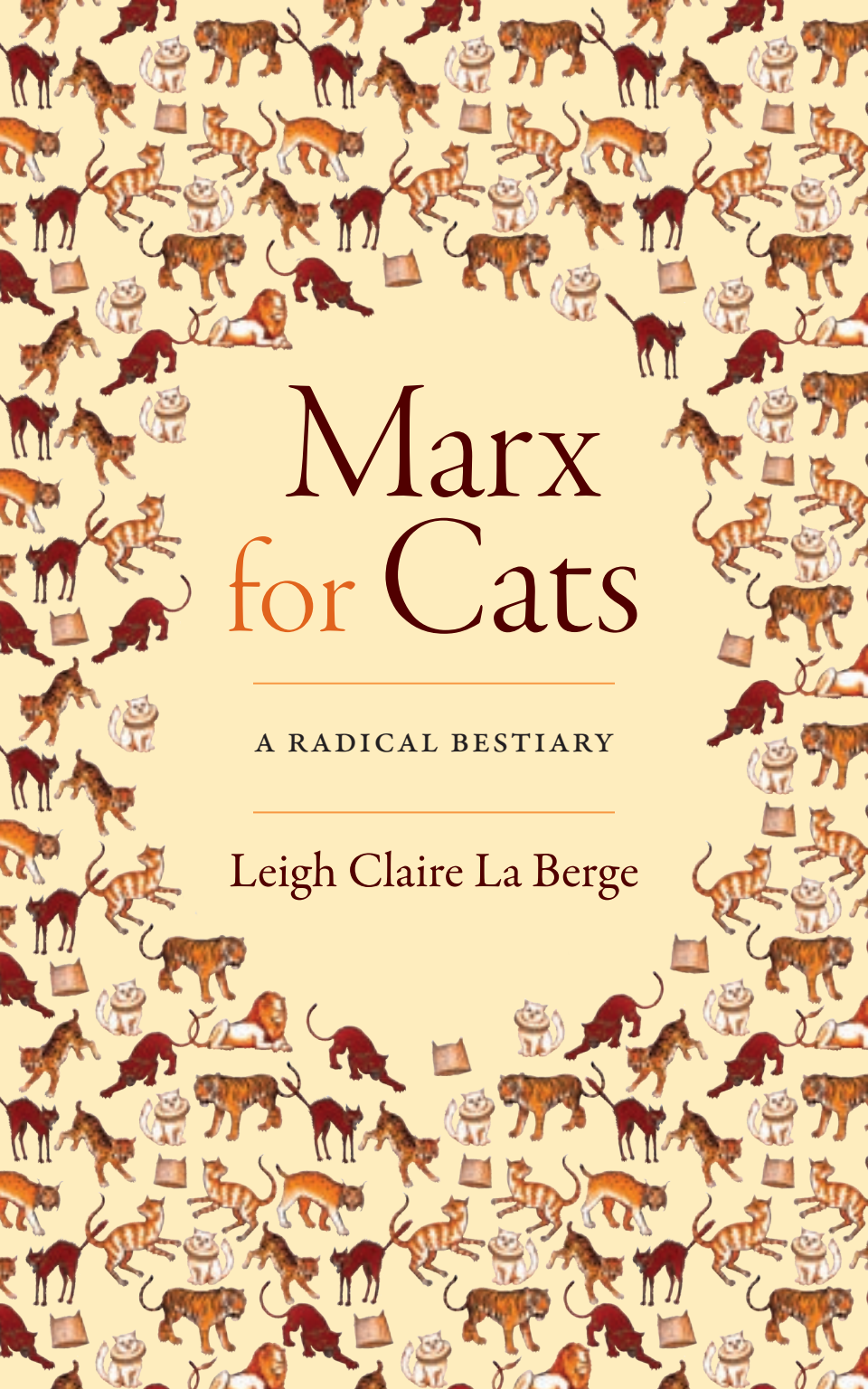

Marx for Cats

A RADICAL BESTIARY

Leigh Claire La Berge


MARX FOR CATS
BUY

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For The Mitten and for Lion

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This book has its origins with Caroline Woolard in multiple ways. It was her idea to create the video series *Marx for Cats*: she was the producer; she found the collaborators; she got the grants; she hired the assistants; she got the project into artist residencies; and, finally, when she was queried about producing a book proposal for an art press, it was she who asked: Could *Marx for Cats* be a book? I was only the one who wrote it, and it turned out not to be an art book but one certainly motivated and influenced by my time in different art spaces.

The material that I've molded here into a historical narrative was developed in conversation with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (and her six cats); with students, visitors, and J. Morgan Puett herself at Mildred's Lane; with glassblowers at Pilchuck; and with Athena Kokoronis at the Domestic Performance Agency. Those presentations occurred before the pandemic and they convinced me that this material could come alive in conversation with others. Presenting more developed material at the Zoom-mediated Red May festival during the pandemic was likewise important, and I thank Philip Wohlstetter for the opportunity to do so.

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My mother, Ann F. La Berge, not only read this manuscript but told me as a teenager, when I first became interested in social movements, that a friend of hers from graduate school in the 1970s had named her cat Angela Davis. That was my introduction to the Black Panthers. I thank her for that acquaintance as well as for a lifetime of sharing archives and animals with me; I've here combined two family interests.

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

INTRODUCTION

Cat out of the Bag

"To take 'liberties' with the signature of Marx is . . . merely to enter the freedom of Marxism."

— PERRY ANDERSON, *PASSAGES FROM ANTIQUITY TO FEUDALISM*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My project likewise began as a discussion with a cat.

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

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

And he would retort:

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

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

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

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

prior to the abstract one. "The concrete concept is concrete," he wrote, "because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing up, a result, and not as the starting point."[11] To see the concrete cat, we must have already arrived in a certain historical situation. Conversely, "as a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all."[12] As we will see, when Marx introduces cats into his work, it is in the context of explicating what constitutes a true abstraction. With Friedrich Engels, in *The German Ideology*, Marx critiques German idealist abstraction through the example of a cat chasing a mouse.

In this book, I follow cats as they assume both abstract and concrete forms and as those forms change and are changed in certain historical moments. The concrete cats who were executed in eighteenth-century Paris as a symbol of proletarian rage at the bourgeoisie could hardly have been more tangible as they were left dangling from a courtyard gallows. In contrast, the wildcat scalps prized by white settler colonists in the nineteenth-century American Midwest were transformed into bills of currency, representations of an abstract money form that connected petty local transactions to a global network of commodity exchange.

But I, too, have engaged "real cats," and the fact that this book began as a conversation with cats and continues to live in that form at marxforcats.com suggests its own argument. Using the rich trove of feline tropes and references buried deep within the archive of political economy, I began an interspecies pedagogy project in which I attempted to explain Marx to cats through cats. I helped them become acquainted with Marxism, a still-developing theory of how and why capitalism works and for whom. The artists Caroline Woolard and Or Zubalsky and I recorded some of these conversations to share with lovers of

FIGURE INTRO.1. Marx for cats: a discussion of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.* Courtesy of Leigh Claire La Berge.

cats, readers of Marx, and what we soon learned was the significant overlap between these two groups. To our surprise, artists, teachers, activists, and felines all responded and encouraged further exchanges.

This book is the expanded version of those conversations with an added archival emphasis. Using visual and textual sourcing in Latin, German, French, and English, *Marx for Cats* shares the often secret histories of cats, cat lovers, and cat haters as each of these groups has taught us about labor, money, and class struggle, and as together they have found themselves in a centuries-long conversation about the freedoms and constraints of humans and nonhuman animals in a capitalist world.

Such broad investigations can hardly be left to economics but must be explored in the fields of history, politics, literature and art. Under the Marxist banner we find artists and activists, philosophers and scientists, historians and prognosticators, and all manner of felines: panthers and wildcats, lions and tigers, lynxes and kittens, leopards and domestic shorthairs.

Each of these beasts and areas of study populates the archive of this book, as interspecies work seems to require an interdisciplinary scope.

I present here many little-known feline tales and anecdotes. I was as surprised as readers are likely to be when I learned that American founding father Thomas Paine was accused of cat sodomy and that Paris Communard Louise Michel wrote letters to her cat from her penal exile in the South Pacific. But what *is* known is that humanity's relationships with nonhuman animals are exploitative and unsustainable. It's known, and yet many inhabitants of the Global North, and most Marxists, continue on, as if—as if nonhuman animals warrant exploitation; as if industrial animal agriculture constitutes an acceptable social practice; as if Marxism need not develop to include new populations, including new species.

Sometimes, an argument is not enough.

If there is one approach this book borrows from the feline-focused *philosophes* of France, it is that of "the pleasure of the text": the idea that words and histories are slippery objects full of obscure and shifting messages and the notion that new meanings and possibilities are formed during the reading process. Hopefully, this text is more fun.

I have tried to take my writerly lead from Marx himself, a great lover of literature who consumed multiple styles, languages, and genres. His writings have an artful and literary playfulness that often goes unremarked. Citing his inspiration and antagonist, the great German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, for example, Marx explains, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."[13] *Marx for Cats* should be read as both. I leave it to the reader to determine the proportions of each as I present a history in which class struggle and cat struggle intertwine.

In 1848 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels penned *The Communist Manifesto*, in which they predicted the abolition of the state and private property as a wave of revolutions swept through Europe. They advocated for a new understanding of history, too: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle," they proclaimed.[14] A year after their famous words circulated, Marx and Engels were exiled from Belgium to London, where they congregated with other communists at London's Red Lion Pub, a location whose name recalls the most imperial animal of all.

Three years later, however, Marx was forced to contend in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with the fact that his predictions had failed to materialize, that the revolutions had dissolved. He turned to a cat and claimed that Europe was operating under the spell of a *Katzenjammer*, or cat's wail, which had prevented the overturning of capitalism but from which he believed the continent would ultimately emerge.[15] From Marx's biography to his writing, we begin to see how class struggle and cat struggle articulate each other.

Marx got some of the particulars wrong. But certainly he understood the longer trajectory of how capitalism would develop, and for whom. To listen to Marx today, some one hundred and fifty years after the publication of his major texts, is to be jolted by a sense of immediate recognition. He wrote, "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere."[16] As Marx saw in the 1850s, for the first time in human history, everything was suddenly for sale, always and in all places. Can we change such a state of affairs? Is another world possible? This sense of a revolutionary horizon continues to be one of the claims for which Marx remains known and it is one to which my book adheres. I attempt only to resituate it and to demonstrate that the revolution has always included

and must continue to include nonhuman animals. Marx realized that one can only craft a new world out of the old. He tells us that humans "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[17] Cats, too, make their own history and seem to be, along with humans, among the few self-domesticated animals. And like that of humans, cats' history has seldom been made under conditions of their own choosing. Rather, they leap into the historical record at surprising and sometimes inopportune moments with little guarantee of how they will be received.

Using the feline in multiple forms, *Marx for Cats* attends to capitalism's tragedies as well as to the farcical moments that punctuate its history. It tells a cat's story of capitalism and delimits the special role that economic history has reserved for cats, from its earliest entreaties of feline feudal glory until our own day of zoos and deforestation, from cat shows to wildcat strikes, from lion hunts to cat cafés. The feline guides us through such tragedies, often becoming part of them; part of the tragedy, for Marxists anyway, has been their failure to appreciate the gravity of this fact. That tendency has recently begun to be amended by critics of what has been called "eco-Marxism," a strand of criticism that seeks a denouement between Marxism and various ecologies, including some adherents to animal liberation. But too much and too often eco-Marxists adhere to Engels's view of humanity's domination and control of nature as a benchmark of its own progress. Or they dismiss Marx as too anthropocentric, as though his concepts do not possess the required elasticity to include animals.[18] Either way, Marxism needs more modesty toward and equality with the many plants and animals that compose that abstraction "nature," and nonhuman animals and Marxists need each other if each is to endure, let alone flourish, in a capitalist world.

Like the great Marxist studies that track historical change over centuries—Perry Anderson's *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, from which I have lifted my epigraph, or his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*; Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*; Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch—Marx for Cats* assumes a longue durée approach to its subject. That phrase literally means "long duration," and it implies that history is expansive and layered, that history itself accumulates over time, and that even the longest duration can be longer. It was this phrase that the French Annales school historian Fernand Braudel used to refer to the totality of the capitalist world system. Fashion, food, farming—no topic was too small for Braudel, nor none too big, as he also turned his lens toward the history of the Mediterranean Sea. I came to Braudel through Arrighi, who wrote in the mid-1990s of trying to understand the import and novelty of the late twentieth-century global financial expansion. That moment, begun in the early 1970s and still present, saw the value of the world's financial holdings double, triple, and seemingly cease to have much relevance to the value of tangible goods and labor. Had capitalism transformed? Had it entered a new phase of development? Arrighi wondered. "It was in this intellectual atmosphere that I discovered in the second and third volumes of Fernand Braudel's trilogy, *Capitalism and Civilization*," Arrighi writes in the preface to *The Long Twentieth Century*.[19] "In [Braudel's] interpretative scheme," he continues, the soaring value of "finance capital is not a particular stage of world capitalism, let alone its latest and highest stage. Rather, it is a recurrent phenomenon which has marked the capitalist era from its earliest beginnings in late medieval and early modern Europe." Arrighi concludes by asserting that "throughout the capitalist era, financial expansions have signaled the transition from one regime of accumulation

on a world scale to another. They are integral aspects of the recurrent destruction of 'old' regimes and the simultaneous creation of 'new' ones."[20]

I have found that replacing "finance capital" with "cat" accomplishes similar work and allows for the articulation of a feline critique in which cats designate an autumnal transition between states and stages of capitalism. *Marx for Cats* uses an interpretative scheme in which cats are not a particular stage of capitalism, let alone its highest stage. Rather, cats are a recurrent phenomenon that has marked the capitalist era from its earliest beginnings in late medieval and early modern Europe. Throughout the capitalist era, cats have signaled the transition from one regime of accumulation on a world scale to another. They are integral aspects of the recurrent destruction of old regimes and the simultaneous creation of new ones.

I have made a few amendments, of course.

Foremost, I have joined the longue durée approach to historical analysis with the bestiary approach to the representation of nonhuman animals. The bestiary genre is a creature of the Latinate Middle Ages, where, in many ways, our story begins. With support from a patron, a learned scholar would assemble a trove of pictures and stories, both real and fictive—the division itself carried little weight—into a "beast book" to document God's creations. Bestiaries followed the guidance offered in the Bible's Book of Job: "ask the animals, and they will teach you."[21] These illuminated books' depiction of beasts revealed crucial truths about the hierarchies that structured the God-made world. I like the bestiary because it connects past and present, allows for a visual logic alongside a verbal one, and, most importantly, takes animals seriously. In the Middle Ages, bestiaries' animal images offered a mnemonic device for those who could not read; here, in the twenty-first century, this text's animal images offer a mnemonic device for those who likely read too much and who, despite looking at animals constantly,

require that a connection be made between Marx and animals, cats and class struggle.

Marx for Cats follows many bestiary conventions, including the complementary use of images alongside text, the primary placement of the lion to reflect its noble status, and a focus on the tripartite. Medieval bestiaries used tripartite groupings to accentuate the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. For Marx, however, the trinity appeared differently:

> [1] Capital—profit (profit of enterprise plus interest),
> [2] land—ground-rent, [and] labour—and,
> [3] wages;
>
> this is the trinity formula which comprises all the secrets of the social production process.[22]

Marx explicated his version of capitalism's own holy trinity throughout his career, but nowhere in as much depth as in his three volumes of *Capital*.

Each chapter of *Marx for Cats* is named for the feline that guides its local history, from kingly lions to rebellious domestic cats, from revolutionary tigers to divine lynxes, from wildcats to sabotage cats. As they accumulate, these chapters span a longue durée and offer three distinct yet overlapping histories. First, they detail how capitalism became capitalism, an economic system unlike any other in its capacious productive capacity and its rapacious destructive capacity. Second, this bestiary details how Marxism became Marxism, a form of economic and cultural criticism whose unmatched insights into the labor power of the human species have been hindered by its limited imagination of the community of species that labor. Yet in certain moments, Marxists and those similarly aligned have reached out in solidarity with other species, and many fellow travelers, from early proletarians to utopian socialists, Jacobins to abolitionists, October revolutionaries to Paris

Communards, have left archives of the fact of or the potential for interspecies solidarity among their ranks.

Finally, this bestiary offers a tale about how felines became cats, wild and domestic beasts who seem to have been and continue to be among the most represented animals in human culture, particularly where the economy is concerned. That is a far-reaching claim, and because such sweeping historical statements risk weakening their intended force, they should be used sparingly. But cats offer an occasion to do so. The American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson once claimed that the only acceptable transhistorical maxim might well be "always historicize."[23] Cats might very well be our originary transhistorical species, and I track a roughly twelve-hundred-year period from 800 CE to our present to provide a sense of how capitalism has changed cats and how cats have critiqued capitalism.

But for all its similarities, *Marx for Cats* crucially differs from so many bestiaries of yore. Medieval bestiaries contained a Christian moral lesson, but this bestiary imparts a Marxist conceptual one. Capitalism's tragic directions ask us to turn away from animals, to see them as our own, to do with them what we like. We must reject this invitation, and we must criticize it. How many deaths and burnings, factory farms and pandemics, will pass before we embrace a different animal history and thus a different animal future? Finally, mine is a *radical* bestiary. That overused adjective must be situated in its present context. *Radical* derives from the Latin *radic*, for *root*, a botanical etymology Marx identified but whose larger meaning he somehow missed when he argued that "to be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For man, however, the root is man himself."[24] Roots appear radical and tracing their genesis unearths a multiplicity of potentials, some of which lie beyond the scope of "man." Another subterranean past of radical comrades and their cats, and radical cats and their comrades, has existed for centuries; we need only to excavate it.

PLAN OF THE PRESENT WORK

To understand the economic system of capitalism fully, one starts with its predecessor, feudalism, the economic system of the Christian Middle Ages, whose archive is dominated by multiple felines: empire-seeking Christian kings were called lions, and devils appeared in the form of domestic cats. The lion was not only a symbol of imperialism, however; it was also an imperial conquest. Lions are not indigenous to northern Europe—not for the past twelve thousand years at least. Rather, they were a prized imperial bounty or donation in an empire-making age. Likewise, cats' fantastic shape-shifting abilities allowed them to appear everywhere, as they were said to host the spirits of Jews and witches. Philosophers contended with accusations of possessing catlike intentions, as did vegetarians. The presence of cats guides a historical narrative as they were on the scene for the Christian Crusades, technological invention, and the elimination of the commons of Europe—spaces where peasants shared land and resources collectively and where animals roamed freely. These medieval beasts and their economic resonance are the subjects of chapters 1 and 2.

When the Middle Ages ended with the bubonic plague pandemic and the first iterations of wage labor and merchant capital began to take hold, cats as symbols of economic power and economic disinheritance did not disappear; they were transformed. The ship that delivered the first abducted Africans into Virginia was named *The White Lion*, a claim to both racial and regal power, and this ship introduces into my book the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the largest forced migration in world history. White masters, white indentured servants, and Black slaves arrived on the thriving and diverse continent of First Nations America. The Haudenosaunee traced their lineage back to the Sky Lynx; other Algonquin nations believed that the underwater panther warded off evil and offered them

protection. But that feline's power could not stave off successive waves of European colonialism.

As European settler colonists began their continent-wide genocide against indigenous Americans and developed a nascent capitalist economy built on a synthesis of stolen land and racial slavery, their own thoughts turned to freedom. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," declared lion aficionado and founding father Thomas Jefferson, "that all men are created equal."[25] Jefferson's story illustrates just how difficult it can be to distinguish tragedy from farce. Sometimes capitalist history seems "like a cross between a nightmare and a bad joke," in the words of Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James; the "L" stands for Lionel.[26] Revolutions were made in this era in France, the United States, and Haiti, and cats did their part in each. Haitian rebel leader Toussaint Louverture ordered his troops to "fight like tigers," while French Jacobin Maximilien Robespierre was described by friends and enemies alike as possessing "a general aspect to that of a cat."[27] Colonization and revolution, as modern nation states come into being and with them fledgling capitalist economies, are the subjects of chapters 3 and 4.

The French and American were the great bourgeois revolutions, and they gave rise to the class for which Marx saves some his most cutting and sometimes most feline words: the bourgeoisie. It is this class that Marx believed had thus far "played the most revolutionary role" in history.[28] The bourgeoisie occupies the role of a transformative class because it spreads capitalism the world over. It is this class that, finally, presents domestic cats in a manner relatable to us today. Quirky, independent, speculative, and—a favorite word of the bourgeoisie—"ours," cats under bourgeois direction are used to sell trinkets and populate cat shows. Yet as the bourgeoisie establishes its legitimacy in the nineteenth century, it likewise confronts its own antagonisms: the American Civil War, various English uprisings, more civil war in France, and the appearance of an in-

FIGURE INTRO.2. Cat meme, 2019. The internet has long been interested in feline ambivalence as a critique of work.

ternationalist commune in Paris, in 1871, led in part by a great cat lover. In these moments of tumult and turmoil, various cats appear on the historical scene. The bourgeoisie and its feline friends and phantoms are detailed in chapters 5 and 6.

Along with the rise of the bourgeoisie occurred that of the leading capitalist empires funded by the first truly global in-

vestment banks, the so-called financial houses. With them came decades of financial panic, profit, and plunder. Socialists like John Hobson noted that these banks were a "cat's paw" for imperialism.[29] Cat lover Vladimir Lenin agreed. A domestic feline symbol was drafted by the International Workers of the World, who called for a single laborers' union to fight the forces of global capitalism. In those moments of labor organization and uprising, workers crooned about a cat they called the "sabo-tabby," or sabotage cat. "The fight is tough, and you can't see through it? Shut your traps, and a cat will do it," they sang.[30] From the successful Russian Revolution to the failed German one, cats participated in re-envisioning what a twentieth-century socialist state could be and for whom it could function.

After World War II, communist cats and capitalist cats entered both domestic and international politics. At the height of monopoly capital's Cold War, three years before the famous Stonewall riots, the police raided the Black Cat gay bar in Los Angeles and the CIA launched Operation Acoustic Kitty, in which it used microphone-equipped cats to spy on the Soviets. The FBI trained its own focus on the Black Panthers, whose feline message of armed revolt resounded across the United States and indeed the world. As the Panthers called for replacing capitalism with an economic system of material and racial equality, neoliberal economists including Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek used their own feline language to insist capitalism must be bolstered and protected. With the rise of the internet as the medium of communication, whether for work or entertainment, a digital cat emerged, this one an absurd cat, a cat meme. As various digital felines peer out from every computer desktop and phone screen, they ask us: what does it mean to work and why do we do it? The many contours of the long feline twentieth century are detailed in chapters 7 and 8.

We will attend to these moments and many more as felines dart in and out of history, unsure of whether to stay or go. Each of the four parts of this book is segmented by a condensed dialectic intermezzo. His conception of the dialectic is perhaps Marx's most important contribution to understanding how economic contradiction drives history. It is the dialectic through which Marx asks: How is capitalism both regressive and progressive? How does the bourgeoisie undermine itself through its victories? How will communism emerge from capitalism? And how did capitalism emerge from feudalism? I have found it necessary to modify some of the great dialectical propositions of Marxism into feline form. It is here that the lord-bondsman dialectic becomes the lion-cat dialectic and a materialist consideration of a signifier-signified pairing takes feline form. These short dialectic intermezzos allow for some particularly trenchant problems to be considered in properly philosophical language as the narrative of the book leaps from one historical moment to the next.

Marx for Cats is intended for both novice and seasoned critics of capitalism, for dedicated cat lovers as well as for those who are allergic. It is for those who have always wondered: Why do cats continue to endure as symbols, tropes, and memes, century after century? How does the medieval cat so carefully stitched into a tapestry relate to the nineteenth-century satirical cat of French newspapers or the Felix the Cat cartoon of the 1920s? Why does respect equate to an act of lionizing and weakness to one of pussying out? Why are cats cherished and hated so passionately and by so many different constituencies in so many different historical moments?

As we answer these questions, we will follow Argentine Marxist Che Guevara's haunting observation: "At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love."[31] For too long, cats, indeed all animals, have been excluded from the reach of that loving revo-

FIGURE INTRO.3. An Contreras Nino, *Interspecies Solidarity*, 2020. Courtesy of Leigh Claire La Berge.

lutionary embrace. The time has come to amend that exclusion. Angela Davis, a Marxist and former Black Panther who came of philosophical age during Che's time and who is still with us today, tells us why such an amendment is important: "The prioritizing of humans also leads to restrictive definitions of who counts as human, and the brutalization of animals is related to the brutalization of human animals."[32] She suggests, too, how to do the amending: "I think that would really be revolutionary: to develop a kind of repertoire, a habit, of imagining the relations, the human relations and the nonhuman relations behind all of the objects that constitute our environment."[33] *Marx for Cats* offers one such imagining.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Epigraph: Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left, 1974), 8

1 Luxemburg, *Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 143.
2 See Dean, *Comrade*, for the term's longer genealogy.
3 Luxemburg, *Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* , 143.
4 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy," 261.
5 Marx, *Capital*, 1:454.
6 Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 381.
7 Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 177.
8 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 82.
9 For the emergence of this field in the literary in terms of Derrida, see Wolfe, "Human, All Too Human."
10 Derrida, *Animal That Therefore I Am*, 6.
11 Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, 206.
12 Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, 206.
13 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, chap. 1, trans. Padover.
14 Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 481.
15 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 6.
16 Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 487.
17 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, chap. 1, trans. Padover.

18 For a good overview of these concerns, see Benton, "Marx, Animals, and Humans." For the most sophisticated rendering of an eco-Marxism, see Kōhei Saitō's *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*.
19 Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century,* ix.
20 Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, x.
21 Job 12:7–10 (New International Version).
22 Marx, *Capital,* 3:801.
23 Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 1.
24 Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, 182.
25 *A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled* (Philadelphia, 1776), https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.
26 James, *Black Jacobins*, 43.
27 C. Jones, "French Crossings."
28 Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 486.
29 Hobson, *Imperialism*, 63.
30 Ralph Chaplin, "That Sabo-Tabby Kitten," Antiwar Songs, last modified May 22, 2014, https://www.antiwarsongs.org/canzone.php?id=47398&lang=en.
31 Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba," 225.
32 Angela Davis, "Angela Davis on the Struggle for Socialist Internationalism and a Real Democracy," interview by Astra Taylor, *Jacobin*, October 21, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/10/angela-davis-socialist-internationalism-democracy.
33 Grace Lee Boggs and Angela Davis, "On Revolution: A Conversation between Grace Lee Boggs and Angela Davis," 27th Empowering Women of Color Conference, March 2, 2012, https://www.radioproject.org/2012/02/grace-lee-boggs-berkeley/.

CHAPTER ONE. LION KINGS

Epigraph: *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 251.
1 The details of this story come from Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 47.
2 Marx, *Capital*, 1:706.
3 Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* 82.