depending on the land value of the area, the type of cemetery, who is buried there, and, even the gravesite's scenic location.¹⁹ Furthermore, most cemeteries in the United States also require the purchase of a burial vault or a burial liner,^{*20} supposedly in order to keep the ground from eventually sinking in.²¹ There are also additional fees for 'opening' and 'closing' the grave, as well as perpetual lawn maintenance. The 'additional' cost of the grave marker or headstone must also be factored in, which could cost "anywhere from several hundred dollars for a modest flat marker to several thousand for a granite or marble headstone."²² Therefore, the actual cost of the funeral and burial ceremonies are much, much higher than the FTC estimates.

As with every experiential thing in our society, according to Marx's view, funerals are rooted in a historical, material reality: they are social facts. It is, in Marx's words:

The product of industry...and, in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders

¹⁶ Federal Trade Commission, "Funerals: A Consumer Guide," Federal Trade Commission website, <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/funeral.shtm>

¹⁷ "Consumer Resource Guide" International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association website <http://www.icfa.org/cemeteries.htm>

¹⁸ Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, *Remember Me: a lively tour of the new American way of Death* (New York: Collins, 2007), p. 44.

¹⁹ Peter Charron (funeral director at Tasker's Funeral Home in Dover, NH), telephone interview, 31 April, 2008

^{*20} A burial vault is a box, usually made from non-biodegradable material, such as metal, polymer or marble, in which the casket is enclosed before burial in a cemetery plot. A burial liner is a five-sided arrangement of metal-lined, concrete, slabs which surround the four sides and top of a casket before burial.

²¹ Peter Charron (funeral director at Tasker's Funeral Home in Dover, NH), telephone interview, 31 April, 2008

²² Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: a journey through the modern funeral industry to a natural way of burial*. (New York: Scribner, 2007). 7-47

of the preceding one...through social development, industry, and commercial intercourse²³

The ‘funeral package’ is a bizarre commodity because not only is it so emotionally-laden, but it is also, extremely temporary and deliberately squandered. Because of the shock of death, the consumer’s emotional vulnerability becomes a profit-making opportunity. While other purchases are deeply fueled by our emotions and desires, funerals are unique because they are created specifically for emotional comfort, and have very little utility. Every commodity it produces is meant to be buried; all the services it provides last for only a few days.

That is, none of the products or services that the funeral industry provides—embalming, casket, burial, etc.—will guard against the inevitable body decomposition, but only delay it slightly and specifically for the purpose of carrying out the funeral. The casket itself is only necessary for the temporary transportation of the body to the burial site and could be merely rented and reused, except that most cemeteries require burial in a casket.²⁴ Furthermore, the airtight, sealer gaskets, which are standard on most caskets and claim to ‘protect your loved one against the elements’, actually prevent natural decay and allow for anaerobic bacteria to flourish, putrefying the corpse.²⁵

However, most people do not realize the reality and inevitability of decay because they are probably in shock from the death, and would prefer the illusion of the deceased in a perpetual state of ‘peaceful resting’ underground. Although products of the funeral industry are all made *specifically* for the purpose of putting in the ground, they have absolute disregard for simple or natural decomposition. There is no other set of commodities that shares this bizarre nature.

Aside from the emotional aspects of a funeral, it is a set of commodities like any other. According to Marx:

A commodity is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that

²³ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 175-207

²⁴ Peter Charron (funeral director at Tasker’s Funeral Home in Dover, NH), telephone interview, 31 April, 2008

²⁵ Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: a journey through the modern funeral industry to a natural way of burial*. (New York: Scribner, 2007). 7-47

labor. [...] There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [...] The fetishism of commodities has its origin...in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them...and...is inseparable from the production of commodities.²⁶

Here, Marx is saying that, because of the nature of production and the social value of labor, commodities are not mere objects, but have a transformative power. Commodities are powerful, they have magical properties: they hold a power over us that goes deeper than our rationality, and we are obsessed with them. Furthermore, commodities are “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”²⁷

Even though the memorial service focuses on the departed person as subject, what is actually present as the focus of attention is a body, an object. For many, the death does not seem real until seeing the body at the open-casket wake. The embalming and preparation of the body for an open-casket wake is a definitive example of the transformative, magical, religious properties of a commodity. The transformation is magical because the embalming process remains almost entirely mysterious, and death is so taboo that most people prefer it that way.

Through the process of embalming, the body of the deceased ceases to be merely a corpse. It is put through a production process, and labor is enacted upon it. The body is drained of its natural fluids, and they are replaced with chemicals to sanitize and disinfect, temporarily counter-act rigor mortis and the smell of decomposition, as well as return a level of elasticity back into the skin. The body is then dressed, typically in semi-formal attire, and applied with various moisturizers and cosmetics to give a more agreeable, peaceful, restful appearance.²⁸ We are left with the image of the deceased as peacefully sleeping, totally extracted from the reality of the death. The transformative aspect is undeniable. And all this is done at a cost. The embalmed body is, therefore, a commodity.

For many, it is customary to kiss the face and touch the hand of the departed at the open-casket wake, in order to ‘say a final goodbye’. This physical contact is almost certainly only

²⁶ Karl Marx, “Capital”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 452-523.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Peter Charron (funeral director at Tasker’s Funeral Home in Dover, NH), telephone interview, 31 April, 2008

possible because of the tremendous sanitation and cosmetic production. That is, given not only the ghastly appearance of a corpse in its natural state, but also the time usually elapsed between the death and the wake (two days or more), it is unseemly that many people would want to maintain this custom. Mostly, this is because, through the funeral industry, the embalmed corpse has become the norm. Furthermore, the body is typically dressed in ‘their Sunday best’ to provide the bereaved with a pleasant lasting image of the departed, as if in heaven.²⁹ Here, the religious aspect of commodities is literal. Additionally, it is considered a normal display of grief to feel the ‘spirit’ or ‘presence’ of the deceased person in his or her personal objects.³⁰

The funeral industry views itself as operating as a service industry, in order to help the family begin the grieving process.³¹ But it is still a commodity and a very expensive one, at that. The fact that it is through a funeral service that we feel the ‘realness’ of death reveals the extent to which we relate to the world through commodities. On the one hand, we have to literally buy into something in order to really feel, but on the other hand, we still feel grief even if a funeral does not carry on in this ‘traditional’ way.

Death and Alienated Labor

In this section of the paper, I would like to apply Marx’s account of alienated labor to this analysis of the funeral industry.

For Marx, labor within capitalism, i.e. wage labor, is alienating because it exists for the sake of profit, which the capitalist extracts by exploiting the worker. The capitalist assigns wages to his workers by calculating the market price of his product. But in this calculation, which includes the cost of materials and means of production, the capitalist extracts some value for himself. This extraction is a percentage of the laborer’s wage, and is exploitative. Furthermore:

The labor process...exhibits two characteristic phenomena. First, the laborer works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labor belongs. ...Secondly, the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Co. 2002), 12-16.

³¹ Peter Charron (funeral director at Tasker’s Funeral Home in Dover, NH), telephone interview, 31 April, 2008

product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the laborer, its immediate producer.

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Therefore, wage labor has “lost all semblance of self-activity.”³³ We work merely as a means to an end, in order to acquire commodities that fulfill our needs and desires. Our labor does not provide us with meaning: “he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy...when there is no physical or other compulsion, labor is avoided like the plague.”³⁴ We only feel alive when we are not working: “life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed.”³⁵

Alienated labor also causes us to have disregard for what we produce and the consequences of our production. This is because the products of our labor are not for ourselves: “the worker relates to the product of his labor as to an alien object.”³⁶ Those working in the funeral industry must acknowledge that the products their industry represents are not only temporary and purposely disposable, but also contribute to environmental pollution. Since neither the embalming nor the casket guard against decomposition, and because they are produced for the set purpose of burying underground, this is probably why the funeral industry promotes itself mainly as a service industry. This change in focus, allows the funeral industry to ignore the tons of wood, steel and cement buried in the ground each year. However, inasmuch as it is a ‘service industry’, there is still very little regard for the bereaved as complex people and not merely as satisfied customers.

Within capitalism, labor is a means to an end, but it “sustains life by stunting it.”³⁷ The hours and hours we spend in our lives working not only take away our time, but also drain our

³² Karl Marx, “Capital”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 452-523.

³³ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 175-207

³⁴ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 87-88.

³⁵ Karl Marx, “Wage-Labor and Capital”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 275-276.

³⁶ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 87-88.

³⁷ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 175-207

energy and vitality. If life only starts when we are not working, we are really only working for the sake of retirement. However, through so many years of working, we are so “alienated from [our] own essence,”³⁸ that we have trouble figuring out what to do with our lives after retirement, and many find ‘meaning’ in a life of leisure and consumption. That is, by the time we reach that age, we are already exhausted and used up by the capitalist system. Indeed, we are ‘let go’ because we are no longer profitable as laborers. But for that fifty plus years of working we are “daily and hourly enslaved by the machine”³⁹ because “the vampire will not lose its hold on [us] ‘so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited.’”⁴⁰ However, we work with the assumption that we will make it to retirement, so we sacrifice our lives for the sake of wages even though death could come at any time.

Death and Money

In this section of the paper I am going to discuss Marx’s account of money through the topic of death in two ways. First, I will talk about money as symbolizing our feelings towards the dead, in specific, exploring the underlying role that money plays in the rationale behind the extreme expenses in funerals. The other idea is that money, in the form of inheritance, allows the dead to live on, not only through a spiritual association solidified within money, but also through continual accumulation of interest. Both of these ideas link to Marx’s account of money as transcendental because it is extracted human labor. However, the first part focuses on commensurability, while the latter part focuses on the credit relation. In order to contextualize these two topics, I will first provide a brief synopsis of Marx’s analysis of money.

For Marx, money holds transcendental properties because, as extracted human labor, it symbolizes the beliefs and desires of its possessor. What we purchase, simply put, is a reflection of what we value, and because when we work, we sacrifice part of our life for the sake of earning money, what we purchase is ultimately a reflection of what we are willing to work for. In

³⁸ Karl Marx, “On James Mill”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 124-128.

³⁹ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 251.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “Capital”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 452-523.

Marx's words, "money is the alienated essence of man's work and being."⁴¹ That is, because we earn money through alienated labor, money is an extracted symbol of that labor. However, as this extraction becomes internalized, it compounds over time:

What originally appeared as a means to promote production becomes a relation alien to the producers. As the producers become more dependent on exchange, exchange appears to become more independent of them, and the gap between the product as product and the product as exchange value appears to widen. Money does not create these antitheses and contradictions; it is rather the development of these contradictions and antitheses which creates the seemingly transcendental power of money.⁴²

The way that we value ourselves and others is a reflection of a money relationship; likewise, the more we value others, the more we are willing to spend on them: money is a reflection of our values towards another. When we love someone, we spend money on them, buy them things to symbolize our feelings, show care and concern. As an extension of this, when someone we love dies we want to show our appreciation for them, and we do this by purchasing an expensive funeral. I have already discussed the extent to which we translate our emotions through commodities, but not in a way that reflects the importance that price has on them.

Unlike shopping for other commodities, there is a social stigma around a purposely inexpensive funeral. Cheapness is seen as disrespectful and uncaring, as well as selfish. Our desire for a 'traditional funeral' far outweighs our ability to pay for it. Not being willing to pay is selfish, while not being able to pay is not a valid enough excuse, and, with a total bill of about \$7,500, debt is a likely outcome.

Our willingness, or at least our social expectation and obligation, to pay such high prices for a funeral is ultimately tied to the idea of each person as irreplaceable and incommensurable. However, the result is that we necessarily end up assigning a relatively high retail value to the dead, and in this way they actually become commensurable. The interesting thing is that, the

⁴¹ Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question", in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 68.

⁴² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, as quoted on the "Money: Marx, Simmel and Rand" worksheet by Nick Smith

person, being dead, no longer has the ability to appreciate or even know that you are buying anything for them, nor the ability to be offended or disrespected. However, if we want to say the deceased ‘feels’ a certain way about her funeral, we must ultimately latch onto the idea of immortality.

Actually, it is through money, in the form of inheritance, that we can achieve some semblance of immortality, as an ‘alienated essence’ of our life and being. This happens in a twofold way: first money continues to symbolize the wishes and desires of the deceased, and second, interest continues to grow after death. When someone dies, all of their assets are transferred to their beneficiaries or next of kin. At first, this seems like a plainly intuitive fact, but, upon further inspection, it is rather bizarre. The money has to go somewhere, we think: we cannot just erase it and pretend it does not exist. That is, because money exists both in concrete form—paper money—and abstract form—credit, stocks, bonds, interest—it becomes an extension of property. And as property, its possession must belong to someone in particular.

Furthermore, as an extension of property, money has a similar ‘spiritual effect’ as commodities: the wishes and desires of the deceased are transferred through the purchasing power of their inherited accounts. In a way, the money that we inherit is still marked with the will of its earner, so that we must ask ourselves if the deceased person would approve of such and such purchase. What is especially interesting is that, through the creation of IRAs and 401k plans, money itself continues to live—it thrives and grows or withers and depreciates in fluctuation with the market—even though the original depositor, the one who worked for the money that exists in the account, has long since died. This growth is only possible if the account is transferred to a living beneficiary. Indeed, as a result, the death of the original depositor becomes profitable for the living beneficiaries.

Death and Class

In this section of the paper, I will discuss the importance that class plays—both on a relative scale in the US and on a global scale—in each of the preceding sections. On the one hand, I have heretofore ignored taking into account the role that class plays in the different aspects of death and the funeral industry. In doing this, I indirectly assumed a universal, middle-class privilege and merely reflected and perpetuated the ways in which those who are

reading this paper do not have to think about class. On the other hand, placing the discussion of class in its own section, I can focus on it in a concentrated way, and not merely as a side note. To allow for the most clarity and consistency, I will simply apply this analysis to the previous topics in the same order.

Ideological Reflexes

The nature of our death, the cause of our death, and the ways of preventing or avoiding death are deeply influenced by our class status. Access to health care is determined by one's class, and therefore those who are not privileged lack access to preventative care, treatment of illnesses, etc. Furthermore, we often overlook the fact that, globally, our life expectancy is a reflection of high standards of living due to capitalism, through improvements in food production and distribution, sanitary conditions, housing, education and health care.⁴³ Regardless of the age at which someone dies in our culture, globally speaking, it is amazing that they made it that far in the first place.

Commodity Fetish

The choices available for the type of funeral one wants to have are extremely limited for those with low wage earnings. Actually, given that funerals cost about \$7,500, they are difficult to fit into the budget of even a middle-class family. Even if someone chose the least expensive of each of the options—casket, grave stone, etc.—the total bill would still be in the thousands of dollars. Such high prices basically restrict the working class from being able to choose the traditional funeral, and so restrict it from the conventional mourning process of the culture. In some states, for those families receiving state benefits, they are allotted some state funds to pay for dealing with the remains, but not necessarily for having a funeral. New Hampshire allots up to \$700, but this is only if the total cost is \$1,500, and the estimate is based on prices from 30 years ago.⁴⁴ Obviously, this is only a fraction of today's cost. Families who cannot afford the privilege of a funeral can choose either direct interment or direct cremation. For those who choose direct interment, this might be the only piece of land they will ever own.

⁴³ Janet Moscrop, "Looking at Death and Dying," *Caring for the Dying Patient and the Family*, 3rd ed., Ed. Joy Robbins and Janet Moscrop. (London : Chapman & Hall 1995), 1.

⁴⁴ Peter Charron (funeral director at Tasker's Funeral Home in Dover, NH), telephone interview, 31 April, 2008

Alienated Labor

The lower paying a job is, the more likely it is to be monotonous, unfulfilling, and alien to the values of our life. The ability to choose a job that is fulfilling, and not have the pressure to stay with any job regardless of dehumanizing treatment, is a vast privilege. Most of the jobs that people find fulfilling are available only through wealth and privilege—whether it is through higher education or loans allowing one to own and run a business. Furthermore, the more we are lacking these privileges, the more dependent we are on our current jobs, and the more likely we are to be exploited to a continuous degree —through unfair wages, dangerous activities, exposure to hazardous materials, etc. Additionally, the idea that we work a certain amount of years in our lives with the expectation of retirement is ridiculous in comparison to the working class, let alone the majority of the world’s population.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have taken a closer look at death in our culture by applying it to Marx’s critique of capitalism. I have revealed the ways in which our views of death, practices of dealing with the dead, and dealing with the emotional impacts of death are bizarre reflections of our capitalist, consumer culture. However, in focusing on death in the contemporary United States, I obviously ignored not only the vastly different practices and rituals surrounding death around the world, but also the vast difference in the nature of and causes of death on a global scale.

Indirectly, I have revealed that the taboo aspect of death serves to perpetuate the funeral industry’s profit margin. Furthermore, by the very nature of the funeral industry as a profit industry, it must necessarily strive for standardization and homogenization, as well as expansion of capital through competition and expanding markets. This idea extends not only on a national scale, but also on a global scale.⁴⁵ For Marx, capitalism “must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere...giv[ing] a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. [...]It compels all nations...to adopt the bourgeois mode of production...to introduce what it calls civilization.”⁴⁶ In thinking about the likelihood of expanding the funeral service market to ‘third-world nations’, it seems feasible, at least from the

⁴⁵ Nick Smith, meeting for final paper, 8 May 2008

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto”, in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, 2nd edition, ed. David McLellan, trans. (Oxford: University Press 2000), 251.

standpoint of ‘sanitation’ in that there are diseases and bacteria present in corpses that can easily be transferred and so present a danger to public health. There is also certain pressure to accentuate the ‘dignity’ involved in the American way of performing funeral rites, so that increasingly the ways that other cultures perform theirs seem like barbaric rituals.

However, if the ‘green burial’ revolution has any real bearing on cultural expectations of a ‘dignified sendoff’, it will bring forth the possibility of other, ‘alternative’, and simpler ways of dealing with the deceased, similar to those practiced in other cultures around the world. On the other hand, there is no stopping the funeral industry from co-opting the idea of ‘ecologically-minded’ funerals, with a whole range of organic, sustainably-harvested, locally-grown, handmade, fair-traded products that are merely a more expensive and elite option.