

**Playing against Alienation:
The Politically Transformative Quality of Huizinga's Play**

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Abstract

Taking an interest in the political influence of play, which I take to be a catalyst and resistant dimension of experience, and investigating the orientation of the political models to which it is drawn unveiled an affinity between the visions flourishing in play and a Marxist model of emancipation from alienation. From here, I put play to a test of political significance: taking up Huizinga's notion of its occurrence outside ordinary life, I argue that play, through a certain cultivation of individual and collective qualities crucial in anticapitalistic consciousness, can amount not to a numbing trick of compliance with the dominant order, nor to merely a liberating-feeling but politically neutral distraction, but to an experience of both prefiguration and resistance that is politically transformative, precisely in a Marxist sense of liberation from alienation and capitalist class exploitation.

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Introduction

I argue that play is that social laboratory. When we play with others, we create and administer a publicly acknowledged reality. Most of us know that this world we are building is only a momentary, fictive affair which nonparticipants are free to criticize or disregard. Still, we earnestly define our play occasion, establish its rules, assign roles to ourselves and others, and defend its boundaries against intruders. (Henricks 2015, 162-163)

The nexus between play and Marxist politics is not one that is explicitly addressed in the foundational introduction of a philosophical account of play of Huizinga nor in the subsequent contributions of his successors and play theorists.¹ Traditions in psychology, anthropology, and especially sociology take an interest in play, games, and leisure, researching influences of socioeconomic condition on play, types of entertainment across classes, and leisure as historically a privilege of a certain class, but the paradigm of the social sciences in which they are situated keeps the research from taking a step back from the empirical and being openly conceptual, observing play beyond its applications in the world.² Goldstraw observes the Marxist influence on both those that advocated for an end to work and those who unmasked the alienation and corruption of leisure by capitalist society, “Yet few have attempted to deduce a conception of leisure in Marx’s writings. This is curious given Marx’s towering influence over the philosophy of work – leisure’s natural opposite.” (Goldstraw 2024, 326). This connection between play and class struggle and alienation *is* a legitimate and relevant one to be drawn: the philosophy of play examines socio-politically fertile ideas such as social competition, creation of rules and roles, possibility and privilege of play, escape from the ordinary and the status quo; and observes social traits essential to uncover to explore non-exploitative societal models; such as control, ownership, entitlement, relationship with risk-taking, tolerance for loss, escapism, freedom, creativity, and rigidity. As I will demonstrate in my analysis of his writings, Marx himself offers a connection with play in the description of his ‘realm of freedom’, suggests something that I conceptualize as playfulness to be taken away, by capitalist

¹ The major philosophical literature on play includes theories on the implications and roles of play on conceptions of culture (Huizinga), aesthetics (Kant, Schiller), role of man, rule-following, maturity (Nietzsche), world-creation (Wittgenstein, Derrida), ontology (Gadamer, Fink), and more. These theories land on perfectly visualizable, practical, embodied grounds, but not exactly nor explicitly on that specifically of political emancipation.

² “Most of them only deal incidentally with the question of what play is in itself and what it means for the player. They attack play direct with the quantitative methods of experimental science without first paying attention to its profoundly aesthetic quality.” (Huizinga 1949, 2).

exploitation, from individuals to realize their ‘species-being’, and takes play to be a positive model for the societal values of non-exploitation that it illustrates.

The Marxism and Marxist strands that I refer to are to be intended in key terms. What my connections point to are the core worries and stances based on Marx’s materialist and dialectical approach to theory most generally shared among Marxist thinkers, from philosophers to sociologists and cultural theorists who apply Marx’s economic concepts to the study of culture, to diagnose the corruption and misappropriation of expressive culture (play: art, sports, religion, celebrations, etc.) in capitalist societies. I clarify these core worries and stances that characterize the Marxist framework I point at to be: material conditions as the driver of society and history; class relations as the key and most burdening, and problematic in nature, social relation; the commodification and suppression of the potential of expression and self-realization of man, of authentic individuality, and of creative culture; alienation; the struggle and exploitation of the many (the proletariat) by the bourgeois owners of the means of production; the critique of the system and mode of production of capitalism to liberate modern man from oppression.

The question driving my research is: in what ways can play be conceptualized in a Marxist framework as a paradigm and praxis of emancipatory resistance to capitalist alienation and exploitation? I argue that play holds a potential of political mobilization, and that this political imprint is a Marxist one of liberation from (class) exploitation and alienation through four closely related chapters that follow a continuous line and keep referring back to each other. In chapter 1, I introduce Huizinga’s account of play and outline its potential of reevaluation of the political status quo and creation of non-exploitative sociopolitical realities. In chapter 2, I examine the alienation and displacement of the genuine play spirit as theorized by Huizinga in the capitalist and neoliberal landscape. In chapter 3, I argue that play, with its inherent anticapitalistic character, functions as a social and political laboratory in which visions for revolution are suggested and inspired. In chapter 4, I analyze carnival and the Latin American cases of capoeira and Calypso as applications of my theory and examples of class revolution carried out through play – this is the comparative and intercultural component reflecting the Global and Comparative Perspectives specialization of my Philosophy Bachelor’s degree.

Chapter 1 Huizinga's play: a transformative political seedbed

It was the fashion to liken the world to a stage on which every man plays his part. Does this mean that the play-element in civilization was openly acknowledged? Not at all. (Huizinga 1949, 2)

[A] further curious feature of play: it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. (Huizinga 1949, 9-10)

Johan Huizinga publishes in 1938 the first edition of the foundational work on the philosophy of play *Homo Ludens, A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, where he presents play as “a quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life” (1949, 4). Play is a rich and fundamental dimension of existence and paradigm, but an aspect of it that can be doubted, and that stays in its explicitness rather unexplored philosophically (sociologically, less), is its political arching. Offering access outside the ordinary could at first glance be marked down as sedating, distracting from the urgency of activity and presence in political life, possibly thus reinforcing the political status quo – I take play as I conceptualize it, based on Huizinga's notion, to produce precisely the opposite impact. Defending the quality of transformation of the world that play can have from doubts driven by its situatedness in extraordinariness is not a task I need be wholly responsible for, as Huizinga already proceeds to it in the first chapter of *Homo Ludens*: he states that “with the end of the play its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community until the sacred play-season comes round again” (14). I read this ‘radiance’ as play's imaginative, creative potential to disrupt the alienating structures of the capitalist order, and inspire visions of a more emancipated, fulfilled, and playful, society.

The player, immersed in the extra-ordinary dimension of play, has a chance to realize the oppression and to wish the liberation from the very (neo)liberal chains that Marx famously called proletarians from all countries to unite against, because, after all, “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count” (12). The dimension of play is one that combines “strict rules with genuine freedom” (22): the strict rules, as well as oppression and exploitation, are what the alienated proletariat is confined to, and the ruling class, owner of the means of production, is on the other hand in a position of unrestricted freedom. The balance and interplay of constraint and idleness that

characterized play is thrown off and play itself is hindered and stifled into a corrupted, ingenuine, alienated counterfeit.

Huizinga declares as early as in page 4 of *Homo Ludens* that “The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start”: play influences and shapes the the institutions that establish the values and norms that govern society. Play, in its strengthening of the connection to the community and the reaffirmation of values in ritual, is cultural creation as well as foundation for political consciousness: “Primitive society performs its sacred rites, its sacrifices, consecrations and mysteries, *all of which serve to guarantee the well-being of the world*, in a spirit of pure play truly understood.” (5, emphasis mine). The fact that, culturally, play is a necessity, does not detract from its disinterested character: “for the purposes it serves are external to immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs” – play is disinterested, unnecessary and non-urgent, but its expression satisfies communal ideals.

Marcuse gives an account of art that closely echoes play: “The ‘high culture’ [...] has its own rites and its own style. The salon, the concert, the opera, theater are designed to create and invoke another dimension of reality. Their attendance requires festive-like preparation; they cut off and transcend everyday experience.” (Marcuse 1964, 63).³ Play, while taking place outside ordinary life, does not lose its engagement with it and with the “well-being of the world”, and does not signify an escape from reality, but a way of engaging with it differently, through a new, creative spirit: citing Marcuse again, “Separated from the sphere of labor where society reproduces itself and its misery, the world of art which they create remains, with all its truth, a privilege and an illusion.” (63). The separation from the world of needs (compatible with the distinction of freedom and necessity outlined by Marx in volume 3 of *Capital*) is precisely what allows play to be an experience of mature insight of contradictions of the systems in place and to hence inspire wishes for alternative realities. Hinman, in his paper “Marx’s Theory of Play, Leisure, and Unalienated Praxis”, writes: “Leisure, although free, is trivial precisely because it is set aside from the everyday world and not intended to transform it” (Hinman 1978, 200). This interpretation, to me, makes a fallacious jump in disregarding the value and impact of the dimension of non-necessity. In the

³ Marcuse is not the only one describing art in a way that echoes describing play: this play-aesthetics nexus is also notably and explicitly drawn by Schiller (letters 14, 15, 16 and 26 in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*), Kant (*Critique of Judgement*), Gadamer (“Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation” in *Truth and Method*).

paper, Hinman advocated for a redesign of work to be more play-like for its nonalienation, implying that play is basically only useful, beneficial, and non-trivial upon the transposition of its characteristics on work, realizing what he calls “unalienated praxis”: “whereas play introduces alternative roles which are separated from the everyday world and in principle not transformations of it, unalienated praxis transforms that everyday reality, giving a concrete foundation to our many-sidedness” (206). Hinman, unlike me, does not formulate a Marxist theory of play that is aligned with Huizinga’s conception of play: the disinterestedness of play cannot be accepted for the project of collapse of the realm of work and play that he is carrying out, in which, to him, the temporary suspension of needs need not be a condition for the possibility to start playing.

What I take up to defend the political significance of play from are, especially, certain Marxist theories such as the above cited Hinman and those of a kind that reduce play to entertainment or gamification and deem it not transformative but escapist – I will not counter those with a liberalist rebuttal but with an alternative Marxist interpretation of my own, which is compatible with Huizinga’s account of play and vitally distinguishes genuine play from false, alienated play. Play is as free and resistant as it is bound to commodification without material autonomy: even Huizinga’s magic circle can, under capitalism, dry up into a mere simulation of freedom.

Chapter 2 Play under capitalism: alienation and compliance

What carnivals remain in most parts of the world have themselves become spectacles – specialist performances watched by spectators – with police lines and barriers placed between the parade and audience. Thus the vortexed, whirling, uncontrollable state of creative chaos is shoe-horned into neat straight lines and rectangles. A visit to many contemporary carnivals sanctioned by the state [...], where consumption and corporate sponsorship has taken over from the creativity and spontaneity is enough to illustrate how carnival under capitalism has lost its vitality. But carnival has been with us since time immemorial and it has always refused to die. Reappearing in different guises across the ages it returns again and again. Freed from the clutches of entertainment, the anticapitalist movements have thrown it back into the streets, where it is liberated from commerce for everyone to enjoy once again. (Notes from Nowhere 2003, 177)

In the current material reality of late capitalism, play is fatally used, transfigured, and corrupted. The vibrancy and capacity for man to play is, I claim, inversely proportional to his alienation and exploitation as described by Marx. It is through several practices and intrinsic structural dynamics that the capitalist

socioeconomical order corrupts play: it commodifies it into a tool of productive optimization of the body and mind that makes for better workers (Poteko, Huizinga), it twists it into an ideological distraction that annihilates its creative spirit and ensures compliance (Adorno and Horkheimer,⁴ Žižek,⁵ Marcuse), and it alienates it into a passive activity that has no quality of cultural formation or value but is a “sterile” bare relief from the very oppressive system that thus stifles it, creating a false replica of it that, emptied of critical action and resistance, does not threaten the status quo (Debord,⁶ Hinman).

A feature of the landscapes of play and of capitalism I immediately wish to highlight is that I need not deny or overcome Huizinga’s suggestion that everything is play and everything can be explained as play, even if “It is ancient wisdom, but it is also a little cheap, to call all human activity ‘play’.” (Huizinga 1949, foreword). My thesis stands with Huizinga and with Axelos (2023), in visualizing both capitalism and Marxist revolution, or communism (although the stage of “resolution” is not one I precisely focus on, as formulating my own account of a playful post-capitalist political organization would be outside the scope of this thesis), as kinds, moves, and stages of games, rather than as non-play or winning of the game. I, again, have the possibility of staying close to Huizinga in clarifying this: “Civilization today is no longer played, and even where it seems to play it is false play.” (Huizinga 1949, 206). In the last chapter of *Homo Ludens*, he examines the state of the play-element in contemporary society, stating that the *genuine*, culture-creating, play quality that he theorizes about and that is core to my thesis has much been lost or has disappeared where it had once been vivid, due to “increasing systematization and regimentation” (197), a “tendency to over-seriousness” (199), “technical organization and scientific thoroughness”, and “mechanization, advertising, sensation-mongering” (202): “The old play-factor has undergone almost complete atrophy” (198). Huizinga conceptualizes this corruption or stifling of play as *false play* as opposed to *genuine play*, or as “a quality that has something in common with play and yields the illusion of a strongly developed play-factor” (205), or as “plays the play-concept [...] false” (210). Additionally, I take up the conception of class in the capitalist system as

⁴ Based on an interpretation of aesthetics and culture as play (Adorno and Horkheimer 2020).

⁵ Again, linked to play on the basis of its exemplification in creative activity and artistic production, Žižek (1989) gives a polemically sharp account of the coercive capitalist ideological conditioning.

⁶ In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (2024) denounces the capitalist pre-mediation of human creativity and opposition through consumer logic: what once was spontaneous or transgressive is made now part of the cultural landscape and sold back to us as neutralized entertainment.

an *antagonistic* relation – said antagonism does not qualify for play as it is, let alone for genuine play, but it presents a variation within the realm of play, a sort of false move, to it which I care not to overlook. A question I am aware of and attentive to ask myself as I conduct this research is: if all human activity is play, how do we fall into the false, alienated game of capitalism? What corrupts the rule-bound *agon* of play into *antagonism*? I come to think of instances such as wage labor, surplus extraction and competition for profit as a game of which rules, no longer voluntarily negotiable for the proletariat, are rigged, and thus turn into unregulated conflicts where one side dominates, with no trace of the ancient Greek civic unity and community strengthening. I take that social and economic Marxist revolution can resume the suspended game.

As Marx outlines in his *1844 Manuscripts*, alienation extends itself to and contaminates *leisure*⁷. Leisure signifies for the oppressed, alienated laborer, not edification and creation, but escape (from work). Leisure in the capitalist system is at its most precious when it's characterized by inactivity, recharging, and passive relaxation, as opposed to creative action, “for activity under alienated labour is not self-expression but self-denial” (Horowitz, n.d.). The *quantity* of leisure time is affected by capitalist labor, requiring surplus time and negating the human meaning of leisure through a denial of its intrinsic value – yet that, the quantity of time off allocated, has progressively improved, naturally, just enough to smooth off the most overtly and visibly exploitative edges and tame revolutionary urges. It is also the *content* of leisure that gets shaped by alienation and alienated, “by encouraging possessiveness, conspicuous consumption, the values of the marketplace such as competitiveness, and an illusory escape from the alienation of work” (Hinman 1978, 197). One of the alienating effects of capitalist neoliberal society is that what was or could once be a source of joyful and pleasurable play is constructed and constrained to an activity that ends up being conceptualized and taken up the way work is. Under capitalism, there is no place for non-profit-oriented ‘disinterestedness’ nor for spontaneity which does not grant yielding a certain advantageous result. There is therefore no place for play: “Ever since Eros became separated from Logos [...], history has been dominated by the economic principle. This principle reduces other bodies to instruments of accumulation instead of partners in pleasure.” (Berardi 2021, 122).

⁷ As I interpret it, leisure is not inherently play, but the space where play can occur: the cut-out from ordinariness or the realm of necessity that is fertile for play and can thus either welcome it or eliminate the chance of it.

Poteko, in her “Reflections on Modern Physical Activity”, analyzes the state that sports have fallen into in contemporary society, citing Greif’s provocation that “Modern exercise makes you acknowledge the machine operating inside yourself. Nothing can make you believe we harbor nostalgia for factory work more than a modern gym.” (Greif 2017, quoted in Poteko 2025, 105). The neoliberal capitalist order produces the least playful individual there could be: the *homo economicus*, whose decisions and actions are guided by the calculation of costs and benefits. Poteko ascribes to the Huizingan account of play as an end in itself that exists and is cultivated for the intrinsic pleasure it brings, aside of rational or moral justification.⁸ Graeber, whom she cites in the article, argues of play as the purest expression of freedom, “based on the creation of imaginary worlds and is a continuation of the so-called ‘pleasure at being the cause’” (Graeber 2018, quoted in Poteko 2025, 115). Huizinga states that “the play-function is especially operative where mind and hand move most freely” (Huizinga 1949, 201): this condition is far from the one of the alienated individual, for whom pleasure, leisure, and play time is, as mentioned, not only reduced in quantity, but in content and in spirit – the playful imagination is suppressed.

Are we under the impression that play is well alive under capitalism? That is because, as Marcuse remarks in *One-Dimensional Man* under his concept of “repressive desublimation”, capitalism no longer simply represses desire, but releases it in controlled, commodified forms that are not only no longer threatening to it but instead reinforce its system.⁹ Playful or erotic energies are not wholly *suppressed* – in late capitalism, we have more free – they are *redirected* into consumer goods, passive entertainment, relieving release valves that enable putting up with oppression. The emancipatory and transgressive potential becomes a market niche. Genuine, non-commodified play cannot flourish under capitalism because it inherently poses a threat to it, for its fundamental features of creation, overturning of hierarchy, and resistance to exploitation. Play stays, albeit less meaningfully, and albeit more in a sense of distraction than of creation, sufficiently pleasurable – but politically impotent and even compliant.

⁸ “Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here.” (Huizinga 1949, 6).

⁹ “This liquidation of two-dimensional culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the ‘cultural values’, but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale.” (Marcuse 1964)

Leisure and play activities can be transformed into consumer activity by the fetishization of gadgets and equipment that heightens the desire for possession satisfaction. The system of private property restructures people's senses, Marx argues in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is ours only if we have it, if it exists for us as a capital or is immediately possessed by us, eaten, drunk, worn, lived in, etc., in short, used; but private property grasps all these immediate forms of possession only as means of living, and the life they serve is the life of private property, labor, and capitalization. Hence all the physical and spiritual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of them all, the sense of having. (Marx 1994, 74)

In the commodity-based society, the value of private property turns the game of play into a game of having, one ideologically prescribed by capitalist accumulation interest, not developing out of a genuine need, or desire, or, let alone, pleasure – it's not a game of which value is given by its intrinsic non-profitable, purposeless, purpose. The right to play genuinely is then not only an escape from the alienation of this exploitative system, but a disruptive brake from supporting it, too. Playfulness, autonomous and self-created, should not have any necessary link with consumption, productivity to improve labor time, or production of surplus value – it should instead, to retain its social and political strength, oppose itself to labor time and defend its quality of freedom and possibility of a new social empowerment – as outlined by the Marxist theory of Pierre Naville (1957, cited in Bortoletto 2006, 11).

Corrupted, alienated leisure and play can just well reinforce the alienation already found in work, or in the rhythm of everyday life: “Leisure activities extend and reinforce more general patterns of alienation already present in society, especially those found in the work situation” (Hinman 1978, 198). It can be that “Numerous studies have indicated that the leisure activities of workers often correlate with their work activities – e.g., boring and unimaginative leisure is often found among those whose work has the same characteristics”, as Hinman finds, but that is not the only version of alienation from leisure and play. I find that there well is a resort to extravagant, quirky, hyper-extraordinary pastimes, which not genuinely playfully, but, rather, hopelessly, neutralize chances of revolution. The freedom and self-expression of this false player is oppressed in their ordinary life, visibly (or *more* visibly), and this oppression is extinguished in an outlet that allows her to keep bearing this order and her state, invisibly to her, delighted about the infamous false playfulness she is tricked of. She may think to be free to be as creative, meaning-making, and human as she can be – taking a state of being she deserves at no cost, not

after work, and not as a reward, as a prize, keeping her satisfied and compliantly hooked on the chains that take from her what she does not know she has full time ownership to.

Neoliberal capitalist politics operate a suppression of the play character, both as an inevitable result of the material conditions of exploitation and alienation that its individuals are under, and as a deliberate means to protect its status quo from the associative, rebellious resistance against its structures that play inspires and supports – as declared in the quote by members of the anti-capitalist collective *Notes From Nowhere* that I opened this chapter with. The hope of redeemability of the play-character, even under capitalism, is further sustained by Notes from Nowhere on the same page, paving the way for the analysis of the potential of Marxist resistance contained in play that I carry out below:

Passivity disappears when carnival comes to town, with its unyielding demand for participation...It is a moment when we can break free from the alienation that capitalism enforces in so many ways...Carnival denies the existence of experts, or rather, insists that everyone is one...it demands interaction and flexibility, face-to-face contact and collective decision-making, so that a dynamic and direct democracy develops – a democracy which takes place on the stage of spontaneity unfolding life, not raised above the audience but at ground level, where everyone can be involved. (Notes from Nowhere, 2003, 177-178).

In the next chapter, I analyze the prefigurative potential of play, suppressed to prevent inspiration of revolutionary ideals, resulting in the distortion and corruption of play I just described. Capitalist structures co-opt play and undermine its very sustenance, but, when it does emerge back, the revolutionary player can weaponize it to enact disruptive politics – in chapter 4, I lay out examples of this kind of resistance.

Chapter 3 Play as an emancipatory model: prefiguring non-exploitation

The carnival is a celebration of how good life can be, and at the same time a statement against those who spoil it for the majority. (Carnival for Full Enjoyment, 2005, in Bogad 2010, 540)

The Carnival was to be both a rejection of state authority [...], an affirmation of joy of solidarity and resistance (particularly resistance to the regulation of everyday behavior in increasingly privatized and controlled public space), and an alternative to what was seen as the more staid technic of ‘marching around with placards’. (Bogad 2010, 540)

The Marxist potential of play is twofold: not only is its nature rebellious and resistant but play functions as a laboratory in which what revolution is *for*, not only what it is *against*, can be envisioned. Play’s

inherent structures of voluntary participation, social association, creative tension and disinterested pleasure model and prefigure Marxist ideals of a world post capitalism, non-exploitative, and beyond alienation. If Marx's notion of freedom lies in free engagement with natural necessity, ability to realize our essential powers, and free relations with the rest of humanity, confirming that attacking the possibility of genuine play is an unavoidable feature of the assertion of capitalist power, it might well be that only by resisting and keeping on playing we can get the taste of what the alternative to oppression, what it was that was taken away from us, is. Engaging in play makes us realize that the playful space we are in is not simply *outside* ordinary life, but unnaturally and critically *shielded* from it. Play is the most fundamentally available, closely intrinsic and inseparable to us, state there is within us to tap into to figure an alternative to alienation.

To clarify the Marxist impact and effectiveness of the experience of play, it may be useful to make a distinction between class system and class oppression. The presence of competition, role allocation, and hierarchical setup in playing can vary, and not be a given: we can have egalitarian, supportive, collaboration-based games, providing a feel of a social division that is less individualistic and focused on personal ability, gain, and power – but this is not the only reality that in play the player can in touch with. A powerful alarm to shake off, in a Marxist cultural theory fashion, the pervading, prevailing ideology concealing class oppression could very well be the immersion in a *redistributed* version of hierarchy and class system that differs from the one of the non-play world. The hierarchies and classes established by play differ from those of the non-play world, because the realm of play is not constituted by ruling principles, rules, and ideology, but, through imagination, comes up with its own order: “Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme.” (Huizinga 1949, 10). Play hosting a reenactment of a class system does not result in the reinforcement of class the way it is set up in the non-play capitalist world of material and economic exploitation: a different distribution of power and privilege can, yes, offer a liberation from existing class that is necessarily momentary, but the reimagined experience of the reality of hierarchy stays alive in the permanent vision of the world and critically informs the way everyday class hierarchy, often exploitative and arbitrary, is evaluated: “Withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.” (12). Play is not a subsequent reflection of existing social structures (imitation and reenactment of ordinary life

exists in play, but even more proudly does make-believe, pretense, and reversal of roles), but a source of new ones. The player, in full absorption without “losing consciousness of ordinary reality” (14), explores, for this, as taught by Huizinga, it is in the soil of play that the institutions and practices associated with civilization emerged – Henricks describes the political meaning of this: “When people agree on the terms of their engagement with one another and collectively bring those little worlds into being, they effectively create models for living. [...] Without intending to be, players are agents of change.” (2015, 2).

Marx’s vision of liberation, emancipation, and overcoming alienation points at a society in which individuals can freely, spontaneously, and communally develop their creative and social capacities – there is a switch in Marx from the association of this idea to the achievement of unalienated, liberated labor in his early writings and to the realm of freedom in later work.¹⁰

The realm of freedom really begins only where labor determined by necessity and external expediency ends, it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. [...] But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it...The reduction of the working day is its basic prerequisite. (Marx 1991, 958–59).

The realm of freedom is not to be understood as the only realm of unalienation and possibility of positive self-expression: “The labor will not be a case of human beings being ‘ruled’ by the process which is ‘their interchange with Nature’ (as ‘by... blind forces’), but will consist, instead, of their ‘rationally regulating’ their production through a self-directed, autonomous exercise of their powers in which they achieve ‘common control’ of their interchange with nature, rather than are controlled by it.” (Beehler 1989, 547, quoting *Capital*, vol. 3). The realms of necessity and of freedom are both parts of a free communal society, and both are to be free, echoing the distinction of play from ordinary life. Key to the realm of necessity is that “Nevertheless, socialist labour, though free in the above senses, remains activity that human beings must perform. It is activity they are compelled, out of necessity, to undertake. In that sense, then, it is not freely undertaken, but is done because necessity exacts it of them [...], however much it is now done in a manner and under conditions that are ‘most favourable to and worthy of their nature’” (Beehler 1989, 547). I take this Marxist interpretation to defend the autonomous, self-standing, and self-affirming role of play, which is not to be reduced from a remedy to ordinary life – this is a

¹⁰ The distinction between Marx’s framing of labor in the *1844 Manuscripts* and in *Capital* and *Grundrisse* has been extensively addressed in interpreting Marx’s writings: see Roberts 2018, Beehler 1989, and Kandiyali 2017.

reduction that ignores and erodes its original power. A parallel I wish to draw is hence not between play and socialist labor (“Labor cannot become play”, Marx 1993, 712) but play and the realm of freedom, with a focus on this very distinction of the latter from the realm of necessity in Marx’s later works, *Capital* and *Grundrisse*.

Play’s autotelic structure is anti-capitalist. Huizinga’s ‘magic circle’ (disinterested, end in itself, out of necessity) is a material space like Marx’s ‘realm of freedom’ where new social relations are rehearsed. The unity in play of “strict rules with genuine freedom” (Huizinga), under a voluntary agreement, models a non-coercive social order: the rules of a game are binding, but collectively agreed upon – contrasting capitalist rigidity and its mere myth of freedom, coercive under class inequality and masking exploitation. Relevant to mention is that the type of materialism I take up in my own Marxist stance supports the idea that the emancipated life is, whereby afforded by material conditions, full of transcendence, in the form of playful, creative activity. This is against the more orthodox materialist interpretation (of Hinman, for instance) that transcendence is a utopian illusion, a trick to keep individuals subjected, that there is no unalienated play, that play is another kind of opium for the masses that does not liberate but strengthens the chains.

Chapter 4 Play as disruptive resistance: carnival and aesthetic tension

The ‘carnavalesque’, and its liberating qualities for the ‘lower orders’ of society, includes abuse and laughter, which degrade at the same time that they renew. Grotesque realism exaggerates the material body and the ‘lower bodily stratum’, inverting the hierarchies of elite taste and decorum and the symbols of hierarchy. This is a frenetic, celebratory, and ideologically ambivalent performance mode which breaks down the bodily boundaries of the idealized bourgeois individual, ‘polluting’ and collectivizing the human condition in a joyous, outrageously humorous demonstration that has some potential for rebellion. (Bogad 2010, 541).

Play fuels a creative tension that challenges capitalist realism and is embodied in aesthetic activity and in collective practices such as carnivals and capoeira that, after the unmasking of alienation and the rehearsal of its alternatives, disrupt capitalist ideology by enacting and reclaiming what capitalism takes away from us.

[I]n the current assemblage of modern, liberal societies, acts of resistance must be regarded as a way of life, an ethos, or continuous practice. Opposed to the view of neoliberal governmentality, or post-politics,

as an all-pervasive, inescapable condition of politics today, resistance understood as ethics highlight a subject that acts in spite of its claimed docility. (Ølgaard 2015, 126).

The reactions and actions produced by play, in aesthetic and carnivalesque expressions, align with those that Marxist thinkers set to carry out: “It is this playful, creative impulse [...] which defines subjects ‘as active explorers and negotiators of societal possibility’ (Henricks 2010, 162) rather than docile bodies” (Ølgaard 2015, 128).

The history of carnival in nineteenth-century Trinidad and Tobago is a crucial instance of the picture of play as the working-class subversive catalyst I illustrate. The tradition develops in the – crucial for class, social, and colonial liberation – period of Trinidadian history between emancipation from slavery (not from its residues) in 1838 and the rise of British-style trade unionism around 1937. Carnival signified for the fight for freedom of Trinidadians class struggle and resistance to exploitation for profit. The culture of *capoeira* in Brazil offers what I see as an analogous example of expression of social resistance and opposition to a political system that abandons and exploits the lower class. I find it interesting to note the introduction of the definitions of capoeira provided by Wesolowski in her article “Professionalizing Capoeira: The Politics of Play in Twenty-first-century Brazil”, showing its melting into play in a philosophical notion of decent fit with the Huizingan conceptualization of it: “martial art, dance, play, game, art, self-defense, sport, culture, physical education, corporal expression, resistance, liberation, education, history, identity, energy, health, philosophy, gathering, dialogue, vice, way of life” (Wesolowski 2012, 84). Playfulness expressed itself in the discipline of capoeira as a powerful reaction to counter social injustice – capoeira started and always existed alongside and against social injustice, as the reaction of the enslaved people of newly colonized Brazil. The rebellion of capoeira expresses itself through unruliness and trickery to a system that still does not do justice to the majority: “Malandragem [idleness, trickery] is a response to a highly hierarchical, inegalitarian, and paternalistic society in which getting things accomplished requires working one’s social connections in creative and not always honest ways” (Wesolowski 2012, 86). Around the 1860s-80s, the *jamet/jamette* culture triumphantly entered the Trinidadian carnival (Campbell 1988, 10) – those were the lumpenproletariat of the slums, such as dock workers, laundresses, criminals, prostitutes, and the unemployed youth. By the late 1890s, institutionalization reached the carnival and started to enclose it, neutralize it, and contain it to become

“what it is today – an event which, catering only very little to tourism, functions as a vital form of social control.”

The expression of play in the authentic carnival – and in aesthetic creation – not only indicates the potential of capitalist resistance of play but reveals, in its repression, its threat to the bourgeois order. Genuine play, authentic carnivalesque celebrations,¹¹ and independent, non-commodified artistic creation¹² are so threatening to capitalist domination that the latter must necessarily find ways of neutralizing them and their emancipatory power to retain its status quo. Referencing Kellner (1989), Ølgaard sustains this: “In this aestheticized, postmodern form of action, one does not act in any autonomous sense according to one’s desires, one fashions oneself in accordance with the dominant values of society.” (Ølgaard 2015, 142). The current-day state of carnival has also reached its version sanitized from authentic anticapitalist resistance: “Now, Carnival fosters mass year-long preoccupation with costumes and band organization culminating in an alcohol-soaked extravaganza which shabby nationalism seeks to make its own.” (Campbell 1988, 10). By 1900, social protest moved from carnival to the founding of labor unions and strikes – worth mentioning the November-December 1919 general strike around the Port of Spain waterfront, an event that provoked the newspaper headline ‘Bolshevism extending to Trinidad’ (Campbell 1988, 20) and hosted the return of the hailing chant of calypsonian ‘Chinee’ Patrick Jones:

Class legislation is the order of the land,
We are ruled with the iron hand. (Rohler 1972, 21-22)

The efforts had shifted away from carnival, which had become more regulated and commercialized, but the oppositional energy of the carnivalesque, playful, spirit, shined through, expressing itself in the vehicle of calypso for working-class, black, anti-colonial sentiments.

Play, pretense, humor, and creativity hold a power of *appropriation* of the structures of oppression, to redefine them – Žižek explains this effect through the medium of the *meme*: “the popular,

¹¹ According to Baudrillard’s critique of the postmodern carnival of society, “Rather than an autonomous, real entity, the body in the simulacrum is defined solely by the signs and symbols of society (e.g. beauty), and the Carnival, rather than bodies-in-play displaying their pure desire, is the subjugation to normalization.” (Ølgaard 2015, 142).

¹² “Where, previously, art was characterized by its embedded moral values [...], arguably, the role of art in the era of simulation is that of mere representation and reproduction.” (Ølgaard 2015, 142).

plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing...egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power.” (Žižek 1989, 29). Another key feature of liberal and capitalist oppression is the depoliticization of the subject through her objectification. The capitalist system turns its subject into an object, of governance and control that can execute not her own ends, but those of the system. For this, it’s necessary for representational politics to become depoliticized, and to make deliberative democracy a lengthy bureaucratic organ, to keep it from ‘exploding into politics proper’ (Žižek 2005, 71, quoted in Ølgaard 2015, 123). Freire writes in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that

“It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated. Thus, to supersede their condition as objects by the status of Subjects – the objective of any true revolution – requires that the people act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed.” (Freire 2005)

The political of play has long been highlighted in Latin American studies of class struggle framing the individual through the Marxist focus on her relation to the means of production and material power. Quoting Sicart, “For [Marxist] thinkers like Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire, play is a critical liberating force that can be used to explore the ultimate possibility of human freedom.” (2014, 72). Freire mentions *antidialogics* as instrument of oppression and *dialogics* as instruments of liberation. Believing in playful pedagogy as a rehearsal for democratic and emancipated praxis, he describes the characteristics of dialogical action – or basically, I argue, *ludic* action: cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis (Freire 2005). Freire continues outlining a key feature of the capitalist order and the exploitation that it creates:

Why do the dominant elites not become debilitated when they do not think with the people? Because the latter constitute their antithesis, their very reason for existence. If the elites were to think with the people, the contradiction would be superseded and they could no longer dominate. From the point of view of the dominators in any epoch, correct thinking presupposes the non-thinking of the people. (131)

Bogad taps into theory of Boal, a Brazilian Marxist who founded the methodology and techniques called Theater of the Oppressed, to seemingly provide a response: “...the goals of tactical carnival are: [...] To key an experimental mode in which new ways to play with and around power can be tested. [...] To create a celebratory culture of active defiance, as an alternative to the everyday life experience of many people – in response to a widespread frustration that many participants feel – regarding their official

relegation to the role of consumers of culture and spectacle rather than creators/spectators (Boal 1985).” (Bogad 2012, 144-145).

Conclusion: Playing our way out of class struggle

“Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force” (Foucault 1977, XII)

Play is a revolutionary, liberating mode of being in the world, as the praxis for the Marxian world of freedom beginning where necessity ends. This is not a hopelessly utopic prospect: the observation by critical theorists that late capitalism has turned impenetrable and all-encompassing enough to be a mill sucking into itself and into its advantage even the forces that once could counter it is, to me, only supporting the urgency of my argument that we need to keep all its counterforces alive, and keep playing against alienation.

It's not that play is a sufficient condition for revolution – material conditions remain essential and primary. What I aimed to conceptualize play as is a key site of ideological disruption to capitalist realism, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” (Fisher 2009, 2). The “radiance” of play prefigures a state that a society that overcomes alienation can aim for, and express itself and its freedom in. While attempted to be drained, the playful spirit, with its intrinsic political power, is never completely suppressed, even if always more rarely realized. True play can counter alienation, but the conditions of late capitalism can deform, neutralize, or suppress it. The authentic playful character is always under threat – but not defeated, never completely annihilated – and when it reemerges, no matter how briefly or temporarily, it exposes the alienation it offers a drastic emancipation from, and prefiguratively points towards a state of freedom that need not be the only one, but should accompany the realm of necessity, not be absolutely shielded from it nor a relief from it. Play is not a *solution*, but a *condition* for liberation, or a *corroboration* of the possibility of liberation, both encouraging it through resistance to oppression and enabling a rehearsal, an enactment, of what emancipation should feel like and entail. I care to point out that, as Mark Fisher (2009) noted, “it’s easier to imagine the end of the

world than the end of capitalism” (1), some will just not be receptive to the hope and inspiration of political emancipation, no matter their play.

Play is, again, not a communist party card in disguise, and I am not arguing that playing Huizinga’s play makes any player a Marxist. What I meant to demonstrate is that Huizinga’s conceptualization of play can be encompassed in Marxist thought, as a resistant, revolutionary, and creatively human realm of freedom. Throughout writing, a self-awareness of my manipulation of *Homo Ludens* was underlying. The intention of his thesis was always a complimentary broadening and continuative, tentative application of Huizinga’s theory, not a distortion of it. I find reassurance in the success of this wish in the purpose, and hopefully result, of this project to bring the play spirit new light, to restore its radiance, of which threat the last chapter of *Homo Ludens* warned, and to revive, in an explicitly political landscape, as well, its meanings and its gifts - as I have learnt play to be this foundational in no more than the teachings of Huizinga.

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