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Speculative Fiction and International Law: The Marxism of China Miéville

Carl Freedman

As I have suggested more than once in print, China Miéville is for me the most entertaining, interesting, and intellectually gifted writer of Anglophone speculative fiction to have yet emerged in his generation.[1] Less disputably, he is one of the most popular – in terms not only of the sheer number of his readers but also of the intelligent enthusiasm and intensity of their response (as may be gauged, for instance, by surveying, via a quick Google search, the extensive and unusually serious amateur commentary about his fiction available on the Internet). Yet it seems doubtful that one out of a hundred – or a thousand – admirers of Miéville's fiction has read the entirety of his only full-length scholarly and theoretical work to date, *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (2005). It is not, to be sure, that Miéville's left-wing political viewpoint is itself any secret. In addition to his well-known public roles as a militant of the (British) Socialist Workers Party and as a one-time candidate for Parliament on the Socialist Alliance ticket, Miéville's socialism is clear enough from his fiction: most especially the saga of socialist revolution, *Iron Council* (2004) – Miéville's latest published novel and the concluding third of the Bas-Lag trilogy – but also his earlier novels and most of the works of his short fiction collected in *Looking for Jake* (2005). What has generally gone unnoticed, however, is the extent to which Miéville's perspective is not only socialist and left-wing generally but rigorously and precisely Marxist: and in a way, moreover, that is based more on the works of Marx's full maturity – above all the three volumes of *Capital* – than on Marx's more ambiguously romantic and "humanist" early writings.

1. See my articles "Towards a Marxist Urban Sublime: Reading China Miéville's *King Rat*," *Extrapolation*, Winter 2003, pp. 395–408; and "To the Perdido Street Station: The Representation of Revolution in China Miéville's *Iron Council*," *Extrapolation*, Summer 2005, pp. 235–248. See also my review of Miéville's *Looking for Jake*, forthcoming in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*.

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It is through an understanding of *Between Equal Rights* that (in addition to the considerable intrinsic interest of the book itself) we can most conveniently come to grips with the strictly Marxist problematic that governs the Miéville *oeuvre* as a whole. That the volume has remained unread by most of Miéville's fans is doubtless due to its concentration on a topic of apparently narrow and highly specialized concern – international law – as well as to the intellectual strenuousness of the argument that dominates its (admirably pellucid) prose: not to mention the more mundane fact that it was originally released only in an unusually expensive hardback edition.[2] In the following pages I will offer an analytic account of the theoretical framework that Miéville constructs in *Between Equal Rights*, and then suggest a few of the ways in which this framework is (more tacitly) integral to Miéville's largest achievement to date, the Bas-Lag trilogy.[3]

The explicit organizational structure of *Between Equal Rights* – which originated as a doctoral dissertation – follows the familiar pattern of academic scholarship. Miéville opens by surveying previous work on international law, beginning with approaches furthest from his own – mainly the liberal and conservative theories of the subject that he finds almost completely fatuous – and then moving on to scholarship produced within Critical Legal Studies and within Marxism itself: work that he finds considerably more congenial and substantial but nonetheless flawed in fundamental ways. He then introduces the thought of the great Soviet legal theorist Evgeny Pashukanis, the thinker with whom Miéville most fully associates his own position. Pashukanis's own writings, however, concentrate overwhelmingly on state law, and so it is necessary for Miéville to develop a properly *neo*-Pashukanisite approach in order to arrive at an adequate understanding of international law. Such is the burden of the remainder of the book. In the central theoretical chapter, significantly entitled "Coercion and the Legal Form," the general outline of Miéville's own theory of international law is adumbrated (and Pashukanis himself is subjected to criticism on certain points). In the following chapters, this outline is fleshed out with considerable historical and empirical detail, especially as regards the function of international law in imperialism and war. A polemical concluding chapter, solidly rooted

2. By the time these lines reach print, *Between Equal Rights* should be available in a much cheaper paperback edition from Haymarket Books in the US and Pluto Press in the UK.
3. In addition to *Iron Council* (2004), the sequence set in the imaginary world of Bas-Lag includes *Perdido Street Station* (2000), which begins the trilogy, and *The Scar* (New York: Ballantine, 2002), which continues it.

in the preceding scholarship, is provocatively entitled "*Against* the Rule of Law" (emphasis added).

Co-existing with this straightforward academic organization, however, is the more implicit, more dialectical, and more consequential problematic of *Between Equal Rights*. It is based on a theoretical method that many of us first learned from the poststructuralist historiography of Michel Foucault, though ample precedent can also be found in Marx himself: namely, the method that begins with a focus on some social phenomenon that appears to be of only minor or marginal importance, and that then demonstrates, through a patient untangling of the complex networks of filiations that bind this phenomenon to larger and more prominent aspects of the surrounding social formation, that study of the chosen phenomenon must inevitably engage questions that are generally agreed to be of fundamental importance.

In this way, the first implied claim of *Between Equal Rights* is that international law, though apparently marginal to legal studies generally, is actually crucial to conceptualizing the nature of law itself. For the most obvious difference between state law and international law is the absence, in the latter case, of any coercive regulative apparatus that transcends the individual parties to a legal dispute. How, one might ask, can there be law without a specialized regime of (putatively impartial) law *enforcement*? Faced with this difficulty, one can simply maintain, as many have done, that international law does not exist. For obvious reasons, however, professional scholars of international law (who, according to one of Miéville's sources, are currently publishing about 700 books and 3,000 articles on the subject annually)[4] are disinclined to conclude that their discipline is an illusion or category mistake; and, Miéville argues, they have usually responded to the difficulty by evading it. More specifically, they have tended to understand international law as a set of ethically based rules of international relations that nation-states normally obey: or, at least, in a slightly different version of this approach, rules that nation-states *ought* to obey a good deal more consistently than they actually do. Yet, as Miéville shows, such a response is patently inadequate. For, if international law is held to be a valid category, despite the lack of any international government or police force, then one must be able to specify in what, exactly, its actual character as law properly speaking – rather than merely as a set of descriptive or prescriptive

4. See China Miéville, *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 9n. Further references to this text will be given parenthetically by page number.

norms – consists. In other words, one must be able to theorize the legal *form* itself, quite apart from the regulative apparatuses of law enforcement. Accordingly, the quest to define international law with any real rigor necessarily leads us to define law *simpliciter*.

At this point, though, we might ask whether law itself, national *or* international, is not a relatively marginal concern, at least from any genuinely Marxist standpoint. Marx himself, who was professionally trained in law, seems to suggest, in some of his earlier works, that law is a merely "superstructural" phenomenon, detachable from and strictly secondary to the economic basis of human activity. In the famous "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), he speaks of "the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." He flatly states that it is "not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."[5] In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels specifically denounce what they call the "juridical illusion," namely, the fallacy of seeing law as an unmediated expression of autonomous social will rather than as a phenomenon derivative from economic production and property relations.[6] From this perspective, law appears to be less than crucial to the construction of social reality.

Miéville, however, follows Pashukanis in opposing such unidirectional determinism with the help of the more complex and more genuinely dialectical thought of the later Marx. The fundamental point at issue here is the centrality, for the capitalist mode of production, of *circulation*, to which Marx devotes the whole of Volume Two of *Capital* (1884). Here Marx points out that money-making, rather than the mere creation of commodities, is "the driving motive of capitalist production."[7] Under the capitalist regime of generalized commodity production, money is made – profit is achieved – only on condition that commodities are circulated, i.e. exchanged as units of value within the economic system as a whole. To put the point in the more familiar terminology of Volume One of *Capital* (1867): in order for capitalism to function, surplus-value must be not only created by and extracted from the productive proletariat, but

5. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), pp. 20–21.
6. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. W. Lough (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 81.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume Two, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 137.

also *realized* as well, that is, converted into hard cash. Since realization takes place in the sphere of circulation rather than that of production proper, Miéville is perfectly justified in asserting that "capitalist production is dependent on circulation like no other mode of production in history" (94). We may note that the greatest irony attending any essentialism of production (of the sort that has sometimes been maintained within putatively Marxist interpretations of capitalism) is that such "productivism" comes much closer to the truth of *pre*capitalist systems like slaveholding and feudalism. Only under capitalism does circulation truly come into its own.

This crucial importance of circulation has profound consequences for the status of law under capitalism. For the circulation of commodities according to their true exchange-values – which Marx repeatedly stresses to be prototypical of capitalism, even though not empirically descriptive of every single act of capitalist exchange – necessarily presupposes a certain kind of relation between those who sell commodities and those who buy them. Sellers and buyers must confront one another as "free" economic agents who transact their business on a strictly voluntary basis, and as "equal" participants in the transaction: equal, that is, in the sense that their economic status is determined not by any pre-existing political status or by putatively "natural" qualities of their persons (as is normally the case under feudalism or slaveholding) but solely by the sheer *amount* of exchange-value represented by the commodities they have come to buy or sell. This is the formal freedom of capitalism, which extends, of course, even to the proletariat, who have only that particular commodity known as labor-power to sell. Proletarians are free to decline to sell their labor-power – that is, they are free to decline to participate in the capitalist wage relation – in the sense that they are "free" to choose homelessness and starvation. But the capitalist subject defined by this formal freedom and formal equality is, clearly, nothing other than the free and equal sovereign individual, possessing inalienable rights, assumed by law under capitalism and ideologically enshrined by the legal rhetoric of the American and French Revolutions. The central insight of Pashukanisite legal theory is thus that the modern (capitalist-era) legal form is not only directly dependent upon the commodity form and homologous with it but also – because of the inescapable centrality of circulation, of "free" buying and selling, to the realization of exchange-value – indispensable to it. It is in this way that Miéville can rightly argue for seeing "*the legal form itself* as part of the base" (95; emphasis in original), despite its having been consigned to the superstructure by the young Marx. For, without the modern legal

form of the sovereign individual subject who freely comes to market, capitalist exchange could not take place; and so capitalism itself could not exist.

Accordingly, the legal form under capitalism is always a *coercive* one. Since capitalism forces the worker to sell his or her labor-power on pain of death, the legal form, like the wage relation from which it is inseparable, is *intrinsically* coercive, quite apart from the "fair" or "unfair" administration of the machinery of law enforcement. As Miéville puts it: "[A]s the legal form embodies the concrete content of social relations founded on commodity exchange, ... the legal form will also embed the particular exploitative class relations of capitalist exploitation" (119). In Volume One of *Capital*, Marx notes that capitalist and worker confront one another with formally equal rights and that (in the sentence that gives Miéville his title), "Between equal rights, force decides."[8] In the absence of socialist revolution – which, as Miéville would add, means as long as the legal sanctity of private property on which the capitalist class depends is maintained by the regulative and repressive mechanisms of the bourgeois state – force always favors the capitalist class, who *necessarily* coerce the proletariat to work or starve.

Furthermore – and this is perhaps Miéville's most original point – coercion is just as important in international relations, where no superordinate authority precisely corresponding to the bourgeois state of national law exists. International law is not only genuine law but is, in a sense, law at its purest. For, internationally, the legal form remains based on and essential to the commodity form that governs capitalist exchange: only here the processes of exchange take place between nations rather than within national borders. Coercion remains indispensable, and, in the absence of superordinate international authority, the political apparatuses of coercion are managed by the nation-states themselves, or rather (in practice) by the strongest ones. International law *means* international coercion. International law is thus deeply embedded in imperialism and war, and Miéville can end his book with the provocative conclusion, "The chaotic and bloody world around us *is the rule of law*" (319; emphasis in original).

Thus it is that, by concentrating on the apparently marginal topic of international law, Miéville produces a profound and rigorous demonstration of how violence, intrinsic to the commodity form itself, is

8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 344.

also intrinsic to global capitalist "civilization." Coercion and violence are not mere "abuses," but precisely what capitalism is all about. Such, I maintain, is the intellectual problematic that also governs Miéville's construction of his vast invented world of Bas-Lag, which is depicted throughout his three most important works of fiction to date, *Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar*, and *Iron Council*. If most of Miéville's readers, upon finishing the volumes of the Bas-Lag trilogy, have not immediately turned to the writings of Marx and Pashukanis for elucidation, that is mainly a tribute to Miéville's novelistic skill. In common with the greatest fictional works of political didacticism – the *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and the major plays of Brecht are representative examples – the theoretical content of the Bas-Lag novels is so thoroughly incorporated into the latter's narrative structures that it remains relatively unobtrusive, and may even be missed altogether on a first or second reading. Yet few scholars would deny that some appreciation of Virgil's Roman imperialism, and Dante's politically dissident Thomism, and Swift's reactionary Tory radicalism, and Brecht's revolutionary communism, are important to a critical understanding of their work. The same is true of Miéville's neo-Pashukanisite Marxism. A full explication would require a small volume, and I will offer only a few examples to open the discussion.

The Remade, for instance, constitute one of the most memorable elements in the Bas-Lag sequence, and figure prominently in all three novels. New Crobuzon (the dictatorial capitalist city-state where much of the trilogy is set) maintains "punishment factories," in which those who have fallen afoul of the law, whether through political dissidence or ordinary petty criminality, are sent to be tortured and hideously transformed. Some parts of their bodies may be amputated, while others are grotesquely maimed, and new body parts taken from animals or from machines can be added. Sometimes (in a motif that seems directly borrowed from the punishments in the *Inferno*) the government intends the Remaking to allude, symbolically, to the prisoner's offense: as, for instance, when (in *Perdido Street Station*) one unfortunate arrested for refusing to "talk," that is, for withholding information demanded by the authorities, is deprived of his mouth, the area below his nose being reshaped into a smooth unbroken expanse of skin. On other occasions the point of the Remaking is more utilitarian, and the Remade are fitted so as to function efficiently as slave laborers in some of the most oppressive sectors of the New Crobuzon economy. Most of the population at large regards the Remade with intense disgust and loathing. In the terms familiar to our own earthly

society, the marginalization and stigmatization of the Remade have a distinctly *racial* form. In *Iron Council*, an important narrative and political climax is reached when a large contingent of free, unmutilated workers embrace the Remade who work alongside them in order to make a revolutionary insurrection.

The remarkable force with which the Remade and the process of Remaking are represented derive not only from Miéville's considerable talent for narration and visual description but also from the way that the theme deftly figures some of the social relations inherent to the commodity form. The violence of the wage relation, on which so much of the argument of *Between Equal Rights* depends, is expressed, for the worker, by the transformation – the "remaking," as we might say – of labor into labor-power. In this process, the creative and qualitative capacities of the individual are remade – when the individual is forced by material necessity to become a member of the waged proletariat – into a commodity that functions as a merely quantitative unit of exchange-value within the total circuits of capital. The exercise of the worker's ability to work becomes absolutely subject to the demands of the capitalist employer: and these demands are themselves determined, in the final instance, by the national and global exigencies that govern the production and realization of surplus-value. In a sense, the punishment factories of New Crobuzon (and the use of the term *factories* is surely not inadvertent on Miéville's part) do nothing but to take this process one ghastly and grotesque step further. For the Remade, it is not only their creative potentiality but their physical bodies that are alienated into the commodity form; or, to put the same point in a different way, their bodies are subjected to the dictates of the economic system not only during actual working hours but permanently. The use of the Remade as a slave labor force dispenses with the formal freedom of the capitalist wage relation, and the venerable socialist metaphor of "wage slavery" is literalized.

In addition, the fact that Remaking is a punishment mandated by law may be taken as allegorizing the Pashukanisite link between the commodity form and the legal form. This link seems especially strong if one reflects that the Remaking of its citizens appears to be the "natural" tendency of the political economy of New Crobuzon. There appears to be no reason, apart from problems of technical feasibility, why the process should not eventually be extended to the entire workforce. If, indeed, the entire proletariat of New Crobuzon is ultimately destined to be Remade, that process would merely recapitulate, in the modes of "weird fiction" (Miéville's generic term – borrowed from H. P. Lovecraft – for his own work), the historic

remaking – the conversion of labor into labor-power – that *defines* the actual historic proletariat of earthly capitalism.

Another instance of the way that the conceptual problematic of *Between Equal Rights* functions in the Bas-Lag novels is provided by the expansive portrait of imperialism and international relations offered in *The Scar*. Also at work here is a somewhat more general theoretical pattern, one that forms a key epistemological principle of narrative construction in the Bas-Lag trilogy: namely, the principle that, despite the trilogy's free use of magic (or "thaumaturgy," as it is more often called) – and despite the fact that Bas-Lag, like the typical settings of fantasy but unlike most of the invented worlds of science fiction, is never presented as directly connected in space or time with our own empirical environment – the underlying philosophical assumptions of Miéville's imagining are unswervingly *materialist*, as is typically the case with science fiction, rather than idealist in the manner of conventional (or Tolkienian) fantasy.

The Scar begins as its protagonist, the linguist Bellis Coldwine, is fleeing New Crobuzon because she has good reason to suspect that her past association with a former boyfriend (the scientist Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, the central character of *Perdido Street Station*), who has suddenly become dangerous to the ruling authorities, may well land her in the punishment factories (or worse). She begins a sea voyage to one of the city-state's faraway colonies, but the ship carrying her is soon seized by pirates; and the passengers are forcibly relocated to the pirate city of Armada, a huge floating metropolis made of many captured vessels yoked together. Though the text never sentimentalizes the violence and physical coercion crucial to Armada, it does insist – in what seems a self-conscious echo of much recent scholarship (some of it overtly Marxist) on piracy in the 18th-century Atlantic – that Armada is also marked by a rough egalitarianism and a generally somewhat progressive ethos that contrast favorably with the "legitimate" capitalist society of New Crobuzon. For instance, Remade slave laborers, once captured and taken to Armada, instantly become free and equal citizens; and pirate violence, though sometimes ugly, pales in comparison to the much vaster violence of colonialism. As Bellis's acquaintance Carrianne explains to her, justifying the Armadan refusal to allow captured seafarers ever to leave the floating city:

> You know what would happen if they got home and let out the wrong sort of information, and your lot [the New Crobuzon authorities] got hold of Armada? Just ask any of the Remade who made it out of the New Crobuzon slave ships, see how loyal they feel about the Crobuzoner navy. Ask some of those who've been to Nova Esperium [the colony to which Bellis had been traveling] and

> seen what happened to the natives . . . You think *we're* pirates, Bellis? (emphasis in original)[9]

Nonetheless, Bellis remains homesick, despite the dangers that New Crobuzon may hold for her. Hoping for escape from Armada, she forms an uneasy alliance (which at times includes a sexual relation) with another captured Crobuzoner, one Silas Fennec (also known as Simon Fench), who works as some sort of very high-ranking intelligence agent in the pay of the New Crobuzon government. Fennec's intricate and shadowy machinations comprise one of the major narrative strands of the novel (*The Scar*, like its predecessor and successor volumes, is an extensively multi-plotted book), and includes the sort of occult magical quest often prominent in ordinary heroic fantasy. Silas has stolen a small statue created by one of Bas-Lag's many non-human races, and this artifact – which encloses a thin strip of flesh, evidently the fin of some ancestral magus – gives Silas remarkable (and lethal) supernormal powers, enabling him even to bend the fabric of space and time. The fin, whose full potential can only be guessed at, appears, at one point, to be the prime objective of all Silas's schemes and the means by which a major new power grab may be achieved by the New Crobuzon authorities who employ him. Such is the explanation suggested to Bellis by the Armadan warrior Uther Doul, whose character represents the generic tendency of heroic fantasy more emphatically than does any other element of *The Scar*; and she finds it persuasive. "This is the cause of it all" (501), Bellis thinks of the magus fin less than 150 pages from the end of a novel that extends well beyond 600 pages.

Yet the truth turns out to be more complex and more materialist. Indeed, it turns out that Silas's "secret" has really been hidden in plain view all along. At the beginning of Silas's association with Bellis, he represents himself as being in trade, and insists on the supreme importance of mercantile relations: "There's no such thing as exploration or science – there's only trade" (131), he says. This is, in fact, the real clue to his vastly complex scheming. His main object all along is to conduct a "feasibility study" (as Bellis puts it when she finally grasps the whole truth) that will enable New Crobuzon to seize a decisive commercial and military advantage from the grindylow, the powerful race from whom Silas stole the magic statue. And the statue itself is revealed to be of distinctly

9. China Miéville, *The Scar*, pp. 219–220. Further references to this text will be given parenthetically by page number.

secondary importance. As Bellis says: "The statue was just a trinket, wasn't it" (576) – it was not, that is, an object of truly fundamental importance like the ring in Tolkien's idealist (and much weaker) version of fantastic fiction. But the point here is not only the materialist precedence of the mercantile over the magical. The emphasis that the novel, towards its end, places on Crobuzoner force and fraud in the imperialist global politics of Bas-Lag also underscores the comparison and contrast maintained throughout *The Scar* between New Crobuzon and Armada itself. The violence of piracy – embodied above all by Uther Doul, who serves as the chief enforcer for the rulers of Armada – is to be seen as not only relatively limited but also as reactive and in most respects essentially defensive, as compared to the immensely greater violence of the "legitimate" – the lawful – capitalist imperialism of New Crobuzon and its chief rivals. What Miéville says of our own world at the end of *Between Equal Rights* is no less true of Bas-Lag: the international rule of law, from which Armada is an outlaw nation, is part and parcel of the unimaginably vast chaos and bloodshed of imperialist exploitation and war. The "rogue" city-state Armada, though far from a perfect society, possesses a good deal of genuine utopian value when compared to the lawful and sanguinary empires that surround the floating pirate realm.

A further and rather different – and more ontological – way that *The Scar* exhibits the overall Marxist problematic of the Bas-Lag novels is suggested through the invented science of "possibility mining." As explained to Bellis by Uther Doul, possibility mining is based on the metaphysical assumption that any actual event is but one out of trillions of potential events that *might* have taken place in the same circumstances; and possibility mining is a technique that enables one to actualize some of these hypothetical events that would otherwise have remained mere ghostly possibilities. Doul, who is a master of all the ordinary martial arts and fighting techniques, also possesses an extraordinary military resource in his Possible Sword, which, by means of possibility mining, is capable of landing numerous blows simultaneously – that is, the sword partially dispenses with the necessity of choosing one blow out of all possible blows at any given moment. In practical terms, it seems to stand to an ordinary sword as wielded by even the most skilled swordsman almost as a machine gun stands to a rifle. In this martial application, possibility mining is, generically speaking, a science-fictional inflection of the kind of heroic fantasy represented by Doul; and Doul's Possible Sword helps to guarantee his standing as the supreme warrior.

The reader who has come to *The Scar* after *Perdido Street Station* may well find possibility mining somewhat reminiscent of "crisis energy" in the earlier book. Crisis energy is the chief object of Isaac's scientific research – immensely complex research that includes elements of thaumaturgy and of theoretical physics – and the theory of crisis energy is based on a certain ontological instability at the very heart of reality. Properly tapped, this instability is capable of generating enormous kinetic energy; at one point Isaac even proposes that, through the right sort of feedback loop, the crisis field could provide perpetual, unlimited energy. Much of the plot of *Perdido Street Station* concerns the monstrous "slake-moths" that terrorize the citizens of New Crobuzon. Huge flying creatures that feed on the sentience of human (and other intelligent) minds, the moths do not physically destroy their victims but leave them literally mindless, as though ultra-lobotomized. At the end of the novel, it is by harnessing the almost unimaginably huge resources of crisis energy that Isaac, assisted by a small band of followers, succeeds in defeating and destroying the slake-moths.

But Bellis – loyal, in her own way, to her ex-lover Isaac – sees possibility mining not as similar to crisis energy but, on the contrary, as its opposite, as "the radical undermining of crisis theory" (438). Clearly serving, in this key passage, as Miéville's spokeswoman within the text, Bellis sees possibility mining as based on "nothing but a vague, pluralist reality" (438); and she dislikes the notion intensely. The point here is that the theory of crisis energy presupposes the ontological priority of the indispensable Marxist category of *contradiction*, i.e. of "the tendency," in Bellis's own words, "of the real to become what it was not" (438). Isaac's research, in other words, shows the inner reality of matter and energy to be dialectically structured, in a way that echoes some of the later speculations of Georg Lukács and, behind Lukács, the (now relatively unfashionable) "dialectics of nature" first proposed by Engels. Only Isaac's dialectical perspective enables the tapping of crisis energy necessary to destroy the slake-moths – who, not accidentally, amount, on one level of *Perdido Street Station*, to an allegory of capital.[10] In this way, Isaac's triumph obliquely allegorizes nothing less than the overthrow of capitalism, i.e. nothing less than socialist revolution itself. By contrast, possibility mining – in which "what *was* and what was *not* were allowed to co-exist" (438), rather than clashing in dialectical tension – must

10. For a good account of this instance of Miéville's Marxism, see Steve Shaviro, "Capitalist Monsters," *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2002, pp. 281–290.

logically presuppose a mere vague pluralism, as Bellis sees; and, again not by accident, possibility mining in *The Scar* generates no collective triumph like the defeat of the slake-moths but (in a consequence of the individualism at the heart of all pluralism) only the individual martial prowess of Uther Doul. Of course, Doul remains an impressive character and possibility mining an intriguing concept. But Bellis's preference for crisis theory and crisis energy nicely figures the dialectical Marxist ontology of contradiction that supports Miéville's imaginings.

The defeat of the slake-moths through the harnessing of crisis energy is not, of course, the largest or most overt consideration of socialist revolution in the Bas-Lag sequence. In conclusion, we may glance, very briefly, at the full-scale representation of revolution in *Iron Council*.

Between Equal Rights, like the three volumes of Marx's *Capital* that form its main theoretical infrastructure, does not, in fact, deal in any very explicit way with revolution. But the Marxist theory of revolution is logically grounded in the analysis of capitalism invented by Marx and developed by Pashukanis and Miéville, among so many others. The main point here is the centrality, for Marxism, of *exploitation* as an economic category. Any individual can be subjectively opposed to capitalism, for any number of personal, ethical, aesthetic, or other reasons; and a particular capitalist society may well oppress and discriminate against certain groups of individuals on non-class grounds (ethnicity, for instance). But the only group that must possess a permanent interest in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism as such is the class that is exploited (that is, the group of people who are denied the full fruits of their labor) by the fundamental economic mechanism of all capitalism whatever (that is, the extraction of surplus-value). This group is of course the proletariat, which Marx identifies as the privileged agent of revolutionary change. But the point has often been misunderstood. For Marx, there is no intrinsic virtue in being a proletarian, nor is the suffering caused by capitalist exploitation necessarily worse, in the terms of lived experience, than non-class forms of oppression. The privileging of the proletariat simply reflects the fact that, in the long run, there can never be any basic common interest between those who are deprived of what they create and those who do the depriving: between, that is, workers and capitalists, between those who produce surplus-value and those who expropriate surplus-value. Despite "false consciousness" and despite the tactical compromises that may prove feasible in the immediate term, the proletariat is ultimately and objectively opposed to capitalism in all its guises,

opposed, so to speak, *by definition*: and hence its unique potential for socialist revolution.

Such is the theory – grounded in *Capital* though not explicitly formulated there – that is presupposed in *Iron Council*. At the same time, Miéville's portrait of revolutionary socialist action makes clear that the Marxist analysis of capitalism requires us to understand the proletariat more broadly, in sociological terms, than has always been the case in the political history of Marxism. The principal example here is the formation of the revolutionary railroad workers' collective that gives the novel its title. The Iron Council comes into being as a result of the visionary capitalist project – undertaken by the Transcontinental Railroad Trust (TRT), a wealthy firm based in New Crobuzon – of building a railway across an immense wilderness area of Bas-Lag. As conditions on the project become increasingly unbearable, the workers seize control and continue building. They defeat the bosses and the bosses' enforcers, and work now only for themselves, managing the "perpetual train" as a moving revolutionary space of democratic decision-making. But the Iron Council is composed of three originally distinct proletarian fractions, and of these the one that corresponds to the most traditional popular image of the proletariat – formally free male workers – is in fact the most initially *conservative*. They at first oppose the insurrection and join it only after a significant degree of persuasion. The more immediately radical fractions are the contingent of Remade slave laborers and the female sex workers. The latter actually inaugurate the revolt when they refuse to extend credit to their customers, free male workers whose own wages are being withheld by the TRT. The women strike on the slogan *No pay no lay*. The Remade join the strike at once, and, when the free male workers join too – after a brief period during which their long-term political judgment is clouded by short-term sexual frustration – the women's slogan comes to refer not only to sexual coupling but also to the laying of railroad track. With this proletarian unity, the Iron Council triumphs.

But are the Remade and the prostitutes truly proletarian? It might be objected that, strictly speaking, the former are slaves, not workers, and the latter are very small-scale entrepreneurs who take money for services rendered. This objection, however, far from being pristinely Marxist as it might seem, is actually based on an empiricist confusion alien to any genuinely Marxist perspective. For Marx – as for those, like Pashukanis and Miéville, who have truly worked in the tradition of *Capital* – the details of any specific situation are fully meaningful only as understood within their total social context; so that, in a capitalist society, no act of labor can be understood apart from its

function within the capitalist mode of production as a whole. In this perspective, the Remade, though not formally free like the prototypical worker under capitalism, are nonetheless (like black slaves in the antebellum American South and unlike slaves in ancient Greece or Rome) producing exchange-value within a national and global capitalist market. Likewise, the sex workers (who enjoy a typically working-class level of material consumption) contribute services indispensable to the efficient functioning of the free male labor employed by the TRT – and in that somewhat indirect sense also produce exchange-value. The sex drive being what it is, the laying of railroad workers is not really separable from the laying of railroad track. All three class fractions are thus required for the production of surplus-value, though in different ways, and hence all are proletarian in the fundamental Marxist sense. Once again, the Bas-Lag novels are as deeply Marxist as *Between Equal Rights*.

The foregoing analysis cannot possibly convey the extraordinarily powerful impression of verisimilitude that Miéville's trilogy conveys – the way, that is, that the "thick" descriptions of Bas-Lag render it a fully achieved fictional world unto itself – and, correlatively, the way that the Marxist presuppositions of the novels are organically (and hence unobtrusively) incorporated into the more foregrounded textual realities of setting, plot, and character. By disentangling and making explicit the trilogy's Marxist theoretical problematic, I have, however, been concerned not only to contribute to a more adequate reading of Miéville's fiction but also to suggest the continuing vitality of Marxist theoretical practice in general.[11] Today this vitality is to be found most prominently, perhaps, in economics, in political analysis, and in literary and cultural studies. But China Miéville – though not he alone – proves that the three volumes of *Capital* also continue to inspire writers of first-rate imaginative literature, as surely as the philosophical works of Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas did in earlier eras.

11. This is a theme I have pursued at some length in *The Incomplete Projects: Marxism, Modernity, and the Politics of Culture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2002), especially pp. 3–41.