

CHAPTER 13

Death and Love: The Metaphysics of Communication

Acknowledgement: Translated from German to English by Mareile Pfannebecker and Christian Fuchs

13.1. Introduction

Since 1990, references to Marxism have usually been references to the ‘death of Marx’ or the ‘death of Marxism’. Those who speak in this manner imply: ‘the analysis of class, class struggle and the critique of capitalism are outdated and wrong. We don’t need them!’ The rise of neoliberalism, Stalinism, and the corruption and collapse of actually existing socialism have worked together to render positive references to Marx difficult. My own political and academic socialisation took place in a climate of hatred towards Marx and Marxism. Again and again, we heard the same old claim:

‘Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, and along with it, its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices.’ It [this discourse] says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here’s to the survival of economic and political liberalism!¹

This was not only the old, anti-Marxist tune of neoliberals. It was also repeated by representatives of identity politics and postmodernism who regard themselves as politically progressive. The effect is that they have furthered the discrimination against Marxism and its representatives. The recurrent claim, then

¹ Jacques Derrida. 1994/2006. *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge. p. 64.

How to cite this book:

Fuchs, C. 2020. *Communication and Capitalism: A Critical Theory*. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book45>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

and now, has been that Marxism and Marx are reductionist, determinist, totalitarian, and anti-democratic.² Those who make such claims have usually not read and cannot uphold a debate about Marx. But they often occupy positions of power that allow them to discriminate against Marxism and its representatives. Their aim is to nip any revival of Marxism in the bud.

Since the antagonisms of capitalism caused a new global economic crisis in 2008, not even the most ignorant and foolhardy can deny that in the 21st century, class, the capitalist economy and capitalist society are of great significance. Socialist politics did not experience a general upsurge during the immediate crisis. And yet the interest in Marx and Marxist theory has increased. The overall effect was that it became easier to speak about Marx, Marxism, capitalism, class, exploitation, and socialism. Marx was never quite dead, since his work remains practically and theoretically relevant for at least as long as capitalism exists. Yet there were and remain many who would like to declare Marx's works dead for good. Recent history, in contrast, only shows their relevance.

Since the ideological project of silencing Marx has failed, perhaps it is now time to consider death in the context of Marx not as 'death of Marx' but rather to ask how Marxism ought to confront the phenomenon of death. This chapter is a contribution to this task.

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that deals with phenomena that cannot simply be quantified and that cannot easily be put into words. Death, mourning, religious belief, and love are among such existential human phenomena that fall into the realm of metaphysics. A critical theory of communication must deal with metaphysical questions such as the one that asks how we communicate about death, mourning, and love.

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that deals with questions of the trans-empirical, that is, with questions that go beyond the empirical everyday reality of human life. This includes death. Death is an important cause, impetus, and gateway for engagement with metaphysical questions. Since death is a scandal that affects everyone, everyone also asks metaphysical questions. Life is the dialectical counterpart of love. Since death is the eternal darkness, the nothing that confronts humans and is the cause of mourning, to simply pitch life against death is little consolation. The only hopeful counterpart to death is love as the principle of human sympathy and as the social principle of socialism.

'Religions have much to say about some vital questions – death, suffering, love, self-dispossession and the like – on which the left has for the most part maintained an embarrassed silence.'³ Marx argues that '*religion* is a register of

² For the rebuttal of this claim see: Terry Eagleton. 2018. *Why Marx Was Right*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

³ Terry Eagleton. 2009. *Reason, Faith, & Revolution. Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. p. xii.

the theoretical struggles of mankind.⁴ This translation from the German original is a bit imprecise because Marx speaks of religion as ‘*Inhaltsverzeichnis*’, which literally means table of contents. Ideological and class struggles – like struggles focused on pain, suffering, loss, loneliness, and death – are part of the struggles of humankind. So, metaphysical questions belong in humanity’s ‘table of contents’. Just like other philosophies, Marxism has to deal with such questions in order to understand and respond to the lived realities of human life.

Section 13.2 considers the ontological question of death and love. Section 13.3 deals with death and estrangement/alienation. Section 13.4 is concerned with the work of mourning and the communication of death and mourning. Section 13.5 discusses mortality and immortality, as well as post- and transhumanism.

13.2. Death, Love, and Ontology

The death of the human being is the end, the absolute nothing. Every change is a becoming as dialectic of being and nothing. A new idea that revises an old idea renders the latter void. A new idea *sublates* an old idea in the sense of the triple dialectical *Aufhebung*, as a simultaneous elimination, preservation, and elevation onto a new level of organisation. The same principle applies to the introduction of new methods of production and technologies that *sublate* old methods. Death, on the other hand, is the annihilation of being, the end of the body, spirit, consciousness, thinking, action, experience, social relations, social roles, and communication of a given human being. For others, new things may come out of the death of a person, like insights about the shape of their own lives. But death produces nothing new for the concerned party; it destroys their being. Death is the purest and most negative form of the dialectic. It negates the dialectic of life itself. It is the end of life’s dialectic.

Aristotle on Death

Aristotle relates death to fear. Humans are afraid of ‘loss of reputation, poverty, disease, loss of friends, and death.’⁵ Fear is the expectation of something bad.⁶ ‘But the most frightening thing is death, for it is a limit, and it seems

⁴ Karl Marx. 1843. Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843. In *Marx Engels Collected Works (MECW) Volume 3*, 141–145. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 143.

⁵ Aristotle. 2002. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Joe Sachs. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. § 1115a.

⁶ *Ibid.*, § 1115a.

there is nothing beyond it to be good or bad for the one who is dead'.⁷ Aristotle argues that the most honourable and brave way to die, 'in honour' and without fear, is in battle. He thus idealises war. It is not convincing that death for a people, a nation, or a leader is to be considered honourable. Aristotle does not directly name the death of the nation as honourable, so does not directly idealise nationalism. In the case of fascism, the armed antifascist battle against the tyrannical regime is in fact honourable. Yet antifascism is the opposite pole to nationalism and imperialism, which have caused global wars. The mysticism of death must be avoided.

Death in itself is a scandal. That does not exclude the possibility that in some situations the fight against those who make killing systematic can be honourable. Dying, however, can never be honourable and instead takes place as tragedy. Fascism idealises killing and dying and presents the soldier as the perfect human being. Erich Fromm argues that those humans who act based on the principle of 'Long live death!' have a necrophilic character.⁸ In his definition, necrophilia is 'the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction'.⁹ According to Fromm, Hitler was not only authoritarian and sadomasochist, but also necrophilic.

Philosophical Positions on Death

Depending on one's philosophical standpoint, death is regarded as a complete or partial ending of human existence, and thus either as temporary or final. Various religions assume a body/soul dualism where the soul does not perish in death, but instead lives on. This dualistic belief is shared by the world religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism see death as the end of worldly existence of the human mind and body but believe in the eternal existence of the soul in paradise and the possibility for the resurrection of the dead body. In Buddhism and in Hinduism, on the other hand, a cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*) is assumed (death as end of the human body and the transmigration of souls). In contrast, the dialectical and materialist worldview founded by Marx, like other materialist approaches, is monistic in outlook. Here, matter is understood as a differentiated unit and totality, within which moments overlap and correlate (see chapter 2 of this book). Accordingly, the human mind and body are conceived of as interdependent aspects of human matter. Death is understood as the complete and permanent end of a human being, and so of body and soul.

⁷ *Ibid.*, § 1115a.

⁸ Erich Fromm. 1973. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. p. 330.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

While religious people can find comfort in the belief in redemption in paradise or nirvana, among Marxists this belief is considered irrational and esoteric. The 'salvation' they concern themselves with is generally that of the oppressed within their society. Irrespective of their beliefs, of theism or atheism, most people will be confronted at some point of their lives with the mourning of deceased loved ones. Religion is an ideological coping process that can offer genuine consolation and make it possible to live on. After all, Marx insists that religion is not only 'opium for the people', but also 'the sigh of the oppressed creature', 'the heart of a heartless world', 'the spirit of spiritless conditions', and 'expression of real distress'.¹⁰ In its promise of salvation in another world, religion displays an ideological character. But the reason why people look for refuge in religion is often based in suffering, pain, mourning, loss, misfortune, and death. Instead of just ignoring metaphysical questions related to death and mourning, Marxism ought to offer materialist answers to fundamental problems of human existence. Religion and Marxism share the hope for a good life for everyone. Marxism is the translation of such hope into 'the secular project of understanding societies and expressions of human possibility and history as a means of liberating the present from the burdens of the past, and so constructing the future. [...] But the Marxist project remains the only one we have for reestablishing hope as a social virtue'.¹¹

An important aspect that derives from Marxism is the necessity of solidarity amongst people in the fight for a good life and a good society. The ideal of the socialist society stresses community, collective control, co-operation, and solidarity. These principles also play a role in relation to death and mourning: If someone is alone in trouble, illness, death, and in mourning, then their suffering is multiplied. If others are there with their solidarity, love, and friendship, then suffering, dying, death, and mourning will not disappear, but be ameliorated by shared experience and endured more easily. In Marxism, love for your neighbour is not only an interpersonal principle as in many religions, but a societal principle and a matter of class struggle. Socialism is the society of love for your neighbour, of peace, and humanism. Death and mourning do not disappear in socialism, but lonely death, lonely illness, and lonely mourning become less likely. Only in socialism does it become possible to subject death 'to human autonomy, if not in terms of time, at least in terms of its quality, by eliminating decrepitude and suffering'.¹² Erich Fromm argues that the fear of

¹⁰ Karl Marx. 1844. Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction. In *Marx Engels Collected Works (MECW) Volume 3*, 175–187. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 175.

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre. 1968/1984. *Marxism and Christianity*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. pp. 115–116.

¹² Herbert Marcuse. 1958/2011. The Ideology of Death. In *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Five: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and*

death can best be alleviated 'by our reassertion of our bond to life, by a response to the love of others that may kindle our own love.'¹³ Love and death are fundamental aspects of human existence. Morally and politically, love is the most positive aspect of existence, on which socialism is founded as a social system. Death is the most negative, darkest, most absurd side of existence.

When human beings cannot live properly due to their alienation, domination, and exploitation, then the fear of death is largely the fear of 'seeing how much the living resemble it. And it might therefore be said that if life were lived rightly, the experience of death would also be changed radically, in its innermost composition.'¹⁴ Only in a society where humans were 'really identical to that which we are not but which we deeply know we could become, [...] might we have the possibility of being reconciled with death.'¹⁵

There is a qualitative difference between the death of a human being at an old age, who has lived and enjoyed their life to its full extent and dies 'peacefully', and the death of a child or a young person or the unexpected death in a massacre, a genocide, war, or another catastrophe. 'In the death camps death has a novel horror. Since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death.'¹⁶ Since Auschwitz, there is a new categorical imperative, that is, to avoid the repetition of industrial mass murder: 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.'¹⁷

The death of a child or young person often affects us especially, since in that case a person is not only robbed of their life, but also of the possibility to live many years, to have a family and children, and to experience self-fulfilment through life.

The Meaning of Human Existence: Three Philosophical Positions

There are essentially three positions regarding the question of the meaning of human existence. The first position assumes that both life and death are absurd and meaningless. The second position sees the meaning of life defined by death. Here, death gives meaning: the expectation of death is the meaning of life. The third position assumes that life is meaningful and death without meaning.

Emancipation, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, 122–131. London: Routledge. p. 129.

¹³ Erich Fromm. 1979. *To Have or to Be*. London: Sphere Books. p. 127.

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno. 2001. *Metaphysics: Concept and Problem*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p. 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno. 1973/2006. *Negative Dialectics*. London: Routledge. p. 371.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre is a proponent of the thesis that both life and death are absurd: 'It is absurd that we are born; it is absurd that we die.'¹⁸ Sartre is certainly right to speak of 'the absurd character of death.'¹⁹ But the absurd character of life does not follow from the absurd character of death. Human life and the life of a society afford the possibility of individual, social, collective, and societal happiness. The possibility of the happiness that solidarity produces and shares socially makes life worth living. Life in itself is therefore not absurd. Life only becomes absurd by virtue of the unhappiness produced by domination, class-relations and exploitation.

Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger's philosophy is representative of the second position. For him, the being of a human being is being-towards-death. This means that Heidegger ontologises death. He considers death the decisive aspect of human existence. For Heidegger, death is 'the "end" of being, that is, of being-in-the-world'²⁰ Only through death does life become complete: Being-toward-the-end enables 'a wholeness.'²¹

When life and human existence are defined via death, nothingness is made absolute and idealised. Death is not an everyday experience of human beings but a tragedy, absurdity, and futility, which breaks into everyday life to shatter it. Herbert Marcuse argues that Heidegger advanced the 'ideological exhortation to death, at the very time when the political ground was prepared for the corresponding reality of death – the gas chambers and the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen.'²² Adorno speaks of Heidegger's 'propaganda for death.'²³ Marcuse criticises death-nihilism as 'the exalted acceptance of death', which takes the shape of soldiers' willingness to sacrifice themselves or the acceptance of the possible nuclear mass annihilation of human life.²⁴ In these instances, death is instrumentalised by the rulers. Death becomes the ideology of death. Accordingly, death is then not a natural

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre. 1943/2003. *Being and Nothingness. A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 547.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 533.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger. 1926/2010. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Revised by Dennis J. Schmidt. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. p. 238.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

²² Marcuse, *The Ideology of Death*, p. 126.

²³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, p. 131.

²⁴ Marcuse, *The Ideology of Death*, p. 130.

fact but a socially created one. 'Compliance with death is compliance with the master over death.'²⁵ By such compliance, death 'assumes the force of an institution which, because of its vital utility, should not be changed, even if it could perhaps be changed.'²⁶ Fascism is based on a sadomasochistic ideology and character structure that is built on the concept of 'self-sacrifice as the highest virtue.'²⁷ 'This masochistic sacrifice sees the fulfilment of life in its very negation, in the annihilation of the self. It is only the supreme expression of what Fascism aims at in all its ramifications – the annihilation of the individual self and its utter submission to a higher power.'²⁸

Life only forms a totality when a human being can make use of all of their abilities in society. The wholeness of a human being is thus determined by society and in a worldly manner, not, as Heidegger claims, by death. Exploitation in class relations and domination mutilate the human being in such a way that they cannot form a whole. They cannot fully be what they could be. Heidegger neglects the negative and destructive aspects of class society. That 'death does not constitute the entirety of existence – as it does to Heidegger – is the very reason why a man who is not yet debilitated will experience death and its envoys, the ailments, as heterogeneous and alien to the ego.'²⁹ When Heidegger claims that 'death belongs primordially and essentially to the being of Dasein', then this applies to the *Dasein* of family, friends, and acquaintances of the deceased.³⁰ Depending on a person's relationship to the deceased during their lifetime, varying reactions like mourning, labour of mourning, indifference, etc. ensue. The reaction to the death of an acquaintance, friend, or family member makes it part of life. Yet Heidegger is mistaken in regard to the death of a particular person: death is not part of the life of a particular individual, but constitutes the end of their lifetime, an unending nothing. Death does not stand within, but outside of and after the time of life.

Heidegger regards the repression of death and false hope for survival as 'inauthentic' (*uneigentliches*) being-toward-death.³¹ He understands the 'anticipation [*Vorlaufen*]' of the possibility of death as the authentic (*eigentliche*) being of death.³² With this term, he indicates the anticipation of death, including one's own death. In this way, it would be possible to overcome the fear of death and to meet death in freedom.³³ Heidegger not only ontologises and de-scandalises

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁷ Erich Fromm. 1941/1969. *Escape From Freedom*. New York: Avon. p. 294.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 369.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 242.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

death, he also takes a philosophical and idealist approach to death: he distinguishes between correct (*'eigentliches Sein-zum-Tode'*) and false (*'uneigentliches Sein-zum-Tode'*) forms of thought in the encounter with death. To face up to death in thought is brave to him, whereas to repress and deny it is cowardly and false. Death, however, is a material certainty regardless of whether a person faces up to it in thought or not. Death does not become less absurd, meaningless, or scandalous by thinking about it more or less. You cannot stop death by thinking about it or not thinking about it. After the death of a significant person, a human being has access to different forms of coping, all of which are directed towards their own survival.

Thomas Nagel

Thomas Nagel is a representative of the third position, which is also the position taken up in this chapter. He argues that 'death is an evil because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains.'³⁴ A counter argument proposes that many people have a bad life and that death offers them deliverance. But this argument overlooks that society can organise a good life for all. The development of productive capacity, for example, has greatly increased the real possibility for a life without toil. This possibility of a good life and happiness for all makes the individual life worth living, even though in class society, individual happiness must come out of the political struggle for the happiness of all. Bad life is produced socially, and largely by domination and class relations. Nagel does not engage with aspects of capitalism and domination. He says that 'perception, desire, activity, and thought' are constitutive for a good human life.³⁵ This definition, however, is too general and too individualist. It is based on purely individualist aspects of life. Yet life also includes social phenomena like work and communication, which organise social relationships. The good life presupposes spaces free of class and domination. Capitalism has not colonised society completely; there are always spaces left in which we experience love and happiness. There are thus particular forms of perception, desire, action, thought, communication, and labour, and of social conditions which make up the good life. Even in spaces free of domination a human being is confronted with disease, suffering, pain, loss, mourning, and death. Yet, in such free spaces and in a free society, they are more likely to have the strength to encounter it and to experience the solidarity of their fellows.

Nagel makes one important point about death: death destroys the potential to live. 'But the time after his death is time of which his death deprives him'.³⁶ 'Therefore any death entails the loss of some life that its victim would have led

³⁴ Thomas Nagel. 1979. Death. *Noûs* 4 (1): 73–80. p. 74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

had he not died at that or any earlier point.³⁷ Death is the loss of potential good lifetime. It demarcates the end of the possibility of leading a good life, of fighting for a good life and, by acts of solidarity, of furthering a good life in a good society, which in itself creates meaning.

The next section asks: What does death have to do with estrangement?

13.3. Death and Estrangement: Death as Endstrangement

Thomas Nagel suggests that death is an estrangement. Through death, one is absolutely estranged from one's body and spirit. Marx understands estrangement, or alienation, as the loss of control and the ability to make decisions about the structures of one's own life (see Chapter 8, Section 1). One's own life concerns a person most immediately, which suggests that death presents a particular sort of alienation. Yet, alienation is a social phenomenon; it implies that lost control can be won back, that alienated structures, relationships, and structures can be appropriated. Alienation thus presupposes, as its own counterpart and counterforce, the possibility for the appropriation and attainment of control over one's own life via social struggle. Once dead, all potentials for action of a human being are extinguished, including the potentials for appropriation and the struggle against alienation. Death destroys the possibility of appropriation. This circumstance speaks against the idea that death is a form of alienation. The lack of control and the loss of control over body and mind during death is an aspect of alienation. But in contrast to alienation, death means the loss of the potential for appropriation and the participation in class struggle.

Death as Endstrangement

Death is *endstrangement*, estrangement without end. Death is the ultimate alienation of the self and society. It means the destruction of the essence of a being and the potential of their human existence. Death is 'the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation which *itself is no longer a part of my possibilities*'.³⁸ While the alienation caused by domination can come to an end, the alienation caused by the death of the body, the mind, social relations, society, experience, consciousness, action, and communication is without end. While *endstrangement* also leads to the end of the experience of societal alienation, it does not lead to the end of alienation as a societal phenomenon. When a human being has lived in conditions of alienation, and so in misfortune, and dies in those circumstances, then he no longer has the opportunity to experience a better life in happiness and to fight for this together with other people. *Endstrangement* is

³⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

³⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 537.

a misfortune and no deliverance from alienation. What is left to the bereaved is the continuation of the struggle against alienation in the memory of loved ones who have passed away.

Sartre argues that death is a kind of alienation because one becomes the 'prey of others'.³⁹ The 'very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the Other'.⁴⁰ Sartre means that people can say what they like about the dead, who cannot defend themselves. Sartre refers to a communicational aspect of *endstrangement*: since the dead person is robbed of all the possibilities of human existence, he/she cannot communicate. He/She therefore cannot tell fellow human beings what he/she thinks about any statements made about him/her, about others, and about society.

Alienation as Death

Alienation takes on economic, political, and cultural forms: Exploitation, political oppression, and ideology are three forms of domination that lead to the economic, political, and cultural alienation of a human being. The result of alienation is that people are deprived of the control of the economic, political, and cultural systems in which they live. Capitalism, class society, and domination always mean a partial death of the life world of the human and of society: they kill the realisation of potentials that could have furthered the happiness of all humankind. Alienation as the surrender of the good life and of the realisation of positive potential for all is a partial death in life. Alienation involves forms of direct, structural, and ideological repression. Alienated structures thus always include the danger of the direct and indirect killing of humans by economics, politics, and ideology. Examples in the economy are overwork, work accidents, and health damaged by work; in politics, war, terror, imperialism, fascism, and genocide; and in culture, racism, nationalism, and other forms of ideologically motivated murder and mass murder of human beings in a given target group.

As 'double free' labour, work under capitalism means that the majority of people are forced to sell their labour power to earn money for their survival. The structural violence of capitalism includes the threat of death by starvation as a consequence of the refusal of waged labour. For Marx, human work is 'the living, form-giving fire'.⁴¹ The products produced by work within class structures are dead labour, in as far as they are reifications of a human being's living labour and the surplus-value produced by it. Labour appropriated by capital acts as 'fructifying vitality' on the 'dead objectivity' of capital.⁴² The transformation of living labour into dead objects, which are sold as products that belong

³⁹ Ibid., p. 543.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 543.

⁴¹ Karl Marx. 1857/58/1973. *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin. p. 361.

⁴² Ibid., p. 298.

to the capitalist and not to the workers, is one of the foundations of capitalism. Capitalism means the rule of capital as dead labour over the living labour of human beings. Living labour is capitalism's 'mere means to realize objectified, dead labour, to penetrate it with an animating soul while losing its own soul to it'.⁴³ As a result, value is created that forms wealth that is alien to labour and is 'wealth of and for the capitalist'.⁴⁴ So, economic alienation under capitalism is the result of the transformation of living into dead labour.

What Karl Marx Says About Death

Marx describes working conditions in the 19th century that were so terrible that workers died through overwork, starvation, dangerous working conditions, etc. 'Hence even in the condition of society most favourable to the worker, the inevitable result for the worker is overwork and premature death, decline to a mere machine, a bond servant of capital, which piles up dangerously over and against him, more competition, and starvation or beggary for a section of the workers'.⁴⁵ 'So much does labour's realisation appear as loss of realisation that the worker loses realisation to the point of starving to death'.⁴⁶ In the method of absolute surplus-value production, the 'recognized form of overwork here is forced labour until death'.⁴⁷

Compared to the 19th century, and as the result of class struggle, the general living conditions of workers in the 20th and 21st centuries have improved. Death at work and as a consequence of work will nonetheless continue to exist as long as capitalism itself, since to capitalism humans are mere resources and instruments. In the 21st century, precarious working conditions dominate, including part-time work, pseudo-self-employment, temporary employment, unemployment, unequal distribution of working hours, subcontracted labour, precarious self-employment etc. Overall, people in insecure working conditions (precarious work, unemployment, permanent unemployment) are more physically and psychologically impaired than those in permanent positions.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid., p. 461.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 461.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx. 1844. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In *MECW Volume 3*, 229–346. London: Lawrence & Wishart. p. 238.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 272.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx. 1867/1976. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*. London: Penguin. p. 345.

⁴⁸ Lars Eric Kroll and Thomas Lampert. 2012. Arbeitslosigkeit, prekäre Beschäftigung und Gesundheit. *GBE kompakt – Zahlen und Trends aus der Gesundheitsberichterstattung des Bundes* 3 (1): 1–8.

Also, crises of capitalism are ‘a question of life and death.’⁴⁹ In these crises, capital is destroyed, which bankrupts companies and makes jobs disappear. Suffering caused by capitalism often remains invisible, since those who suffer are ashamed and hide. Those who suffer invisibly in capitalism, such as the unemployed, the homeless, starving people in developing countries, etc. are like spectres.

Capitalism and class society lead to inequality, instrumentalist thinking, unhappiness, and loneliness. Capitalism makes people unhappy, and in some ways drives them mad. Violence in the form of crime, including murder are unavoidable within capitalism. Brutal murder cases (for example of children) are often instrumentalised in order to make the case for the death penalty. But the death penalty does not bring back the dead and does not remove the societal causes of high rates of murder and other violent crime. In 1853, Marx argued against the death penalty:

[It] would be very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to establish any principle upon which the justice or expediency of capital punishment could be founded, in a society glorying in its civilization. [...] Punishment in general has been defended as a means either of ameliorating or of intimidating. Now what right have you to punish me for the amelioration or intimidation of others? And besides, there is history – there is such a thing as statistics – which prove with the most complete evidence that since Cain the world has neither been intimidated nor ameliorated by punishment. Quite the contrary. [...] Now, what a state of society is that, which knows of no better instrument for its own defense than the hangman, and which proclaims through the ‘leading journal of the world’ its own brutality as eternal law? [...] is there not a necessity for deeply reflecting upon an alteration of the system that breeds these crimes, instead of glorifying the hangman who executes a lot of criminals to make room only for the supply of new ones?⁵⁰

Mourning and grief have aspects of labour and communication that will be discussed in the next section.

13.4. The Labour of Mourning and the Communication of Grief and Death

The dead cease to live, and so, to communicate. Death means infinite silence and infinite non-communication. We can speak to the dead in thought, at their

⁴⁹ Marx, *Capital Volume One*, p. 618.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx. 1853. Capital Punishment – Mr. Cobden’s Pamphlet – Regulations of the Bank of England. In *Marx Engels Collected Works (MECW) Volume 11*, 495–501. London: Lawrence & Wishart. pp. 496, 497, 497–498.

graves, at memorials, at funerals, and days of remembrance, etc., but they do not hear us and they cannot answer. The impossibility to continue to communicate with dead loved ones, to continue to experience them, to see and feel them and share the world with them via the social relations that are kept up by communication, form the source of mourning.

The Labour of Mourning

Labour of mourning is labour for the memory of the dead. Because death is *endstrangement*, and so, the ultimate estrangement, the labour of mourning is always labour and not work. It necessarily confronts the ultimate alienation of human beings from themselves: the *endstrangement*. The labour of remembrance and mourning is production in the face of the destruction caused by death. It produces thoughts about the dead and the attempt to process mourning, to alleviate the pain caused by the loss of loved ones, and to live on.

Jacques Derrida understands the labour of mourning as the attempt 'to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead.'⁵¹ 'Mourning always follows a trauma.'⁵² Derrida sees the labour of mourning as 'confused and terrible expression.'⁵³ Why this expression is supposed to be terrible remains unclear. After a death, relatives often engage with the legacy and the remembrance of the deceased, contact shared relatives and friends, organise one or several memorial events, etc. They are thus confronted with *endstrangement* and process it by producing remembrance. Death is tragedy, and thus life without mourning would be a better life. This is why Derrida says 'there shall be no mourning.'⁵⁴ He does not mean that we should not mourn, but that it is a disaster that humans die, and that this is the cause of sadness and mourning.

The Labour of Mourning and Communication

Funerals and memorial events for the dead are rituals of the labour of remembrance and mourning. One question raised is how the dead are best remembered, through silence or language, individually or socially. The labour of remembrance and mourning is caught between the two poles of communication and silence (see table 13.1).

⁵¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵³ Derrida. 2001. *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. p. 26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Table 13.1: Forms of labour of remembrance and mourning.

	Communication	Silence
I	Individual speaking to the deceased	Individual remembrance of the dead
we	Communal/common talk among the bereaved about the deceased	Gathering of silent mourners (e.g. at a place of remembrance)

The problem of the labour of mourning, as it presents itself, for example, at a funeral or the obsequies right after the death of a beloved individual, is that speaking 'is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness.'⁵⁵ It 'is almost indecent to speak right now – and to continue to address our words to you. But silence too is unbearable.'⁵⁶

The dead are silent. In many modern cultures individualised mourning predominates; here mourners must rely on themselves. The solidarity, the collective-individual dialectic as well as the communality and commonality proposed by Marxism imply that the remembrance of a dead loved one should not be individual and silent, but instead organised in a social and communicative fashion. By speaking to one another about the deceased and by trying collectively to let their ideas and their character live on, the labour of mourning becomes social labour, which helps people to find their way back into everyday life more easily. 'When, surviving, and so forevermore bereft of the possibility of speaking or addressing oneself *to the* friend, to the friend himself, one is condemned merely to speak *of* him, of what he was, thought, and wrote, it is nonetheless of *him* that one should speak. It is of him we mean to speak, of him alone, of or on his side alone. But how can the survivor speak in friendship of the friend without a "we" indecently setting in, without an "us" incessantly slipping in? [...] For to silence or forbid the "we" would be to enact another, no less serious, violence.'⁵⁷

It is anything but 'indecent' that, in speaking about a deceased loved one, one speaks of the community with the deceased and of a community of mourning, which produces solidarity in the labour of mourning. Derrida stresses the significance of collective communication about the deceased, but is yet too much caught up in the postmodern rejection of collective identity. Especially when faced with mourning and death, the 'we' is a weapon that may not be able to conquer death, but by which people can give each other strength.

There is a dialectic relationship between speech and silence. He/She who always speaks and is never silent destroys this dialectic. She/He who is silent at the wrong time and does not speak up against oppression also destroys the dialectic by standing by and watching domination at work. Without the silence

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

of reflection and listening there is no true speech. And reflection, listening, and silence solicit speech. Speaking about the death of a loved one demands a particular dialectic of speech and silence. We can neither simply be silent about death nor speak about it with the form and content of everyday speech. Communication about death demands speaking that is quiet rather than loud, that encourages reflection and remembrance, that reflects and continues in thought the life of the deceased, returns the deceased back into life, and lets them live on in our life. In the Tanakh and the Old Testament, the *Book of Ecclesiastes* says that there is ‘a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.’⁵⁸ These times, however, do not exclude, but dialectically integrate each other. The communication of mourning, especially, demands both, the dialectic of the time to keep silent and the time to speak.

It is part of the peculiarity of many modern cultures to render death taboo. Not only do we rarely see the dead, but death also remains un-communicated. ‘Dying is pushed away [...] Thus we live from one day to the next and into the night, no thought must ever be given to the worst end which is yet to come.’⁵⁹

Our own era simply denies death and with it one fundamental aspect of life. Instead of allowing the awareness of death and suffering to become one of the strongest incentives for life, the basis for human solidarity, and an experience without which joy and enthusiasm lack intensity and depth, the individual is forced to repress it. [...] Thus the fear of death lives an illegitimate existence among us. It remains alive in spite of the attempt to deny it, but being repressed it remains sterile. It is one source of the flatness of other experiences, of the restlessness pervading life, and it explains, I would venture to say, the exorbitant amount of money this nation pays for its funerals.⁶⁰

Part of the task of breaking the taboo of death is to ensure that death and dying is talked about, so that their horror can be moderated by the force of community and solidarity.

The Commodification of Death and the Communication of Death

Capitalism is imperialist in essence (see chapter 11). This means that its aim is to subsume as many social phenomena as possible under the logic of capital accumulation. Death itself is not immune to being subsumed under capital. Cosmetic surgery is an enormous engine of profit based on the striving

⁵⁸ *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Chapter 3, §7, <http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Ecclesiastes>

⁵⁹ Ernst Bloch. 1986. *The Principle of Hope. Volume Three: Chapters 43–53*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. p. 1105.

⁶⁰ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, p. 271.

for eternal youth and beauty, and therefore on the implicit negation of death. The anti-ageing industry also commodifies the fear and repression of death. It sells creams, medications, hormones, treatments, literature, advice, anti-ageing retreats, etc. that are supposed to slow down ageing and prolong life. So, for example, the British corporation Healing Holidays offers different anti-ageing retreats that cost up to £9,000 and have the defined aim to ‘slow down the clock when it comes to ageing.’⁶¹ Death and mourning are also commodified directly. RipCemetery is an app for iPhone and Android-phones that describes itself as the ‘world’s first virtual cemetery’ and an ‘interactive cemetery’.⁶² Users can create virtual memorial sites where they can leave messages, photos, videos, virtual flowers, and gifts. Users can also remember the deceased together and communicate about them. The operators of the app make a profit when virtual goods like messages, flowers, tombstone decorations, and other virtual objects are bought. The use of online social networks for the purpose of collective remembrance of the deceased, to keep them present and unforgotten, as well as to organise the labour of mourning and communication of mourning socially, interlinked over great distances, is in itself a good idea. But the commodification of death, of mourning, and of the communication of death, via the mediation of such forms of communication and community by the logic of money, of capital, of profit, and of exchange value is disrespectful. The logic of capital does not even stop before the dead, mourning, and the remembrance of the dead; this demonstrates that capitalism is a deeply immoral system. Services like RipCemetery should always operate in a not-for-profit, non-capitalist fashion in order to respect the memory of the dead instead of exploiting it.

Eternal life promises the alleviation of suffering and mourning caused by the loss of a loved one. Materialism shows that the idea of eternal life in an other-worldly paradise is ideological. But can there be eternal, or at least very long life in this world? The next section focuses on this question.

13.5. Mortality and Immortality

Human Life Expectancy

World-wide life expectancy has risen from forty-seven years in 1950 to seventy-three in 2020. According to forecasts, life expectancy in 2100 will be 82.6 years. Medical progress allows human beings to live longer. There is, however, a decisive split: While in the least developed countries, life expectancy in 1950 was thirty-six, in developed countries it was sixty-five. In 2020, life expectancy in the least developed countries was sixty-six years and in developed

⁶¹ <https://www.healingholidays.co.uk/retreats/anti-ageing-retreats>, accessed on 23 October 2018.

⁶² <http://www.ripcemetery.com/>, accessed on 23 October 2018.

countries eighty years. For 2100, calculations suggest that life expectancy for the least developed countries will be 79.1 years and in developed countries, ninety years.⁶³ The capitalist world community is riddled with inequalities regarding death. The rich tend to live longer, and the poor tend to die sooner. All humans die. Death and dying in capitalism are shaped by class. A socialist politics of life must aim to make medical and social progress accessible to all, so that a long, fulfilled, happy life for all is possible.

Immortality is an old human dream. The dream exists because humans want to overcome the fear of death, suffering, and mourning. But humans have physical limitations. Jeanne Calment was the human being who reached the highest age so far. She was born in 1875 and died in 1997. She lived for 122 years and 164 days.⁶⁴ In terms of physics, the immortality of human beings is an illusion. If humans were to become immortal, but their minds and bodies continued to age, then ageing would be accompanied by constant suffering and pain, since older people are more susceptible to physical disease and dementia than younger people. A precondition for immortality as good rather than bad life is therefore that physical and psychological diseases must be vanquished. In order to achieve this, one would have to stop physical ageing or to reverse physical damage. Mental ageing, on the other hand, insofar as it does not come with dementia, is experienced by many as a growth of wisdom, knowledge, and serenity. While it is thoroughly desirable to stop mental decline, mental ageing itself can be enriching to human existence.

Post- and Transhumanism

Post- and transhumanism are philosophical approaches that assume that technical and medical progress will make human beings immortal. A first assumption of posthumanism is that medical nanorobots will operate within the human body to identify diseases and repair the human organism. A second assumption is that technical advancement will at some point allow the content of the human brain to be downloaded onto a computer, so that when the body dies, the mind lives on within the machine and so becomes immortal. Post/transhumanism assumes that the human species will cease to exist and that individuals will continue to exist as a new species of cyborgs that are human-machine hybrids and will thereby become immortal. This vision occurs not only in cyberpunk fiction⁶⁵ but also in philosophy. Postmodern feminism

⁶³ Data source: UN Population Division: World Population Prospects 2017 data, <https://population.un.org/wpp/DataQuery/>

⁶⁴ Data source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeanne_Calment, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_verified_oldest_people

⁶⁵ See for example: William Gibson's *Neuromancer*-trilogy: William Gibson. 1984. *Neuromancer*. London: Gollancz. William Gibson. 1986. *Count*

developed the idea that cyborgs will not only make individuals immortal, but that they will also sublimate gender identity and patriarchy (cyborgs as androgynous, non-male and non-female beings).⁶⁶

For Günther Anders, posthumanism is a reified, ideological dream of the human being 'to become equal to his deities, the machines'.⁶⁷ But to 'leave the human condition behind and stop being human', as posthumanism and transhumanism intend to do, implies 'the *climax of all possible dehumanization*'.⁶⁸ An initial problem of post- and transhumanism is that, like many religions, they are based on a mind-body dualism. This is philosophical idealism. If instead, as assumed by materialism, mind and body are interlinked and in a dialectical relationship, then the human mind cannot exist in a machine, independently from the body. The second problem is the techno-determinist assumption that technology can make humans immortal and free society of societal problems like patriarchal structures. The third problem is that post- and transhumanist approaches ignore the extent to which technical and medical progress is embedded in class relations and capitalist society.

Cyborgs and Capitalism as Cyborg-Fascism

Within capitalism, death works as a negative dialectic: While it has become scientifically possible to increase human life expectancy and improve human health, the potential for mass destruction and the application of destructive forces has also increased during the history of capitalism. While humans have the ability to transcend death to a certain degree, these possibilities are undermined by the forces of death inherent in capitalism.

If, in a capitalist society, nanorobots were to be developed that could penetrate the human body, then we can assume that these would be put to use to monitor human behaviour as well as to attempt to manipulate consciousness. Medical nanorobots that can heal diseases and renew cells and organs would, under capitalism, become a product that not everybody could afford. In this way, the class division of life, health, disease, and death would be further advanced.

Zero. London: Gollancz. William Gibson. 1988. *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, London: Gollancz.

⁶⁶ See: Donna Haraway. 1991. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–181. Donna Haraway. 1997. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouseTM. Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.

⁶⁷ Günther Anders. 2016. On Promethean Shame. In *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*, Christopher John Müller, 29–95. London: Rowman & Littlefield International. p. 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

If it were possible to create cyborgs in a capitalist society, then immortality would also be subject to class division: the rich and privileged classes would become immortal cyborgs, the class of the poor and the workers would remain mortal and serve the cyborg class and be exploited by them. By the creation of cyborgs as 'superhumans' two species would be created. Under capitalism, it could easily happen that those mortals who are ill, old, or unable to work would appear as too expensive and a burden to society, and thus be killed. Capitalism always has fascist potentials. In a capitalist society that creates two classes, of mortals and immortals, a fascist demographic policy would be a serious threat. A further threat is posed by the possible future creation of genetically manipulated humans without a will of their own, with the aim of stopping resistance against exploitation and domination.

13.6. Summary and Conclusion

Death and mourning are phenomena that suddenly enter into the everyday lives of human beings. A person cannot experience their own death, but they can experience illness and dying. We experience the death of loved ones, friends, and family members as existential experiences. The absurdity and absoluteness of death, and the witnessing of it as an existential phenomenon that leads to mourning, show that death is a decisive human problem. This is why Marxism cannot ignore death, but must, like other philosophies, face up to it.

We can draw a number of significant conclusions:

- Marx views capitalism as the rule of the dead labour of capital over the living labour of human beings. He points out that capitalism carries deadly potentials, which take the shape of crises and the killing of humans by economic, political, and ideological repression. Accordingly, capitalism is a system of death, whereas socialism on the other hand is a system on the side of life.
- Economic, political, and cultural alienation in the form of exploitation, repression, and ideology mean a partial death of one's life world inside a society shaped by domination: they kill the realisation of the positive developmental potential of humans and society.
- Death is at the same time ultimate alienation, but as an estrangement is also strange to itself, since it escapes sublation and appropriation: the dead person cannot be brought back to life. Death is *endstrangement*, the estrangement of mind, body, experience, consciousness, action, communication, social relations, and community without end. Thomas Nagel does not use the terms estrangement and alienation but yet shows that death robs humans of the opportunities for the practice and realisation of and struggles for the good life.

- Auschwitz has shown that political and ideological mass murder is worse than death, which is already in itself a disaster, an absurdity, and a scandal that causes mourning. Antifascism is therefore a task of socialism. At stake is the categorical imperative to prevent a second Auschwitz.
- The practice and principles of the social, of love, cooperation and solidarity that are the basis of socialism can avoid lonely suffering, lonely illness, lonely dying, and lonely mourning. Socialism as a general community of solidarity, of love, and human sympathy produces happiness for all. This cannot expel death from the world, but it may render its appearance less terrible. Socialism also includes striving for a long, healthy, fulfilled, and happy life for all.
- The labour of mourning is labour in the face of death as *endstrangement*. It can take its course individually or socially, in communication, or in silence. Marxist philosophy suggests not to be silent about death, but to communicate about it with care in order to lift its taboo and to create human solidarity in the engagement with it.
- Commodification does not stop at death, mourning and the communication of mourning, but tries to subsume them under the logic of capital. Examples like virtual cemeteries operating for profit show the immorality and disrespect of the logic of capital, which will not even leave the dead in peace.

Love as a Socialist Weapon

Love cannot conquer death. Nevertheless, it is the most powerful socialist weapon that humans can wield against the destructive forces of death, which include not only physical death, but also class society and fascism.

If man is to be able to love, he must be put in his supreme place. The economic machine must serve him, rather than he serve it. He must be enabled to share experience, to share work, rather than, at best, share in profits. Society must be organized in such a way that man's social, loving nature is not separated from his social existence, but becomes one with it. [...] Indeed, to speak of love is not 'preaching', for the simple reason that it means to speak of the ultimate and real need in every human being. That this need has been obscured does not mean that it does not exist. To analyze the nature of love is to discover its general absence today and to criticize the social conditions which are responsible for this absence. To have faith in the possibility of love as a social and not exceptional-individual phenomenon, is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of man.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Erich Fromm. 1956. *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper & Row. p. 133.

Religions have legitimated and advanced authoritarianism, domination, exploitation, patriarchy, sexual abuse, war, terror, nationalism, and fascism. They thereby have again and again undermined essential elements of their own doctrines, namely the facilitation of love. One has to preserve those elements from religions that advance the struggle for a peaceful society based on love and solidarity. And we have to criticise practices and structures that turn religion into ideology and domination. We need religions of liberation that together with Marxism struggle for ‘overcoming doom, lovelessness and indifference’ and aim at establishing a realm of freedom, in which we ‘can live for each other so as to reap the true riches of being human.’⁷⁰ ‘The call to [...] love [...] is the most serious call for praxis.’⁷¹ Religion can thereby also act ‘as a means for carrying out class struggle.’⁷² In the same way as we do not need just any religion, but liberating religions and theologies of liberation, so we do not need just any socialism, but democratic, humanist socialism. United, liberation theology and humanist socialism can act as ‘passionate protest against the break-up of humanity by existing society that makes the human being fall victim to ‘self-alienation’⁷³ and can stand up for ‘the wretched of the Earth.’⁷⁴

Marxism and Liberation Theology

The dialogue of Marxism and religion allows the ‘function of theology as critical reflection on praxis,’ as is the case in liberation theology.⁷⁵ Theology thereby becomes a critical theory that aims at advancing the liberation of humankind from oppression and exploitation.⁷⁶ The theologian of liberation is an organic intellectual.⁷⁷ ‘Salvation embraces all persons and the whole person; [...] the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history.’⁷⁸ Liberation theology and Marxism converge in stressing the importance of class struggles to establish love as society’s principle.

⁷⁰ Translation from German: Emil Fuchs. 1955. *Marxismus und Christentum*. Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang. 3. Auflage. p. 165.

⁷¹ Translation from German: *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷² Translation from German: *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁷³ Translation from German: Emil Fuchs. 1958. *Christliche und marxistische Ethik. Erster Teil: Lebenshaltung und Lebensverantwortung des Christen im Zeitalter des werdenden Sozialismus*. Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang. 2. Auflage. p. 127–128.

⁷⁴ Translation from German: *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁷⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez. 1988. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. p. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors. [...] But in the last instance we will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society.⁷⁹

In the penultimate chapter of this book we will consider social struggles. The chapter will discuss questions of political communication with regard to struggles for alternatives.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 174.