
Cultural Class Struggle for Animalist Socialism

Featuring Vladimir Mayakovsky

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An extensive arsenal of weapons for socialist class struggle for animal liberation on the cultural terrain in capitalist societies today comes to light when the oeuvre of early Soviet and futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) is reread through the lens of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. This paper shows that the avant-garde artist’s poetry and other writings comprise elements of an animalist Marxism *avant la lettre*: images and ideas of a political ethic and a mode of living that include animals, criticisms of capitalist society with respect to animal super-exploitation, conceptions of animal agency, and references to utopias in which social relations to non-human creatures are peaceful. These features need to be conceived not only as an integral part of Mayakovsky’s vigorously advocated third, cultural revolution of the Soviet way of life. Rather, they need to be considered as useful instruments to construct an animalist socialist counterculture that builds on and supplements the socioeconomic and political battle against (animal) capital.

Mayakovsky; animalist Socialism; Marx; Marxism; hegemony; Gramsci; poetry; cultural revolution

INTRODUCTION

I’ll join you
in the far communist future
[...]
My verse will reach you
across the peaks of ages,
over the heads
of governments and poets.
[...]
When in mounds of books,
where verse lie buried,
you discover by chance the iron filings of lines,
touch them
with respect,
as you would
some antique
yet awesome weapon.

From: *At the top of my voice* (1930) by Vladimir Mayakovsky (2015, pp. 211–212)

[T]o see Mayakovsky, we, and maybe our grandchildren too, shall have to turn round not backwards, but forwards. (Tsvetaeva, 1932–33/2010, p. 105)

In 1918, roughly one year after the October Revolution, the then 25-year-old poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) published a short poem called *Ode to the Revolution* (1918). In it, he welcomes the “double-faced” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 78) political revolution against and within the state and the socioeconomic revolution of property and production relations in Russia. At the time, Mayakovsky was a futurist writer known among the avant-garde art movement and to some specialized politicians, not yet the pop star he eventually became in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

In his poem, Mayakovsky glorifies the revolution in his typical hyperbolic manner, notwithstanding the imminent military battle against it at the time of the poem’s writing. He mocks “all the vile hollering” against it and turns accusations into positive self-descriptions. His acceptance of the revolution as “O bestial!/O childish!/O penniworth!” is followed by its praise, “O great!” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 78) He goes on to hail “man’s labour” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 79), referring not to human labor in general, but instead to the everyday labor of proletarians who build the new Soviet society from the bottom up.

Just as in historical reality, the revolution is not yet consolidated in the poem. Mayakovsky describes scenes of battle, including one by seamen. The revolution

inspires marine soldiers to drive “grey-haired admirals with rifle butts/head-down from the bridge in Helsingfors,” thus turning the officers’ power over the rank-and-file upside down. Beyond that, “To the sinking cruiser/you send your seamen,/where a kitten,/forgotten/mews” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 79). In-midst of war and chaos, the revolution animates the seamen, heavily occupied with fighting for their own lives and for the victory of their revolution, to rescue a cat from drowning in the sea.

According to Israeli critical theorist Moshe Zuckermann (2021), this motif of interspecies solidarity in class struggle reflects “the most profound revolutionary humanity” (p. 27, own translation). It is only matched, he argues, by Rosa Luxemburg’s compassionate attitude toward animals. In one of her prison letters, she famously laments the torment of a buffalo in the prison yard, calling the buffalo her “beloved brother” (Luxemburg, 1917/2013, p. 458). And in her article *A Duty of Honor* (1918), she draws a connection between revolutionary socialist politics and the avoidance of any—also animal—suffering, symbolized by a carelessly trampled worm (Luxemburg, 1918/1990, p. 406).

In his *Ode to the Revolution* (1918), Mayakovsky points in the same direction. His depiction of the socialist revolutionary struggle implies, among others, a reconciliation with nonhuman animals. This is particularly remarkable given the openness of the sociohistorical constellation at the time, including the possibility of the revolution’s own failure and the ensuing consequences, not least for the author himself. One might not necessarily assume that the revolutionaries of that time gave the fate of animals much thought under these conditions. Nevertheless, for Mayakovsky, the cat seems to matter.

The author himself rightly wonders in the poem how the revolution would end up, “As a splendid edifice/or a heap of ruins?” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 78) However it should turn out, he takes his stand and defends it against what he considers the means in the service of the old order. In the poem, among those powers of the existing order, Mayakovsky identifies the old bourgeois forces of culture which condemn the revolutionary upheaval. They are the ones against whom he lauds the revolution in the closing lines of the *Ode* (1918), acting himself as the representative of the new art at the side of the revolution, “From the philistine comes/‘O, be thrice accursed!’/and from me/a poet/‘Thrice blessed be, sublime!’” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 79)

Ode to the Revolution (1918) brings together three recurrent topoi in Mayakovsky’s writings: the socialist

revolution, animals, and the confrontation between the old culture and the new. It is exactly this nexus that is of interest to critical human-animal scholars and animalist Marxism today. In the following essay, I will explore and scrutinize the collected writings by Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, as far as I had access to them (see the Methodological Approach section), to demonstrate that they provide valuable weapons from the past to wage socialist class struggle for animal liberation on the cultural terrain in capitalist societies today. These weapons comprise images and ideas of the political ethic and the mode of living concerning animals, criticisms of capitalist society with respect to animal super-exploitation, and of utopian futures portraying other social relations to nonhuman creatures.

However, before opening up Mayakovsky’s artistic arsenal, I will take what may seem like a diversion. I begin by providing a sketch of the theoretical and political background for the poet’s work. This is necessary to understand the role he attributes to culture and cultural class struggle within the broader project of socialism. Subsequently, I show how Mayakovsky’s approach can be reconceptualized within today’s constellation, which differs basically in that class struggle in all its forms takes place within the confinements of bourgeois society, whereas Mayakovsky pressed for cultural revolution within a society in which at least at the beginning an attempt to construct socialism was made. In this context, I reread Mayakovsky’s approach through the lens of Antonio Gramsci’s hegemony theory, which the Italian Marxist, theoretician, and politician only developed fragmentarily during his lifetime. With the help of Gramsci’s concepts, I reframe Mayakovsky’s notions as elements for the construction of an animalist socialist counterculture in capitalist societies on the terrain of culture, building on and supplementing the socioeconomic and political class struggle within their respective terrains.

Following this theoretical but inevitable prologue, I proceed by outlining some key features of animals in Mayakovsky’s writings and in his life to give an idea of the omnipresence of nonhuman figures and creatures, their importance, and their functions in general. Then I dive into an empirically-based analysis of Mayakovsky’s poems and other works to elaborate on the meaning and utility of his images with regard to cultural socialist class struggle for animal liberation. I propose five categories of images according to which I investigate Mayakovsky’s writings. First, I look at his political ethics which is based, among other things, on the kinship between humans and animals. Second and third, I convey to the reader how Mayakovsky describes the role of animals in capitalist society

and their super-exploitation in the meat industry. Fourth, the poet's ideas of animal agency are addressed. Finally, Mayakovsky's utopian perspective for human-animal relations in potential socialist futures is laid bare.

Though this may seem an unmanageable effort, there is one core argument and leitmotif throughout the essay. I try to prove that Vladimir Mayakovsky developed a political ethic, ideas, and criticisms in his images which can be used to promote class struggle on the cultural terrain for socialist animal liberation in current capitalist societies without turning to culturalism or ideologism.

THEORETICAL MANUAL

Mayakovsky was not a theorist in the strict sense. However, the poet's conceptualizations of the three topics introduced with the *Ode to the Revolution* (1918)—socialist revolution, animals, and the battle against the old culture—and their dialectical interplay are of particular importance to understand the argument put forward in this essay. Therefore, I begin by discussing them.

First, Mayakovsky clearly sees the political and socio-economic revolution as necessary for social liberation. He welcomes the October Revolution as “my revolution” (Mayakovsky, 1965, p. 88), according to the second version of his autobiography *I Myself* (1928) which he writes in 1928 also as a statement about his life with respect to politics and art. Despite recurring quarrels with officials of the new state about them, he delivers the first genuine Soviet play with his *Mystery-Bouffe* (first version 1918, second version 1921) and dedicates his first long poem after the sea change—*150,000,000* (complete version 1921)—to the subject of revolution, the Soviet masses. In *Mystery-Bouffe* (1921), he retells the story of the October Revolution in the form of a journey of seven unclean couples (proletarians) and seven clean ones (representatives of the bourgeoisie). He uses fantastically remodeled images from the biblical Genesis flood narrative. In *150,000,000* (1921) Mayakovsky allegorically depicts the confrontation in universal class struggle between Ivan, the representative of the 150 million inhabitants of the Soviet Union, and US President Woodrow Wilson as the incarnation of the USA and the class enemy. At the time of its writing, the US was backing the White Army in the Russian civil war. Most notably, in poems like *Left March* (1919), *My Soviet Passport* (1929) or *Fine!* (1927) Mayakovsky uncompromisingly defends the revolution. He keeps doing so even after he and his comrades in art become more and more sidelined by the Soviet authorities. In his epic poem in memory of the revolution's leader called *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1925), Mayakovsky unambiguously states, “All/my

thundering power of a poet/is yours,/my class/waging rightful battle!” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 155)

However, the poet is, from relatively early on, unsatisfied with the course of the revolution and, more importantly, with the building of socialism after the revolution. And this concerns the second topic he addresses in *Ode to the Revolution* (1918), that is, the old cultural forces that interfere with the construction of the new society and that need to be fought on their terrain. In the poem *Rot* (1921), he lets a picture of Marx express his complaints, “The revolution's tangled in philistine webs./Worse than Wrangel are philistine habits.” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 83) Mayakovsky resolutely fights against such habits, which he usually summarized under the Russian term *byt* and which he primarily combats in the field of art. As linguistic expert and Mayakovsky's friend Roman Jakobson (1931/1973) argues in his formative essay *On a generation that squandered its poets* (1931), the struggle against *byt*, which he translates as “the stabilizing force of an immutable present” (p. 11), is the one constant topic in Mayakovsky's writings.

According to Rosy Carrick (2015), *byt* can generally be translated “as ‘everyday life’” (p. 287). In the same vein, Senta Everts-Grigat (1975) uses the notion “way of life” or “mode of living” (p. 219, own translation). However, in early Soviet Russia, the term specifically “referred to the stagnant daily life before the revolution, the practical conditions of the culturally and industrially backward, largely illiterate and impoverished population, and alongside that, the parasitic greed and extravagance associated with the bourgeoisie” (Carrick 2015, p. 287; for a similar interpretation, see Everts-Grigat, 1975, pp. 219–226).

According to the Jakobson tradition of reading Mayakovsky, the battle against *byt* is most explicit in the longer poem *It* (1923), also called *About That* in English or *Pro Eto*, the latinized Russian title (see, for example, Jakobson, 1931/1973, pp. 11–12; Brown 1973, pp. 256–260). This interpretation is in line with a statement by Mayakovsky about the poem during a dispute in April 1923 on *Futurism Today*. He argues that the long poem's leitmotif is the mode of living which has not changed yet, and which is the worst enemy in the early Soviet Union, as it turns Soviet people into philistines (Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 5, p. 126). This is mirrored in *It* (1923), where he says, “I cannot accept it/I hate it/All of it./Everything/that chains us/to a past of slavery,/Everything/the vulgar/slave-swarm/alighted upon,/everything/routine/swarmed over/even in our/red-bannered/order of things” (Mayakovsky, 2015, pp. 106–107).

Byt can take many different forms. After the October Revolution, Mayakovsky famously titles the four sub-chapters of his first long poem, *A Cloud in Trousers* (1915), also known as *Cloud in Pants*, “Down with your love,” “Down with your art,” “Down with your system,” “Down with your religion” (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 61). These are some of the author’s recurring enemies and embodiments of byt. In *It* (1923), the relationship between man and women, religion, love, and other feelings are addressed. In the poem *Drag Forth the Future* (1925), Mayakovsky relates byt to the family, interpersonal relationships, and the comfort of a contemplative home. For him, of course, art is the main battlefield against the old mode of living.

Furthermore, Mayakovsky criticizes the culture and the processes of bureaucratization in the Soviet Union in an array of poems like *Conference-Crazy* (1922), *The Bureaucratiad* (1922), *Talking With a Taxman About Poetry* (1926), *Office-bugs* (1928), or *Conversation With Comrade Lenin* (1929). In both his late plays *The Bedbug* (1929) and *The Bathhouse* (1930), the overlapping of the political and the private (or personal) and the different *Charaktermasken* (personifications) of it become key points in his critique of byt. Almost none of the main characters—present and future state and party officials, scientists, artists—is without a trace of byt. In sum, Mayakovsky treats byt as a problem of the state, civil society, and the individual, as it permeates all three.

To overcome byt, he advocates a “third revolution” (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 168) in the poem *Fifth International* (1922) or a “revolution of the spirit” (Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 5, p. 55, own translation) in the *Manifesto of the Flying Federation of Futurists* (1918) and in an *Open Letter to the Workers* (1918, own translation). He also uses the term “cultural revolution” (Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 5, p. 334, own translation) in a speech during an assembly of the REF art organization in January 1930. As Viktor Shklovsky (1974), a futurist comrade of Mayakovsky’s and one of the leading formalists in Russia in those days, puts it metaphorically, “Mayakovsky saw the old way of life as a bunker that had to be stormed.” (p. 194) His purpose was the establishment of a “new byt” which represents “the ideal communist way for the ‘new Soviet man’ to live” (Carrick, 2015, p. 287).

It is decisive in this context that Mayakovsky considered this transformation of culture as a complement—to a substitute or an alternative—to the politicoeconomic revolution (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 104). For him, byt has to be fought in arts, but on the basis of the socioeconomic and political turnover, and in connection with it. In his

Open Letter to the Workers (1918), the poet writes that in life, “the revolution of the content” is inconceivable without “the revolution of form” (Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 5, p. 56, own translation).

In fact, the connection between the negation of byt in the name of art and the work for a revolution as a continuation of the politicoeconomic revolution appears in different works. He makes such statements in the vast majority of programmatic, art theoretical statements from the revolutionary period until 1929 and in nearly all poems in which he addresses the art community directly, as in *Order of the Day to the Army of Arts* (1918), *Order no. 2 to the Army of Arts* (1920), or *A Message to Proletarian Poets* (1926). The objective of the struggle against the old art is, according to the manifesto *What is LEF Fighting for?* (1923) written by Mayakovsky and six of his comrades from the avant-garde art organization Left Art Front (LEF), “the strengthening of the victories of the October Revolution, while reinforcing left art. [...] Lef will fight for the art-construction of life.” (Sherwood, 1971, p. 35)

This cultural revolutionary approach, which considers the politico-cultural as a relatively independent terrain of class struggle is the second important feature of Mayakovsky’s overall approach, which is present in the poem *Ode to the Revolution* (1918). The key messages in this context are that Mayakovsky understands the revolution of byt (a) as an integral part of the politicoeconomic revolutions, building on the latter and continuing it. The negation of byt (b) comprises all of everyday life or the whole mode of living. Finally, (c) it is something that has to be done actively using cultural means in relative independence from Marx’s revolution of the social economy and Lenin’s political revolution of the state. Especially the last two aspects were challenging for the Soviet revolutionaries and their theoretical approaches, as parts of Trotsky’s (1925/2005, pp. 118–120) otherwise instructive remarks on futurism in *Literature and Revolution* (1925) demonstrate.

The third important aspect of Mayakovsky’s general approach is his use of poetic imagery open to rethinking and reshaping human-animal relations in the triad of political, economic, and cultural-theoretical transformation. The remainder of this essay is dedicated to its analysis. Suffice it to say at this point that Mayakovsky heavily employs images of animals, the social relations to them, animal metaphors and figurations. They are applied in different ways and with various functions. In fact, some of them reproduce conservative, even speciesist ideas. However, and more importantly, Mayakovsky’s writings contain a political ethic, ideas about animals’ role in capitalism, and utopian concepts for human-animal relations

that transcend the exploitative and oppressive relations in capitalism. This is the gold mine that needs to be uncovered.

In summary, the affirmation of the socialist revolutions and the battle for a new mode of living coincide with countercultural pro-animal elements in Mayakovsky's poetry. Even though this might not have been his intention, it is possible to read Mayakovsky's works in support of a socialist animalist concept of a politicoeconomic and cultural revolution. This includes a conscious making of cultural forms (mode of living, ideas, political ethic, etc.) by the proletariat, and it integrates the making of peaceful social relations with animals.

Unlike in the Soviet Union's early 1920s, though, the transformation of cultural forms today comes up against the limits of the bourgeois social and political form. A cultural revolution—as a complement to the socioeconomic and political revolutions—is not on the table at the moment. Fathoming the potential of Mayakovsky's verse and prose for an animalist socialist project thus requires us to interpret it within the scope of a critical social theory directed at the overcoming of exploitative and oppressive relations in capitalism. Otherwise, we would cut off the path to animal liberation from its preconditions and end up with mere culturalism or, as Gramsci (1971) called it, "ideologism" (p. 178). In the face of Mayakovsky's approach, cultural change needs to be conceptualized as an indispensable supplement to the socialist animalist class struggle of the proletariat on economic and political terrains and as a relatively independent terrain of this struggle. Here, the weapons are different but not separated from socioeconomic and political ones.

Understanding cultural revolution this way, Mayakovsky's works and his animal motifs can be comprehended as instruments of a proletarian counterculture in general and of an animalist socialist one in particular. They challenge the bourgeois politico-cultural hegemony from a socialist standpoint, especially its anti-animal forms of thought, mode of living, and political ethics, among other things. Put differently, they belong to the arsenal necessary for what Gramsci (2007) characterized as a "war of positions" (pp. 109, 117, 162, 163, 168, 267, 378) or struggle for hegemony (see, for example, Gramsci, 1996, pp. 177–188) between capital and the proletariat in nonrevolutionary times. One of Gramsci's central notions is that, to win over the masses in civil society for a political and socioeconomic revolution, it is necessary to develop a socialist counterculture which includes, among other things, a political ethic, convincing ideas of the present and future, and a mode of living which contradicts—

but does not modernize—their bourgeois counterparts, thus outlining a socialist alternative.

What goes beyond classic Gramscianist concepts in this essay, though, is that animals, the social relations to them, and their exploitation by "animal capital" (Stache, 2020, p. 19) are also considered to be an object of class struggle on all terrains (see Stache & Bernhold 2021). In other words, I suggest interpreting Mayakovsky not only as a Gramscianist, but as an animal Marxist Gramscianist. Of course, this is my reading of his works.

We have to be careful in interpreting Mayakovsky this way. While it can be easily argued that the poet's ideas on cultural revolution and Gramsci's approach correspond to some extent, it is not possible to say that the artist as a historical person was an animalist socialist or that his works were written as a source for the socialist animalist class struggle. There are contradictions or, more precisely, inconsistencies in his writings when it comes to animals and their treatment.

In his late longer poem *Fine!* (1927), for example, Mayakovsky's poetic self, who appears in the poem, eats "horse flesh" (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 252) and, more importantly, he depicts "feeding/poultry,/milking" as parts of "my country,/building/and growing" (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 276). Similarly, in the poem *We* (1928), his hyperbolic praise of the development of the productive forces includes Soviet animal breeding and livestock farming. He encourages the Soviet "worker—inventor" to "let our cattle and horses/make the rest look like ponies" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 250). Similarly, the future self of Mayakovsky in the second part of his long poem *The Flying Proletarian* (1925), explains to a friend that "I just/now/flew past the fence./I'm grazing my herd" (Mayakovsky, 2015, p. 153), indicating that some sort of animal husbandry takes place in the utopian "Daily Life in the Future" (Mayakovsky, 2015, p. 143).

Thus, it cannot easily be concluded that "Mayakovsky becomes redefined when we look at how he treated animals" (Lahti, 2010, p. 163). However, the elements concerning improved relationships with animals in the avant-garde artist's work outweigh and are more powerful in his writings than the images of ordinary animal use.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this essay, I interpret Mayakovsky's work with reference to his own and to Gramsci's theoretical framework. Based thereon, I distill from the poet's writings cultural features which are useful for an animalist Marxist counterculture strategy. I will demonstrate that some elements in Mayakovsky's poetry and prose can contribute

to forming a mode of living and a political ethic, and to forms of thought in favor of a new and just social relation to animals as an integral part of the socialist class struggle. In this vein, I do not discuss Mayakovsky's writings on an art theoretical basis.

My following adoption of Mayakovsky's oeuvre breaks with the main discursive traditions in at least three ways: first, I resist focusing only on the early or the later works. This implies that I reject the separation between a futurist Mayakovsky, who puts the relative independence of art and form above everything else, and the communist poet of the revolution who tramples "on the very throat/of my verse" (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 282). Put differently, I neither side with the left-liberal and "early lyrical" (Brown, 1973, p. 311) Mayakovsky nor with the troubadour of actually existing socialism who presumably gave up his beliefs in aesthetics in favor of socialist realism. The Mayakovsky I read and analyze is both an artist who insists on the revolution of form and a communist who defends the politicoeconomic revolution. In fact, the artist and the communist can only be fully realized through one another.

Second, I do not consider Mayakovsky to be basically anti-nature or in favor of the "mastery of nature" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002, p. 19), despite the abstention from classic natural imagery in his poetry and overall enthusiasm for the development of the productive forces, for the city in opposition to the countryside, and for the anthropological capacities of the human. Several short and longer poems harshly contradict such a one-sided reading. In *An Amazing Adventure of Vladimir Mayakovsky* (1920) the poet's self fraternizes with the sun. In *Atlantic Ocean* (1925), the sea may have other symbolic meanings as well, but it is evident that the author honors the ocean itself in very high terms, calling it "my Revolution's/elder brother" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 136). In *Topics from the Tropics* (1926), Mayakovsky blurs the boundaries between humans, their technologies, and art on the one hand, and the elements of tropical nature, including animals, on the other. He expresses his fascination with tropical nature. Without exaggeration, romanticism, or special treatment, he even laments the destruction of nature by war (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 40) and considers it a part of instrumental reason (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 85, see also Mayakovsky, 2015, p. 81) in the longer poems *War and the World* (1917) and *I Love* (1922) respectively. Terras (1982) is one of the few Mayakovsky's readers in the Anglophone and German-speaking world who explicitly recognizes a contradiction between the poet's "warm feeling for animals" (p.

2) and his alleged ignorance and manipulation of nature. But unfortunately, he does not examine it.

Third, I decentralize the dominant line of reading Mayakovsky's animals in the literature. Generally, the literature pays less attention to this topic than to other subjects in the poet's writings. In the German reception of his work, animals play hardly any role at all. In the most recent and comprehensive German biography of Mayakovsky written by Nora Thun (2000), for example, the animal imagery is not really addressed, although, as is often the case in biographies of the poet, the most popular poem with reference to animals, *Humane to Horses* (1918), is reprinted. In his popularized short biography, Hugo Huppert (1965), the translator of the German edition of Mayakovsky's collected works, at least mentions that the poet sides with a bull when he sees him tortured in a Mexican bullfighting arena during his trip to North America (p. 118) (see also chapter Work, Self-defense, and Revolution). But in Huppert's interpretation of *Humane to Horses* (1918), he proclaims that Mayakovsky's empathy with horses is ultimately directed at humans (p. 38). Following a similar line, Birgit Menzel (1992) claims that "the animal imagery is mainly assigned to the human world and to self-expression" (p. 59, own translation). Everts-Grigat (1975) interprets the transformation of the poet's self into a polar bear in *It* (1923) as a form of distancing himself from rational self-control, getting access to his real feelings, and revealing "the true human nature" (p. 131, own translation). Bernd Südkamp (1977) argues along similar lines when he characterizes the metamorphoses of Mayakovsky's selves into animals as an expression of "loneliness, of not being understood" (p. 87, own translation).

In his analysis, Südkamp refers to one of the two formative English-speaking authors on the topic: Lawrence L. Stahlberger. Stahlberger (1964) and Edward J. Brown (1953) produced their influential and extensive interpretations of Mayakovsky's work under the auspices of Roman Jakobson—Mayakovsky's friend, futurist companion, a linguistic expert, and, most importantly in this context, a decisive figure in the discourse concerning Mayakovsky's works after his death. For Stahlberger (1964), "perhaps the most important function of the animal in Majakovskij's poetry" is "the animal as a symbol of his own predicament, to express isolation among his fellow man" (p. 81). He adds that "the animal symbolizes both the plight of the poet who is estranged from men and therefore suffers because of men, and the plight of man (including the poet) who suffers because of his creaturely condition" (pp. 85–86). In a similar vein, Brown (1953) writes that "Mayakovsky's animals are all alter egos of the

poet himself, and each one expresses some aspect of his own alienation” (p. 185). This alienation hypothesis, as I would call it, recalls the dominant readings of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915). It also corresponds, in my eyes, with the zeitgeist of those early Cold War days in which the reinterpretation of Marxist works in the West focused on alienation to avoid an outright rejection of Marxism and the integration into discourses of real existing socialism at the same time.

The alienation hypothesis is still considered valuable in this essay, even though it needs a less transhistorical and humanist reading. More importantly, though, it is not necessarily the only interpretation for some of Mayakovsky’s poems like *The Way I Became a Dog* (1915), *To All and Everything* (1916), *To Russia* (1917), or the becoming of a polar bear in *It* (1923). However, as Brown, Stahlberger, and Huppert themselves notice, this reading turns out to be—at best—only partially correct in the case of the poem *Humane to Horses* (1918). Huppert (1965) at least mentions the author’s empathy with animals (p. 38). Brown (1953) states that the animal symbol in the poem “includes more than Mayakovsky.” All sentient beings suffer, and “the poet suddenly realizes the community of his own suffering with the general ‘bestly’ misery” (p. 188). Stahlberger (1964) also acknowledges that “the fallen horse” in the poem “encompasses the suffering of all creatures—of man and animal” (p. 85).

Against this background, Stahlberger’s (1964) explicit reluctance to examine “the significant role animals play in Mayakovsky’s poetry” through an “analysis of the ‘be kind to animals,’” which he dismisses as “sentimental-moral” (p. 80), seems to be unsubstantiated and therefore ideological. I agree that an exclusively animal ethical interpretation is not sufficient in light of Mayakovsky’s own approach and his artistic lyric. But it is definitely possible. As already outlined, the examination in this essay has a different framework. It considers the animal ethic that inhabits Mayakovsky’s poetry as one part of a politico-cultural revolutionary program to fight bourgeois ethics and to form a socialist mode of living. But it also includes other aspects of Mayakovsky’s animal imagery, like ideas on animal exploitation, noncompliance, and utopian human-animal relations as parts of the socialist animalist class struggle for hegemony in bourgeois societies.

To this end, this essay refers to more recent works which try to bring together Mayakovsky’s poetry and a broader pro-animal reading of it that cannot be reduced to its ethical aspects. This body of literature is actually very small, and I hope to contribute to it. Professor of Language and Culture Studies Katherine Lahti’s *The*

Animal Mayakovsky (2010) gives a good introduction and concise overview of animals in the poet’s work and life. She also outlines several fine ideas on how to interpret his poetry. But in my opinion, the essay blends the historical person and the work too much, and it concentrates on contrasting the Soviet myth and the animal Mayakovsky, simplifying both and overextending the contrast in the process. Two other valuable sources are Oxana Timofeeva’s article *Communism With a NonHuman Face* (2013) and her book *The History of Animals* (2018). The Professor at the “Stasis” Center for Practical Philosophy focuses on another Soviet writer, Andrei Platonov. But she lays the groundwork for acknowledging the interspecies solidarity in the revolutionary struggle in *Ode to the Revolution* (1918) in both works. I share with these two authors the view that Mayakovsky’s integration of animals into his poetry is not just as a means of art—as symbols or representatives for humans, their feelings, and alienation—but as an engagement with animals and their treatment in real life, too.

Finally, I must concede a weakness of this essay. I was not able to take into account the Russian discourse and literature because I do not master the language. Therefore I also cannot evaluate the translations of Mayakovsky’s writings from Russian. In other words, my research relies on sources published in German and English. The general argument of this essay is built on this rich body of literature, and I almost exclusively use parts of Mayakovsky’s artistic writings that have the same meaning at least in their German and English translations. However, there might be omissions, particularly when it comes to Mayakovsky’s lesser-known publications, and mistakes due to my linguistic restrictions, which I would like to see filled and corrected respectively by other, more gifted and qualified scholars. In very few exceptions I refer only to the German translation of the poet’s collected works (made by Huppert) because I have not been able to track down any English translations. In these cases, I did the translation into English for this essay.

MAYAKOVSKY’S ANIMALS AND THE ANIMAL MAYAKOVSKY

Mayakovsky’s writings burst with animals: living, real animals and figurative, symbolic ones. Had the late Jacques Derrida examined Mayakovsky’s poetry, he would have been excited and amazed at the bestiary and its politico-philosophical use. They not only inhabit the latter’s short and long poems. His letters, drawings, books for children, speeches, travelogues, journalistic and theoretical articles are also teeming with critters. Before we

analyze the animal imagery in the way mentioned above, let me provide a short introduction to the variety of the poet's animals.

Reading Mayakovsky, the French deconstructionist philosopher and fanatic of animal figurations Derrida would have met several V.I.P. members of his own literary-zoological collection (for Derrida's animals, see Derrida 2008, 2009a, 2009b). For example, wolves, who figure as a metaphor for the voracious Bolshevik revolutionaries eating the Cadets, the members of the Constitutional Democratic Party in Russia, in the poem *Tale of the Little Red Riding Hood* (1917). Derrida would also have met a cat, above all one specific cat called Lilya Yuryevna Brik or just Lili. For several years Lilya Brik was Mayakovsky's partner, but more importantly she was his lifelong intimate friend, roommate, muse, and sister-in-arms in the battles for new arts and aesthetics in the late tsarist Russia and the early Soviet Union since 1915. Her pet name was Kitty. She signed her letters and telegraphs to Mayakovsky as Kitty, and Mayakovsky addressed her with that name (see, for example, Jangfeldt, 1986a, p. 158). The name was so well established among their friends that, for example, Shklovsky (1974) used it naturally in his book *Mayakovsky and His Circle* (p. 75).

Animal metaphors and allegories are thus in no way restricted to Mayakovsky's art. In real life and in art, they are used in classic ways as a form of praise, for insults, as compliments and analogies, and for making fun of others. In the artist's screenplay *How Are You?* (1926), for example, a petty bourgeois family father turns into an orangutan because he is ignorant of poetry. In the poem *Happy Me!* (1929), on the other hand, Mayakovsky's poetical self breathes "like an elephant" and is "as strong as a horse" (Mayakovsky, 1985, pp. 248–249), thus acquiring the extraordinary powers of these animals.

In Mayakovsky's early drawings, crocodiles and giraffes are iterated motifs (see Duwakin, 1975, pp. 180–181, 185). The giraffe is considered to be an image of self-identification for the early painter-poet in the literature. There are crows in poems and the posters that Mayakovsky drew for the Soviet Union's news agency ROSTA between 1919 and 1921. Duwakin (1975, p. 73) interprets them as images of ruin. Horses, giraffes, and bears reappear again and again in short and longer poems, and bulls feature in verse, for example in *Lily Dear! In Lieu of a Letter* (1916) or in *Mexico* (1925), and prominently in prose, particularly in the account of his trip to Cuba, Mexico, and the United States in 1925 (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, pp. 19–21). The author identifies with these animals or their

specific traits, and at the same time he portrays them as independent actors with all sorts of capacities.

In the literature on Mayakovsky's work, some animals take a special place because Mayakovsky, as a poetic figure of his own poetry, turns into these animals. As I already mentioned, this transformation is a recurring theme throughout his collected writings, indicating alienation from society and an access to repressed feelings (see chapter Methodological Approach). In one of his most famous long poems, *It* (1923), Mayakovsky becomes a polar bear. In *To All and Everything* (1916) he initially becomes a white bull and then an elk, and in *To Russia* (1917) he appears as an ostrich. The typical short poem in this respect is probably *The Way I Became a Dog* (1915). Over the course of the poem, in a seemingly hostile environment of humans, the poet's self turns into a dog, step by step, until "I stood down on all fours—/disgrace or no disgrace—/and began to bark:/bow-grr-bow-wow-wow!" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 57), the artist playing with the pronunciation of the words for canine barking.

"Mayakovsky's menagerie of animal-selves," as Brown (1973, p. 330) puts it, is also not restricted to poetry. According to Jangfeldt (2014), one of Mayakovsky's biographers, the poet titled a report in 1922 about one of his trips to Paris for *Izvestiya*, the organ of the Soviet Council of the People's Commissars, "*Paris (Notes of a Human Goose)*" (p. 231), obviously referring to himself as a goose. And in his letters to Lilya Brik, Mayakovsky signs as and depicts himself in little drawings predominantly as a dog, but from time to time as a bear or a donkey.

Another important animal topos in the poet's production of verses is the denunciation and even contempt for certain animals that Mayakovsky and his futurist comrades in art regarded as symbols for the old art or classical arts, especially in poetry. This standpoint is polemically expressed, for example, in the programmatic essay *How Are Verses Made?* (1926) (see Mayakovsky, 2015, p. 224). The prime model in this context is the nightingale. In the long poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1925), for example, Mayakovsky (1986) opposes his lyrical lexis, which was highly debated in his time because of his unusual use of everyday language and political words, with the classical vocabulary symbolized by this bird, "Sure,/'Capitalism' rings/not so very elegant;/'Nightingale'/has a far more delicate sound./Yet I'll go back to it/whenever relevant./Let stanzas/like fighting slogans resound!" (p. 154) The peacock and dove are also mocked for the same reason as the nightingale. In the long poem *Man* (1918), to give an example, he brings together the natural symbols for classical poetry, the peacock and roses, rejecting them

outright, “Away with daydreams lofty and wild!/The muses’ slave,/I rebel./Believers in peacocks—/Brehm’s brain-child,/believers in roses—/the fruit of botanists’ imagination,/this, my flawless description of the earthly hell,/pass down from generation to generation!” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 62) Among other things, it is this treatment of nature and animals that has led some authors to interpret Mayakovsky’s works as being against nature.

This impression can be reinforced by a depiction of animals in one of his screenplays called *Jobann Schranknarr’s Love. Comedy in Four Acts With a Serious Prologue* (1926, own translation), which has never been made into a movie. Generally, it is about two men competing for the favor of a young female typist who works in a Soviet institution. The male characters are allegories for the man of the past and the man of the future. The former works as a museum custodian, is dressed up according to the museum he works for and in which he also seems to live—an 18th century manor. He also behaves and talks like an aristocrat. The latter is a young, daredevil pilot fond of recent technology. Apart from the relatively traditional approach to the relationship between men and women and the simplistic references to history, in the course of the competition, both contenders make use of technical devices. It turns out that animal technologies are outdated and belong to the past. While the pilot telegraphs his messages to the typist to contact her as quickly as possible, the curator sends a homing pigeon. When the pilot drives away with the typist in the end, he does so by motorcycle. The curator is unable to follow the couple because his horse-drawn carriage is too slow (Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 3, pp. 348–349, 358–359). It is obvious that the animals function as symbols of social and technological backwardness in the screenplay. But we should not jump to conclusions, as Mayakovsky generally recognizes and appreciates the work of animals, as I will demonstrate below (see the section Work, Self-defense, and Revolution).

Before we can finally dive into the culturally revolutionary parts of Mayakovsky’s writings with regard to animals, we have to make one last stop to look at the historical person and his emphatic relationship to nonhuman animals. Among several heartbreaking stories, perhaps the most impressive and characteristic is the one about Lilya Brik and the poet adopting what seems to have been their first of at least four dogs (Shchen, the Scottish Terrier Scotty, a Doberman pinscher whose name I could not figure out, and the bulldog Bulka), who they all treated like family members.

Brik (1991, pp. 66–67) tells a touching story in her memoirs on her life with the poet. In 1919 they were at a dacha in the village Pushkino. Going for a walk, they found a lonely puppy. Mayakovsky took him home and bathed him. Brik provided him with food. Mayakovsky baptized their new family member Shchen or Shenik (Russian for pup and puppy, respectively). From this day on, they spent the summer together in Pushkino, never leaving each other’s side. After Shchen’s appearance, Mayakovsky identified himself with his companion, leading to signing his letters and telegrams also as Shchen and even taking that name in their inner circle of friends. Brik describes the similarity between the poet and the dog in affectionate words. She also says that Mayakovsky loved “animals because they are not people, yet they are living creatures” (Jangfeldt, 1986b, p. 17).

His passion must have been so intense that it infected Brik as well. She recalls that “Volodya taught me to love animals” (Jangfeldt, 1986b, p. 18). “In our life together animals were a constant subject of conversation,” she proceeds. “When I came home from somewhere, Volodya always asked whether I had seen ‘any interesting dogs or cats.’” (Jangfeldt, 1986b, p. 18; adjustment C.S.) Like other dogs, Shchen is mentioned as a part of Mayakovsky’s family even in his poetry. In his long poem *Fine!* (1927) the passage says, “Living space—/six square metres./We four/in one room cooped up:/Lily,/Ossya,/me/and a dog/named Pup.” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 247)

Mayakovsky’s love for animals also shines through the stories reported by Alexander Rodchenko, the avant-garde graphic designer and photographer, and by the Czech-German writer Franz Carl Weiskopf. Rodchenko made a famous photo of Mayakovsky holding Scotty in his arms and laughing. It was made under funny circumstances when Mayakovsky gave a huge portion of ice cream to his canine friend, who was crazy about it (see Rodchenko 1980, p. 41). Weiskopf, on the other hand, was once treated as a guest of the bulldog Bulka by Mayakovsky because the dog received the guest particularly warmly (see Weiskopf, 1952/1977, pp. 273–274). Jakobson noted in his memoirs on Mayakovsky, “[H]e loved dogs. This is apparent from the last part of *About That* and from a series of other poems, but it was particularly apparent in life. He played joyfully and tenderly with his dog Shchenik, and once he said to me: ‘Shchen is an animal. I like animals. Shchen is like people, but he can’t talk. That’s pleasant.’” (Jakobson, 1997, p. 97)

After Mayakovsky took his life in April 1930, his relation to animals even became a small matter of politics

and of how to read Mayakovsky's writings after his death. It is striking in this context that the two dominant lines of interpretation in the literature—the Jakobson tradition and the one coined by real existing socialism—whose representatives do not agree on much about Mayakovsky's work, seem to be of one opinion in this case.

At a memorial evening in the Communist Academy one year after the poet's death, Anatoly Lunacharsky—from 1917 to 1929 the first People's Commissar for Education of the Soviet Union, but in 1931 already disempowered by Stalin's fraction in the party—holds an interesting lecture on Mayakovsky and his legacy. He honors "the true proletarian poet" and, at the same time, tries to explain his suicide. Lunacharsky's approach is, in essence, that the author had a "charming," not "repugnant double," which "was made of everything petty that still lived in Mayakovsky." However, "Mayakovsky's petty-bourgeois traits were not disgusting." There "was a great desire for love and gentleness, a great desire for truly intimate sympathy, a great compassion for all living creatures." Lunacharsky at this point quotes some stanzas from *Humane to Horses* (1918). However, despite the "sympathetic" character of his double, according to the late Lunacharsky, it was this double who killed Mayakovsky because the artist opted to be the "poet-tribune" (Lunacharsky, 1931/1973, no page numbers) instead of the petty-bourgeois double.

To understand Lunacharsky's remarks adequately, one has to consider several things. First, despite their different opinions on art, Lunacharsky was one of Mayakovsky's long-time supporters. Second, public appearances and statements were already a highly delicate problem for Lunacharsky in 1931. Third, the doppelganger hypothesis was also contested later in the East (see, for example, Mierau, 1978). Fourth, animals were not an issue for most Communists in those times. Finally, Lunacharsky does not disparage Mayakovsky's empathy for animals in his works and life completely.

The People's Commissar nevertheless classifies the animal Mayakovsky as belonging to the private, individualist, and petty-bourgeois realm of the artist. In other words, Lunacharsky considered him and his topics, like love and animals, as non- or apolitical. The alienation hypothesis, on the other hand, which characterizes the Mayakovsky interpretation by Jakobson and his followers, considered the animal Mayakovsky, as mentioned above, in an anthropological, humanist framework, focusing on human alienation and thus depoliticizing the animalist Marxist cultural revolutionary or at least counter-cultural elements.

However, it makes sense to consider both Mayakovskys, that is, the socialist poet and his doppelganger, given our knowledge today that capitalism is built on the capital-labor relation into which other relations of exploitation and domination between capital and other agents like animals and nature are integrated (see Stache, 2020). Considering the two Mayakovskys is necessary precisely to avoid a petty-bourgeois approach to love or the human-animal relation. The rest of this essay establishes this link between the socialist poet and his double to demonstrate the eminently politico-cultural standpoint in animalist Marxism *avant la lettre* in Mayakovsky's writings.

KINSHIP AND POLITICAL ETHICS

In his *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci does not develop a moral philosophy in the strict sense, much less a trans-historic, a-social, and a-geographical notion of ethics or moral values. He instead interprets ethics like in Engels's (1878/1987) conception of "class morality" (p. 87), according to which moral convictions so far have been determined by the historically and geographically specific social positions in class societies and by their politicization in the class struggle. Following Gramsci (2007), "an ethical state—a state whose aim is to put an end to the internal division of the ruled, etc., and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism," can only be achieved by the social group "whose declared aspiration is the end of the state and of itself" (p. 338), that is to say, the proletariat.

Against this background, Gramsci (2007) examines "the 'spontaneously and freely consented to' correspondence between the actual behavior and the acknowledged principles of each individual, between the conduct of each individual and the ends that society posits as necessary" (p. 69)—that is, moral behavior and convictions—as the result of socioeconomic and political forces, as a terrain for forming class alliances, and as an instrument to tie class fractions and individuals to a class struggle for politico-cultural hegemony in civil society. In other words, moral (not moralistic) ideas and values express the desire for a certain individual mode of living in compliance with a vision of a future society that is distilled into projects for hegemony and formed by class alliances.

Mayakovsky's poetry is permeated by moral considerations that could tie those social groups to the project of socialist liberation that are committed to ending the exploitation and domination of animals by animal capital. For the artist acknowledges the kinship between animals and humans (without equating them), and demonstrates empathy and solidarity with them as suffering beings.

Additionally, he shows how the individual can find modes of living that are for the good of animals, even if this means having to make sacrifices oneself.

The inevitable starting point for Mayakovsky's socialist animal ethics is the poem *Humane to Horses* (1918). Its basic story is about how one of the poet's selves treats a horse who collapsed in a street in Moscow. Instead of joining the people surrounding the horse and laughing at the deranged animal, Mayakovsky's alter ego talks to and gives the horse comfort so that in the end she stands up and goes "back to her stall,/and she felt a colt—just two years, maybe—/and life worth living despite it all" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 76).

The middle part of the poem is the most relevant for this essay. Here, Mayakovsky's self looks the weeping horse in the eye. "And an animal anguish/I couldn't stop/spilled out of me, rippling,/and flooded us both." (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 75) Put differently, the poet shares the fears and agony of the horse, pointing at the feelings and capacity to suffer that humans and animals have in common. This identification in pain reappears in a part of the longer poem called *The Backbone Flute* (1916). There, Mayakovsky's double looks at a torero through the eye of a dying bull (see Mayakovsky, 1961, p. 121). Mayakovsky's reaction to animal harm in *Humane to Horses* (1918), one of a strong degree of identification with the suffering creature, is strengthened by the laughter of the humans around the artist and the horse and by the contrast between their behavior on the one hand and the intimacy between the horse and Mayakovsky on the other. The poet's self and the horse seem to be one for being different from the humans around them, despite their differing species.

In the following, the artist's self talks directly to the horse: "Now, don't, please, horsie!/You know what remorse is?/They're human,/but why do you suppose you're worse?/Pet,/we're all of us a little bit horses,/each of us in his own way's a horse." (Mayakovsky, 1985, pp. 75–76) Mayakovsky explicitly calls into question an absolute difference between the horse and humans, rejecting the devaluation of horses. The latter is symbolized by the human bystanders' indifference to the horse's suffering. Without denying their differences, he acknowledges that horses and humans share characteristics, that there is a continuum between them. "Pet,/we're all of us a little bit horses,/each of us in his own way's a horse." (Mayakovsky, 1985, pp. 75–76) Furthermore, the animal's suffering seems to matter so much to him that he engages in the recovery of the horse. The parallel to *Ode to the Revolution* (1918) is evident. Animals shall not be left behind.

However, in *Humane to Horses* (1918), it is only Mayakovsky who acts. There is not a direct political, but an individual reaction or a morally guided response to the animal suffering. Nevertheless, in light of the poem's verses, it is no exaggeration by Duwakin (1975) to say that "there is not only ordinary kindness, but also something like a 'sense of kinship' (...), a sense of being involved in all that is alive" (p. 62) in Mayakovsky's behavior to animals. It is this kinship and identification with the suffering animal which reappears in the poet's writings over and over again. They open up Marxist class morality for animals and for those groups in bourgeois society which struggle against it. I will demonstrate below that this opening does not undermine the concept of class in favor of species. It instead bolsters the idea of who the class project of liberation is composed of and for whose liberation it is fought.

In the longer poem *It* (1923), we also find an impressive and meaningful passage that supports animal Marxist ethics. Its emphasis is on the action to help an animal in need, even if it means making sacrifices. At the end of the poem about different aspects of byt, its criticism, and how to change it, Mayakovsky's self argues why he should be revived in the future—the real Mayakovsky hated death, as every good utopian does. Among other things, he cites his solidarity with animals as a reason.

His argument starts with a confession about his past, "I did love beasts." Then, he wonders, "Have you still got zoos?" For if this were the case, he would ask to "let me be a keeper for your beasts" (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 137). The artist's self actually wants to establish good relations with animals by working with and for them—apart from the fact that the poet has an uncritical view of zoos and the conditions under which animals are incarcerated in them. More importantly, though, he considers this kind of building relationships with animals to be reasonable and meaningful work in the liberated society of the future.

His notion of relating peacefully to animals in zoos reminds strongly of two minor aspects in the writings and lives of the critical theorists Herbert Marcuse and Theodor W. Adorno. Marcuse is known for his fascination with animals in general and hippos and camels in particular. He regularly visited the latter in the San Diego zoo to get in touch with them, as shown in the documentary *Kämpfer für eine andere Gesellschaft. Herbert Marcuse. Kämpfer und Revolutionär* (Wickert 1978) [Fighter for a Different Society. Herbert Marcuse. Fighter and Revolutionary; C.S.]. Adorno expressed the idea of operating a lift two hours a day if social labor were finally to be rationally organized (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1954/1996, p. 41).

Mayakovsky fuses these two ideas in his utopian idea of being an animal keeper in a future socialist zoo, which, for that matter, probably would not look like the profit-oriented entertainment facilities of the present day.

Despite the strong expression of affection for his wish to be an animal keeper, there is an even more important part of *It* (1923) with respect to the extension of class morality to animals. The poet describes how deep his compassion and kinship with animals are and what follows from them, “I love the creatures./When I spot a pup—/there’s a funny one—/all bald—/hangs round the baker’s—/I feel like I could cough my own liver up:/Here, doggie,/don’t be shy, dear, take this!” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 137). In other words, the poet is not only willing to give a hungry animal the shirt off his back but even his body parts. This is the kind of individual, morally grounded mode of living that he considers necessary for the well-being of his nonhuman fellows. That the Mayakovskyian self wants to help a dog in *It* (1923) surely was no accident because, as I mentioned above, dogs were his companions in real life.

How strict the artist could be about the inclusion of animals in his ethical realm can be observed in a late essay on the relation between poets and newspapers called *It Should Be Clear* (1929, own translation). Here, Mayakovsky harshly criticizes a poem that was published on the literature page of *Komsomolskaya pravda*, the organ of Komsomol’s Central Committee, the leading board of the Communist Party’s youth organization in the Soviet Union. The reason for his critique is that the poem’s author states in his verses that he killed a bird just for the fun of it. Mayakovsky refers to this as a politically inadequate content for poetry. He also denotes the incident as “a murder” (Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 5, p. 314), that is, nothing to laugh about and in no way exemplary for socialist poetry. The choice of the term murder with its morally strong connotation is striking, especially if we consider the great importance words play in Mayakovsky’s artistic conceptions.

In sum, we find a conception of political ethics in Mayakovsky’s writings that includes animals at the side of humans. It stresses the kinship between animals and humans, transcending an absolutizing difference because of at least a shared capacity to suffer. The consequence is a mode of living oriented towards compassionate companionship with and help for animals in need. Obviously, these basic moral considerations are not put forward in a philosophically logical and strict manner. But they point out the direction in which to head. Mayakovsky complements and concretizes them with other concepts.

CRUMBS OF LESSER SIZE FOR ANIMALS IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

The class struggle for politico-cultural hegemony is not only determined by the political ethic of the contending classes or class alliances in the strict sense. To win the hearts and minds of different fractions of the people, it is also necessary to establish ideas about the current society. In other words, it is inevitable to popularize worldviews about how society works, in whose favor and to whose detriment, at what costs, and in which way—good or bad.

In this context, popularization is not meant as simplified, easy explanations for complex structures or as black-and-white images of enemies. From the standpoint of class struggle from below, popularization is not a renunciation of cognition and understanding. It instead means anchoring key concepts in people’s minds by resisting class fractions or alliances, and structuring already existing, common sense ideas in the direction of these key concepts at the expense of the dominating ones. In this respect, Mayakovsky offers some critical images of the society of his time and its problems, including the situation of animals. Thus, he determines negatively, that is, by critique, what kind of society we do not want to have.

Starting with the relatively early poem *An Ode to Judges* (1915), which is a criticism of the political repression and censorship in tsarist Russia even though, according to the wording, it is about the political situation in the country of Peru. Peruvian judges forbid every good aspect of the everyday life of humans and other good things, like animals. Before the judges came, the country was, according to the poet, like the Garden of Eden: “About Peru, the flower of the planet/full of dances, birds and love,/where blossoms crown the green pomegranate/and baobabs reach to the sky above.” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 57) It is important to note that animals and love are both positively connoted here, as they form a part of what the poet describes as a good life, a good society.

However, in-midst of “Bananas! Pineapples! Joy galore!/Wine in sealed bottles shining through.../ (...) God knows where from and what for,/judges overran poor Peru.” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 57) These bureaucrats spare no one, not even the animals. While Peruvian “[c]onvicts row their galley along/over the sea in a sweltering crew” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 57), the representatives of the state “came along and imposed their bans/on birds, dances and Peruvians’ sweethearts” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 57). In other words, Mayakovsky’s critique is not reduced to the exploitation of humans in the fictional real country. It also extends to the oppression of animals, culture, and relations with women. Obviously, it matters to him how a

society deals with nonhuman creatures, such that he treats it as one aspect to be considered when assessing the state of a society.

The poet even highlights the treatment of animals. An orange and blue peacock gets “his tail bleached white” and it is “said in the prairies there once had been/wee little birds—colibri they’re called./Well, the judges caught them and shaved them/clean,/down, feathers and all” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 58). Mayakovsky’s complaints about the deteriorating conditions culminate in the exclamation “Poor peopleless, birdless Peru!” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 58) It is evident in these lines that the artist depicts a bad society and a bad life as a life without animals or with animals deprived of their beauty.

Against this animalist reading of the poem, it could be argued that the animals should be understood as an allegory for poets or artists rather than as actual animals. I do not deny the plausibility of this latter interpretation, but it does not have to exclude the former. There are two reasons for this. First, one of Mayakovsky’s selves also appears in the poem as the incarnation of poetry and art, that is, as embodied art, in addition to other humans and the animals. Second, in the last stanza, the Mayakovskyian figure of poetry and art lists himself as a victim of the judges along with the Peruvians, animals, and others. This implies that poetry is directly addressed and represented by the poet’s self and does not necessarily need to be embodied by the animals, thus opening for the animalist interpretation.

The last lines of *An Ode to Judges* (1915), in which the author, as he does throughout the poem, depicts the suffering of humans and animals alike as interconnected under the regiment of state officials, read as follows: “Those galleys—things could scarcely be worse!/I pity Peruvians! Don’t you?/Judges are a bane for dances and birds,/for me, for you, for Peru.” (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 58) Without doubt the oppression of animals is something worth objecting to when it comes to social criticism.

Mayakovsky sketches a similar picture of society and the animals’ role in it in the longer poem *Man* (1918). It is a parody of the story of Jesus Christ from the New Testament with fantastical elements. Its main character, though, is not Jesus but one of Mayakovsky’s poetic selves as an ordinary and secular human. Mayakovsky welcomes the human as the real social force in history. As in many of his works, his poetic self is confronted with an antagonist. The latter appears in the section called *Mayakovsky’s Life*. There, he is described as “the ruler of all of them,/my rival,/my enemy—vicious as a harpy./The tenderest polka-dots deck his fine stockings./Delightful,/the

stripes on the dandy’s pants./A tie/with all colours of the rainbow—/shocking!—/from his neck/to his globe-belly/crawls/askance.” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 63)

But the ruler of everything does not exist just as a single person having power. He is in the center of processes which Mayakovsky lyrically phrases as follows: “Breaking from meridians,/atlas’ arcs,/foams/the world gold-go-round,clinking:/francs,/dollars,/rubles,/crowns,/ienas,/marks.” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 62) It is at least highly probable that the artist’s words are used here to give the readers an idea of the circulation of money, if not of capital, which dominates all around the world.

In the following stanza, Mayakovsky deplores what the money circulation does to different agents: “Geniuses, chickens, horses, violins—all are sinking./Elephants, drown./Trifles too./In throats,/in nostrils,/in ears/sounds its sticky tinkling./‘Save us!’/everywhere the groan breaks through.” (Mayakovsky, 1986, pp. 62–63) Put differently, intelligent humans like scientists or poets, animals, and art are absorbed by the circulation of money and become alienated, just as in the capitalist market. Therefore, they cry for help. In typical Mayakovskyian manner, the agents themselves—humans, animals, and things—call for their rescue even though some of them are not capable of calling at all.

It is “in the middle” of these processes of circulation, commodification, and alienation, “contoured by an unflappable hem,/on an island-one giant flowery carpet,” that Mayakovsky’s opponent resides. And the situation for geniuses, chickens, horses, and violins gets even worse. “All’s perished around,/but, like a drill into the sky,/your most gorgeous rank/to honour,/ comes: Br-r-a-vo!/Eviva!/Hurrah!/Banzai!/Hoch!/Hip-hip!/Viv!/Hosanna!” (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 63) In more accessible words, the ruler of all is praised all around the world despite, or perhaps because of, the downfall of everything, including humans and animals, disguised in economic wealth. Consent to and identification with progress at the expense of workers, animals, and culture sounds like the identification with Western civilization that Adorno and Horkheimer convincingly reveal as its catastrophic continuation in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The portrayal of Mayakovsky’s ruler of all in the poem could also be an earlier futurist version of the iconic picture *Butcher of the World* (1986) by English contemporary artist Sue Coe, at least with respect to animals. Coe’s artwork shows a well-saturated capitalist standing on a pyramid of dead animal body parts and holding bulging bags with money in hands that bleed. The image of society and the bad life provided by Mayakovsky in this part

of *Man* (1918), though, has more to offer than Coe's drawing, although both artists generally consider animals alongside humans and art as being subjected to exploitation and oppression in their social criticism.

What makes the extract of *Man* (1918) stand out in the context of Mayakovsky's earlier work and similar to Coe's is that it points to the role of money, or more precisely of capital, in the process of alienating the human from himself and his kind, from animals, and from art—all symbols of the good life. An understanding of society in terms of political economy and a rudimentary critique of the capitalist economy comes into the picture, even with respect to the treatment of animals. The extract from the poem also gives an impression of the connection between the ruling person's power and money. In fact, the ruler presiding over the world on top of alienated humans, animals, and things—and who is hailed for doing so—is a simplified but not an inadequate description of what capitalists and the governing political forces are doing today.

It must be noted that the animals call for help in *Man* (1918), indicating that they need a change of their situation and that they are—on a basic level—aware of it. I will return to the topos of social change for animals and their agency later. We should mention, though, that caution is advised because in the Mayakovskyian cosmos of art, embodiments of all sorts—humans, animals, and things alike—are generally capable of acting as agents. To read the depiction of animals calling for help as a direct opinion of animals in real life is therefore not recommended.

The final sketch of a society I want to analyze here belongs to Mayakovsky's cycle on the West. He wrote it during his trip to North America in 1925. It is called *A Skyscraper Dissected* (1926) and was published for the first time in 1926. The poem is a portrait of US capitalist society, which the artist visited. It is intended as a comparison to its Soviet counterpart, obviously favoring the latter. Despite its propagandist function, it is full of insights for the purposes of the present essay.

Proceeding from the 90-story skyscraper's bottom to its top, Mayakovsky assigns different scenes that symbolize varying negative features of capitalist society to its various floors. On the first floor, we find jewelers endowing people with splendor and policemen guarding the rich people's money. On the third floor are offices in which "gains and losses" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 154) are accumulated with "slavish sweat" for a capitalist called "William Sprat" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 155). On the fifth lives an aging woman who seems to be desperate because she

has not been able to marry a man, and thus feels that her life is unfulfilled. On the seventh floor, an athletic man beats up his wife because she had an affair with another man. On the tenth, a married couple reads an ad for financing a new car. On the fortieth, a music-hall artist hires a detective to spy on her husband to force a divorce, and on the ninetieth, a painter woos his landlord's daughter and also tries to get his landlord to buy one of his pictures.

It is immediately noticeable that Mayakovsky does not focus on a strict reflection of the hierarchized class society. He also does not adhere to a pattern according to the spheres of production and consumption. He composes his skyscraper from different milieus of both realms, the economy and the rest of civil society, which was a typical approach for the poet. The issues he criticizes in the poem are manifold. They include some of his classic topics of critique like the power relation between men and women, the commodification of art, the alienated, particularly petty-bourgeois mode of living, and so on.

The two important parts of *A Skyscraper Dissected* (1926) with respect to the human-animal relation also reflect on the spheres of exploitation and consumption. While Mayakovsky's criticism of jewelry and money-making in offices is directed at the way of life associated with it, he displays the meat production business in the poem as the epitome of capitalist exploitation. On the thirtieth floor of the skyscraper—the only one I left out so far—is the headquarter of a stock corporation that invested in the meat industry. There, the following happens, "Shareholders in conference jam,/dividing billions/with snarl and scuffle—/the profits of a firm/manufacturing ham/out of top-quality/Chicago/dog-offal." (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 155)

The poet's choice of meat production as a metaphor for capitalist profit-making in the United States is not surprising because in the early 20th century it was one of the leading sectors of the US economy and probably the biggest of its sort in the world. The reference to Chicago correctly points to its historical and economic-geographical center. Particularly striking is Mayakovsky's use of dog parts as the substance for meat because the main ingredient for meat in those times came from pigs, not dogs. Mayakovsky deeply sympathized with dogs, as I already showed above (see chapters Mayakovsky's Animals and the Animal Mayakovsky and Kinship and Political Ethics), and thus put special emphasis on the contradiction between the meat capitalists and this animal.

Although the exact order of the floors generally does not seem to be of much importance for the artist's image, one exception is made for black workers and animals. Towards the end of the skyscraper description the poem says: "Alone/in the restaurant/next to the sky/a Negro cleaner/eats sizeable leavings,/while rats/clean up crumbs/of lesser size." (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 156) In other words, black workers and animals, here embodied as rats, do not really have a place in the skyscraper. The former just have to work in it, especially in its restaurant where others enjoy themselves and the view. The latter are at best illegal inhabitants. And both groups have to consume what the residents and visitors leave behind as trash to survive. This is the place that capitalist US society assigns to black workers and animals.

Taken together, it is this kind of society, comprising the various problems of capitalist society, including its relations to animals, which leads Mayakovsky to his hostile attitude towards its totality at the end of the poem, "I look/in a blend/of anger and boredom/at the inmates/of the ninety-storey shack." (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 156) His alternative is relatively clear: a revolutionary society with the Soviet Union as its model. "I'd meant/to go 7,000 miles forward," that is, from the Soviet Union to the USA, "but it looks,/I've been taken/seven years back" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 156), meaning from revolutionary to prerevolutionary Russia.

It is impossible to discuss this poem without mentioning the striking parallels with the depiction of capitalist society in *The Skyscraper* (1934) by the early Max Horkheimer, Adorno's congenial partner at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. Of course, both portrayals of skyscrapers differ in form. Horkheimer's description is written as an aphorism while Mayakovsky's is a poem. Furthermore, Horkheimer provides a more straightforward Marxist view of stratification by attending to the relations of production and domination. But he pays less attention to imagery, cultural problems, and the mode of living in capitalist societies. Horkheimer (1934/1978) is clearer in his architectonic metaphor, using it to convey a clear hierarchy of society from the "feuding tycoons" at the top to "the animal hell in human society" (p. 66) in the skyscraper's basement, which is a "slaughterhouse" (p. 67).

However, both authors have in common that they consider animals at all. This element alone makes them special in their time and compared to their contemporary Marxists. The theorist and the artist also both situate animals at the losing end of capitalist society, though from different angles. Horkheimer looks at the production

process in the basement, Mayakovsky at consumption at the top. The interconnections between human misery in capitalism—be it economic, political, or cultural—and the plight of animals are also addressed by both critics. Interestingly, they recognize the proximities and differences between the situations of super-exploited humans and animals. Finally, Horkheimer and Mayakovsky share the criticism of the meat industry as an integral, perhaps paradigmatic, part of an exploitative, oppressive society that needs to be overcome. In sum, they draw the same conclusion: There is no place for animals in capitalist societies. At best, they can survive when they take what trickles down from the table of wealthy humans. Normally, however, they are processed for meat by capitalists so that some "shareholders in conference jam,/dividing billions/with snarl and scuffle" (Mayakovsky, 1985, p. 155).

The three models of capitalist society outlined so far, which Mayakovsky developed between 1915 and 1925, share several common features with regard to the human-animal relation. First of all, the poet takes animals into consideration in his images of what he depicts as the society to be overturned. Their fate is relevant to him. He also conceptualizes animal and human oppression and exploitation as interrelated, recognizing the differences in form. The artist places animals at the margins or the bottom of society. Furthermore, there is a slight change and a progression in the three images in how Mayakovsky grasps the role of animals in capitalist societies. While first conceptualizing it broadly as politically oppressive, he then relates it to economic exploitation and meat production. However, all these descriptions remain vague and are co-determined by aesthetic considerations because art, in the sense of form, cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of reality.

SUPER-EXPLOITATION IN CHICAGO'S MEAT INDUSTRY

With his choice of form, the level of concreteness in Mayakovsky's treatment of animals changes too. The travelogue about his trip to North America in 1925 is written extensively in prose. This helps further develop his ideas and critique of animal exploitation and oppression in capitalist societies. This is particularly true because he directly deals with the US meat industry. Thus, his concepts and criticisms can contribute to the working class's struggle for politico-cultural hegemony by conveying an image of what capitalists do to animals and why it is wrong. However, one has to keep in mind that even

Mayakovsky's writings that appear the most factual contain elements and motifs of fantastical fiction.

Mayakovsky's most important prose piece on animal exploitation is his account of his journey to Chicago, the "HOG Butcher for the World" (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 86), and to its "bleeding heart, the abattoirs" (p. 88). In fact, while Horkheimer expresses the tragedy of slaughter animals in a nutshell in his aphorism *The Skyscraper* (1934), the Soviet visitor gives a similar impressive description of the largest meat industry in the world back in the day on a few pages in *My Discovery of America* (1926). The parallels to Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), if not intended, are unmistakable.

Mayakovsky starts his depiction of the Chicago abattoirs, "the vilest sights I have ever seen," with the conditions of the animals on their way to slaughter, describing their super-exploitation for economic profit and summarizing their suffering.

"You drive straight in (...) onto an extremely long wooden bridge. This bridge stretches above thousands of pens for bulls, calves and sheep, and for an innumerable quantity of the world's pigs. A squealing, mooing and bleating overpowers this place—the like of which will not be heard again until the end of the world, when people and livestock get squashed between merging rock faces. Through your tightly clenched nostrils seeps the sour stench of bulls' urine, and ten types of cattle crap in a measure of millions.

The imaginary—or the real—smell of an entire sea of spilt blood sends your head spinning.

Flies, in a variety of sort and calibre, flutter across from puddles and liquid filth, now onto the eyes of cows, and now onto your eyes.

Long wooden corridors carry off the recalcitrant livestock. If the rams will not go of their own accord, a trained goat will lead them.

Where the corridors end is where the knives of the pig- and bull-slaughterers begin.

A machine hoists the live squealing pigs by a hook, having caught them by a living leg, throws them on to a conveyor belt, and they drift legs upward past an Irishman or a Negro who sticks his knife into the porcine throat. Each man knifes several thousand pigs a day, boasted our abattoir escort." (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, pp. 88–89)

Following these observations, Mayakovsky turns to the socioeconomic structure of the meat industry. He focuses on the oligopoly in US meat production, whose members he does not recall completely adequately, exclaiming "Wilson!/Star!/Swift!/Hammond!/Armour!" (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005), p. 89). He underscores the

companies' economic power and importance for the US and lists some of the problems they produce apart from animal super-exploitation. For example, he accuses them of forming a cartel, even though the law forbids it, of exploiting "fifteen thousand employees in its offices alone" (p. 90), binding workers by treacherous methods of payment, and of monopolizing vast resources under their control. Additionally, the reporter-poet displays the connection between meat production on the one hand, and war and health issues on the other. "Even during the World War there were tinned foods on the front lines with modified relabeling. In the hunt for fresh profits, Armour was getting rid of four-year-old eggs and tinned meat as old as the call-up age—twenty years old!" (p. 90)

Mayakovsky finally describes the political power of the US meat packers which were geographically concentrated in the largest city in Illinois as follows:

"Wall Street is first of the capitals, the capital of the American dollar. Chicago is the second capital, the capital of industry.

Therefore it wouldn't be so incorrect to put Chicago in place of Washington. Pig-slaughtering Wilson has no less an influence on American life than had Woodrow of that ilk." (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 91)

The politicoeconomic power that the US meat industry generated in those days on the backs of animals and wage laborers is also captured in a passage in Mayakovsky's long poem *150,000,000* (1921). Here, the figurative US President Woodrow Wilson eats humans and animals to get stronger, "And people,/people and beasts alike,/it popped by the handful into its mouth." (Mayakovsky, 2013, p. 239) In other words, the poet points to the exploitation of human labor and animals as an explanation for the political power of the United States.

In sum, the Soviet traveler gives a pronounced and concise critique of the interconnected exploitation of animals and wage laborers in capitalist meat production. He does not fail to recognize the special form of treatment that animals endure, nor that blacks and Irish workers represent the majority of the human working poor in the US meat industry. The historical continuity in human super-exploitation from the 1920s to today is striking, even though the ethnic background of the workers has changed to some extent. Mayakovsky also lets his empathy with animals shine through, identifying the "squealing, mooing and bleating" as the horrific tone that will be the soundtrack of "the end of the world" (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 88). The image Mayakovsky generates is still transferable to the conditions in the meat sector today with his references to the wealth of the oligopolistic

companies and the methods they apply to accumulate profits, even at the cost of the health of the people consuming their meat products. Meat production may no longer be the leading branch of the whole economy in the imperialist metropolises, but it still dominates the food chain in terms of sales and profits.

Mayakovsky's report of the Chicago slaughterhouses ends, again similarly to Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), with praise for the worker's organization and the Communist Party doing their work in Illinois's first city. However, before he hails "the greatest opposition encountered in America" (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 91), he comes back to how working in the Chicago Stockyards changes the workers with regard to the animals. "The abattoirs," he writes, "do not endure without trace." There are only two options to cope with it individually. "Having worked there for a bit, you will either turn vegetarian, or you will start quietly killing people." (p. 91) In other words, either you adopt at least a mode of living that is at peace with animals, or you redirect the aggression developed when killing in the slaughterhouses at humans. This is an easy choice, even more so today than in 1925, particularly when you consider yourself a socialist revolutionary with special interest in the revolution of everyday culture.

WORK, SELF-DEFENSE, AND REVOLUTION

So far, I have outlined Mayakovsky's revolutionary ethics with regard to animals, his ideas on the role of animals in capitalist society, and on their exploitation by meat capital. It is particularly interesting, though, that the poet did not just criticize the exploitation and oppression of animals. He also portrays them as agents, acknowledging their capacities and contributions to society. He valorizes them as different but politically and morally relevant members of society, thus changing the approach to how they should be treated. This is important with respect to forming a hegemony that includes a culture open to the reconstruction of human-animal relations for the good of both partners in the relationship.

As I already mentioned, we must keep in mind in the context of the following discussion that even things can act in Mayakovsky's art. That is why we must be cautious about transferring his artistic depiction of what animals can do into reality. Additionally, there are parts in his writings in which real animal agency blurs with fantastical and hyperbolic elements of art. Nevertheless, it is possible to distill forms of animal agency that correspond with Marx's and go beyond the traditional images according to which animals appear to be special forms of a passive nature to master or as living machines.

For example, towards the end of the long poem *150,000,000* (1921), Mayakovsky describes the basis of the future commune. Partners of the poor and young masses at work are the "beasts/with your ribs showing,/who have forgotten about the oats eaten up by people/who labored, carrying someone or something,/until, whipped to death, you collapsed completely" (Mayakovsky, 2013, p. 246). Here, it is indisputable for the poet that animals not only suffered but labored alongside humans. They literally worked themselves to death in the old society. In other words, animals did work and they were in some respect exploited. It is not addressed, however, to what extent they labor consciously or freely, or how the exploitation functions.

A far less dramatic depiction of animal labor is given in *A Bookful of Beasts* (1978), which introduces animals to young children. After presenting several other animals in funny and simple rhymes, Mayakovsky turns to the camel saying "Here's a Camel. On the Camel/Loads are carried,/people travel./He lives amongst the desert sands,/Eats nasty-tasting bushes, and,/A beast of burden,/strong/and sound,/Is hard at work the whole year round." (Mayakovsky, 1978, p. 10) It is self-evident to Mayakovsky to recognize the camel's work as a beast of burden. Furthermore, the animal's hard work and his properties—strength and soundness—instill respect in the Soviet author. The acknowledgment of animal labor in both cases presented here implies the recognition of animals as colleagues and co-members in the collective of the exploited and oppressed, even though this is not further or profoundly conceptualized.

Mayakovsky does not stop at recognizing animals' agency at work. In a small, but for this essay important part of his travelogue *My Discovery of America* (1926), he tells the story of his visit to a bullfighting arena in Mexico during his trip to North America in 1925. He starts by describing the scenery of the "open-air circus." Comparable to contemporary big sports events, "thousands of carriages filled with society ladies with their tame monkeys, driving around in their 'Rolls', and tens of thousands of pedestrians push their way towards the steel edifice." Inside the arena, Mayakovsky observes the separation of class society. "The aristocrats take their tickets for the shady expensive side, the plebs for the cheap side in the sun." (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 20)

Then, the fighting begins.

"[W]hen they stick the first spears into the bull's neck, when the picadors cut into the bull's side, and the bull turns gradually red, when its maddened horns smash into the horses' bellies, and the picadors' horses tear

about momentarily with their guts hanging out—that’s when the depraved joy of the auditorium reaches boiling point.” (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, pp. 20–21)

Mayakovsky does not share the audience’s enthusiasm at all. He watches the cruel events in which bulls kill horses and toreros kill bulls with disgust and rejection.

After he observes this last horrible scene, Mayakovsky takes sides. He reports experiencing “a supreme joy” when “the bull managed to drive a horn between the man’s ribs, taking revenge for his comrade-bulls” (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 21). The Soviet visitor not only sympathizes with the animal who does not tolerate further abuses. He also expresses some form of agency in the bull’s self-defense without raising it to the level of resistance in the strict sense, which instead includes conscious, planned, and mostly collectively organized actions.

It should be remembered here that Mayakovsky also characterizes the behavior of slaughter animals in Chicago’s abattoirs as “recalcitrant” (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 89), not willing to cooperate. In the bull’s case, however, his choice of words even indicates parallels to human reactions (“revenge”) and some form of species solidarity among the bulls (“comrade-bulls”).

The traveling observer

“could not look, and just didn’t want to see” the rest of the show, “as they presented the sword to the chief murderer and he stuck it into the bull’s heart. Only from the rabid uproar in the crowd did I gather that the deed was done. Down below, the skinners were waiting for the carcass with their knives. (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 21)

Mayakovsky resorts to his typical hyperbolicism in light of this early form of an animal-based cultural industry and its connection to the production chain of animal goods. He articulates his wish to equip the bull with even better weapons than his horns and to instruct him how to use his new instruments, “The only thing I regretted was that it was not possible to mount machine guns on the bull’s horns and train him to shoot.” (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 21)

The remarkable aspect here is that Mayakovsky’s solidarity with the tortured bull and his actions of animal self-defense leads to what could be termed the betrayal of his own species. The unruly agency of the bull influences the poet to the point where he supports those who fight back against oppression and exploitation regardless of the species. Accordingly, in his report, Mayakovsky explicitly raises the question of loyalty with respect to the injured toreros, given that they subdue other creatures. He asks, “Why should one have to feel sorry for such specimens of humanity?” (Mayakovsky, 1926/2005, p. 21) Put

differently, the agency of the exploited and oppressed not to accept maltreatment, however different it may be between humans and animals, connects them more than their species affiliation, at least as far as Mayakovsky is concerned.

This interspecies comradeship is expressed in an even more explicit and provoking manner in his fantastical epic poem *150,000,000* (1921) about the socialist revolution in Russia and the Soviet Union inhabitants’ fight against the foreign invasion in its aftermath, especially against the USA as its new main rival in globalized class struggle. Here, animals are introduced as a part of the revolutionary collective alongside the Soviet citizens, inanimate nature, and things.

First, “one hundred fifty million people” enter the class war with their US antagonist. They are followed by “billions of fish,/trillions of insects,/wild animals,/house pets.” Finally, “hundreds of provinces,/with everything that was built/and stood/or lived in them” join the battle, “everything that could move,/and everything that couldn’t,/everything that barely moved,/creeping,/crawling,/swimming—/all of it burst forth like lava,/like lava!” (Mayakovsky, 2013, p. 201)

To take this image literally would be misleading, mainly because Mayakovsky blurs the distinction between animals and the Soviet people and because this kind of exaggeration, challenging stereotypes and too narrowly realistic depictions in art, is an integral element of his aesthetics. It is this mixing up of art and politics in reality which leads contemporary animalists like philosopher and artist Fahim Amir, for example, to misconceptions of the working class and animal resistance. Amir (2018), among other things, takes conservative politician and thinker Edmund Burke’s pejorative label “swinish multitude” (p. 63) for disobedient pigs and workers at the turn of the nineteenth century too strictly, turning animals into members of the working class and their noncooperation into resistance.

However, at the same time, it is impossible to pass over Mayakovsky’s repeated consideration of animals as participating in revolutionary change. His sketches, ambiguous as they may be with respect to animals’ specific agency in a rupture with capitalist social relations, point to the reshaping of what Lenin (1918/1964) and other traditional Marxists considered “the people” (pp. 421–422) in the plebeian sense. With this concept, they denote the scope and composition of the class alliance that can bring about a socialist revolution, not the imagined community in the biologist or culturally conservative, nationalist sense. If we take Mayakovsky’s animals as the

representatives of those fractions or social groups of capitalist class society which have politicized the super-exploitation and oppression of workers and peasants in the periphery, of women, migrants, animals, and of nature during the post-Fordist phase, the construction of a new “historical bloc” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 168) made of the working class plus the socialist currents of the new social movements could be a proposal worth considering.

On the other hand, Mayakovsky is not advocating any form of identity politics based on species in his poems. It may be self-evident that in the clash between the Soviet masses and Woodrow Wilson as the allegory of US capitalism, “The people/surrounding the field of battle—/never mind if it was inordinate!—/split into two groups./On one side,/in ermines/and beaver furs,/on the other,/shining blue in greasy work shirts.” But in *150,000,000* (1921), even the animals are divided into haves and have-nots, profiteers and workers, accordingly taking sides in international class struggle: “Horses too/were thrown into/the mix:/with the fur-coats,/an Arabian racing stallion;/and with the grease-shirts,/the heavy hulks of carthorses./The workhorses shot out a few neighs,/talking some horsey trash to the stallion.” (Mayakovsky, 2013, p. 231) In other words, it is the position in the social class structure and the fact of being exploited and oppressed that determines which side animals are on, not their species per se.

Taken together, Mayakovsky recognizes animals as working and self-defending, noncooperative agents, and he depicts them as a part of the revolutionary collective, although their role is rather vaguely and hyperbolically described. He thus opens up a discourse on the human-animal relation in society and how animals should be treated in light of their various capacities and agencies. If the poet’s depiction of animals’ agency could be considered to be only partially true today, it does imply that it is not permissible to treat animals as use values for the production of food, clothes, or as machines for the same purpose. Remodeling the agencies of animals according to scientific insights into their intellectual, social, laboring, and other capacities in the politico-cultural realm of society supports the effort to organize a socialist animalist hegemony and thus the project of a social rupture with the capitalist forms of exploitation, super-exploitation, and oppression—be it human, animal, or natural.

FORECASTS OF AN ANIMALIST SOCIALISM

So strongly I hate
 every kind of dead thing!
So much I adore

 every kind of life!”
(Mayakovsky, 1985, pp. 110–111)

I see horse-freedom
and equal rights for cows.
(Khlebnikov, 1997, p. 176)

In addition to a straightforward political program, organization, equipped activists, and so on, images of what to fight for are needed to struggle for an animalist socialist hegemony in capitalist societies. These glimpses at a utopia must not be created and understood as completely defined models or as instructions for prefigurative action that have to be implemented strictly. As with economist and bureaucratized socialism, utopian or cultural socialism should finally be removed from the table as the royal road to liberation, particularly after subcultures and the leading liberal currents of the new social movements have been integrated into progressive neoliberal capitalism and deradicalized during the last decades one after the other. Today more than ever, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (Adorno, 1951/2005, p. 39) because even living rightly has become part of the capitalist business as usual. You get eco-energy while nature is still super-exploited and increasingly commodified. You get your vegan diet while meat production rises. You can even watch your movies and series about black revolutionaries, for example, the Illinois chairman of the Black Panther Party Fred Hampton. But dare to form a revolutionary organization today! Ideas of a better future, of a good life, and mode of living—at least on the cultural terrain—should point to the new direction in which to head today and inspire the masses to explore new ways forward, integrating cultural with socioeconomic and political class struggle on a socialist basis rather than reaffirming culturalist ideas of the post-68-era, which had their justification due to their sociohistorical constellation and developments, and which hide behind a wisdom of the past.

As I showed at the beginning of this essay, Mayakovsky’s *Ode to the Revolution* (1918) can be regarded as the prototype of utopian imagery for animalist socialist class struggle in the politico-cultural realm. A revolutionary seaman risks his own life and hops on a sinking ship to save a cat from a certain death amidst the social upheaval against the ruling class. However, this idea is not the only one in the poet’s work directed towards a socialist future that includes improved human-animal relations. Mayakovsky’s vision of being an animal keeper in a future zoo in the long poem *It* (1923) mentioned above also belongs here (see chapter Kinship and Political Ethics).

The motif of a future zoo reappears in the artist's penultimate play *The Bedbug* (1929). The comedy's general storyline depicts the life, death, and resurrection of Ivan Prisyppkin. Prisyppkin, a former worker and member of the Communist Party, is the embodiment of a petty bourgeois of the early Soviet society who revives the old byt in a new Soviet form. He wants to ascend socially through a "red wedding" (Mayakovsky, 1961, p. 249) with Elzevir Davidovna Renaissance, whose parents own a hairdressing salon. But during the wedding a fire breaks out. Prisyppkin survives. However, together with a bedbug, he is frozen in the water with which the fire brigade extinguishes the fire. 50 years later, in 1979, the Institute for the Resurrection of People decides to revive him and, in the process, the bedbug too. After giving him back his life, Prisyppkin is treated like an animal by the scientists and politicians of the future because he drinks alcohol, sings schmaltzy songs, plays romantic music on the guitar, and is touched by love. All these aspects of the mode of living do not exist anymore in the future society. Both the bedbug and Prisyppkin, who was at first "mistakenly classified (...) not only as a representative of *homo sapiens*, but even as a member of the highest group of the species—the working class" (Mayakovsky, 1961, p. 298, italics in the original), end up in a zoo. Its director presents them to the public as a specimen of the extinct species of the bug and the philistine. When Prisyppkin suddenly addresses the public during the presentation, a tumult breaks out, and he is returned to his cage.

At first glance, one could assume that Mayakovsky identifies with the sterile and sanitized future society in which feelings, art, and other elements of pleasure do not exist because they might actually have a reprehensible form. But the opposite is true. As Mayakovsky himself told the participants of a discussion on the play in February 1929, there is no positive character in the comedy (see Mayakovsky, 1980, vol. 5, p. 311). The author rather satirizes the petty bourgeois, his way of life in the early Soviet society, and the handling of these problems simultaneously. The future byt—hyperrational, unemotional, seemingly without art, and so on—appears to be an extrapolation of these tendencies that existed at the end of the 1920s in the Soviet Union.

Against this background and keeping in mind that in Mayakovsky's poetic universe the zoo is basically connoted positively (see the section on Kinship and Political Ethics above), the future zoo changes its meaning in *The Bedbug* (1929). It is no longer a place of reliable science, a place to understand animals and connect with them. It is rather a cage for those things with which society cannot

cope. Interestingly, both the philistine and the bedbug, allegories for parasite life forms that society should get rid of, inhabit the zoo and turn into figures that, by their contrast to the future mode of living, reveal the problems with the treatment of the old way of life.

The grandiose aspect of this play with respect to the zoo and the human-animal relation is that Mayakovsky's comedy raises the question of what kind of zoo we want to live in. Is it a zoological garden in which a new mode of living is developed that includes new relations to art, animals, and love, among other things—in other words, a form of a good zoo like in *It* (1923)? Or do we intend to wake up in a zoo where philistines meet bureaucrats, and one does not know who has locked up whom?

Remarkably, Mayakovsky gives a possible answer to this question in the long poem *150,000,000* (1921), published approximately eight years before *The Bedbug* premiered. In this epic about the October Revolution and its struggle against the US-backed intervention against it, the poet defines the revolutionary demos. Put differently, he outlines for whom the political, socioeconomic, and cultural revolution is made and who constitutes the postrevolutionary political entity or zoopolitical collective for which socialist society is organized.

"[T]he will/of the revolution,/cast beyond the final barrier" in *150,000,000* (1921) is articulated by "the meeting/that has amassed/into one giant lump of machine bodies/the carcasses of men and beasts." (Mayakovsky, 2013, pp. 202–203) In correspondence with his aesthetics, according to Mayakovsky the people of the revolution consists of human wage laborers, animals, and technology. "[T]his/is hands,/paws,/claws,/levers,/all thrust/into the rarified air/in sworn allegiance." (Mayakovsky, 2013, p. 203)

And as if he wants to make clear the tripartite zoo-technological alliance and its internal structure, the poet lets the new demos declare their common will in a specific order. The human wage laborer starts: "We've come in our millions,/millions of laborers,/millions of workers and servants./We've come from apartments,/we've escaped from warehouses,/from arcades lit up by flames." Enter the neglected things, or—in Marxist terminology—the unused productive forces, which are needed to build the new society: "We've come in our millions,/millions of things—/disfigured,/broken,/in ruins." (Mayakovsky, 2013, p. 203) They are followed by animals: "We've come down from the mountains,/we've crawled out of the forest,/out of fields gnawed on by years./We've come/in our millions, millions of livestock—/wild,/dim-witted,/and starving." (Mayakovsky, 2013, pp. 203–204)

In this extract from Mayakovsky's first long poem after the October Revolution, we encounter a utopian image of a future socialist society in which the foundational democratic form of rule integrates things and animals alongside humans. It is they who need to be represented and whose interests have to be taken into account when exercising political power, though maybe not in the same way or with the same weight in all aspects as humans. It is at least noticeable in this context that Mayakovsky, who actually was a big fan of the most recent technology during his life, does not reduce the reasonable development of the productive forces merely to the benefit of humans either. In the future society of the long poem *The Flying Proletarian* (1925), "they manufacture/from clouds/artificial sour cream/and milk" (Mayakovsky, 2015, p. 150). In other words, cows are spared the fate of having to produce milk for humans.

In light of animals being members of the revolutionary masses and of the postrevolutionary new zootechnological demos, it is hardly surprising that in *War and the World* (1917) inanimate nature, animals, and humans together welcome the end of the war that is the subject of this long poem. For the future is, at least as far as Mayakovsky is concerned, a peaceful one for humans, animals, and nature. "No lips'll suffice for the smiling of the populace./All—/out of flats/into squares—/out!/Like silver balls,/from metropolis to metropolis,/let's toss our merriment,/laugh and shout!/One can't understand/is it bird,/flower/or air—/sweet-smelling/and mottled,/yet it sets all faces/on fire everywhere,/makes one's brain spin/like the sweetest wine/ever bottled./And not only people/joy's colours unfurl/all over their beaming faces;/animals stylishly/curl their fur./Yesterday stormy,/seas become gracious,/lie down/at man's feet/and begin to purr." (Mayakovsky, 1986, p. 53)

EPILOGUE, OR: HOOLIGAN COMMUNISM AND A NEW MYSTERY-BOUFFE

It is known that Lenin was not happy about the publication of Mayakovsky's long poem *150,000,000* (1921) by the state authorities. The poet sent a copy with a dedication and a "Communist-Futurist greeting" signed by Mayakovsky and several other of his futurist friends to the revolution's leader. But the latter reacted with accusations towards the People's Commissar of Education Lunacharsky for having allowed the printing of 5,000 copies instead of 1,500. Later on, Lenin changed his opinion to a certain degree. He told Lunacharsky that the poem is "very interesting literature" and "a special form of

Communism," qualifying and disqualifying it at the same time as "hooligan Communism" (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 162).

From today's perspective of building a socialist counterhegemony that includes new social relations with animals, though, hooligan communism may not have been such a bad idea. The animal-related images and fantastic elements of Mayakovsky's poetry and prose turn out to be farsighted 100 years into the future from the October Revolution. They anticipate a wider approach to whom the political, socioeconomic, and cultural revolution, which together form the socialist revolution, should serve beyond the proletarian masses and oppressed people. They seem to be useful instruments on the terrain of cultural class struggle against the bourgeois hegemony, in which animals are either means of production provided to capital by nature for free or commodities for individual consumption as pets.

Mayakovsky's writings contain a revolutionary political ethic and a new mode of living open to relating peacefully to animals. In works like *Humane to Horses* (1918), the poet points out the kinship between humans and other animals in suffering and beyond, identifying and showing solidarity with them. The mode of living that he envisions in works like *It* (1923) is one of sacrifice for the well-being of animals, even if Mayakovsky's exaggerations are taken into account as typical of his art.

However, unlike most animal ethicists, the poet does not stop here. He puts forward a straightforward, socio-theoretical critique of animal oppression in *An Ode to Judges* (1915), of their super-exploitation in *Man* (1918), and outlines their role in the capitalist society in *A Skyscraper Dissected* (1926). Thus, Mayakovsky conveys a perception of what is done to animals in our current society, denouncing it as wrong from a historical materialist standpoint. This criticism is underpinned by his description of animal treatment by meat companies in the early 20th century US meat industry with its home base in Chicago. In his travelogue *My Discovery of America* (1926), as in *A Skyscraper Dissected* (1926), he accuses meat capitalists of degrading nonhuman creatures to mere production inputs for making profit.

Furthermore, the revolutionary poet demonstrates various aspects of animal agency such that the dominant ideas of what animals are and of how they should be treated according to their abilities and capacities are confronted with alternatives. In his epic *150,000,000* (1921) and in the children's book *A Bookful of Beasts* (1978), animals appear as laboring fellow workers of humans. Some forms of animal noncooperation and self-defense are sketched in his observations of bullfighting in Mexico in

My Discovery of America (1926). Most importantly, though, Mayakovsky describes his alliance of forces in the revolutionary process in *150,000,000* (1921), in which he considers animals as forming an integral, though not leading, part.

The last tools from Mayakovsky's box for waging cultural class struggle for an animalist socialism today are his utopian ideas about how the future relations between animals and humans could be organized. The paradigmatic poem *Ode to the Revolution* (1918) indicates that socialist revolutionaries should rescue animals in the process of the revolution, too. The long poem *150,000,000* (1921) imagines the people of the new society including animals as members of the demos. And in *War and the World* (1917), animals stand side to side with the subaltern humans in welcoming the restoration of peace.

These images and motifs, criticisms, ideas for a political ethic, and a new mode of living stem from a temporally and geographically different era in social development. As I have pointed out, they are not without contradictions in Mayakovsky's work. Nor are they elaborated in all their aspects, nor can all of them be applied and copied today without rethinking and remodeling. The animalist interpretation of his works itself in the present essay may be questioned as well.

However, all the passages interpreted here challenge everyday life in capitalist society. The critique regards (a) the prevailing political ethic, according to which animals can be eaten as meat and cherished as pets at the same time; (b) the mode of living, which is built, among other things, on the super-exploitation of animals and the consumption of animal commodities or animals as commodities; and (c) the dominant social ideas about animals in the bourgeois common sense, in which animals are living biological machines or dumb instruments for humans' survival and entertainment.

Furthermore, Mayakovsky's poetry and prose direct the criticism of human-animal relations at its heart, socioeconomic super-exploitation by meat capital, and our view of the potential of a socialist revolution in the future—for wage laborers and animals. Thus, the poet from a different time and space still delivers more than “some antique/yet awesome weapon” (Mayakovsky, 2015, p. 212) for the cultural battle of the working class that Gramsci envisioned as necessary in imperialist capitalist societies with developed civil societies.

Despite Lenin's rather disparaging opinion of Mayakovsky's poem *150,000,000* (1921), the poet's insistence on a third revolution and his “hooliganism” in art cannot and should not be read against the former's political

approach and program. As I stated emphatically, Mayakovsky considered himself and his cultural revolutionary work to be fully in line with Marx's socioeconomic and Lenin's political revolution, not to mention the several long and short poems the artist wrote about the leader of red October. Mayakovsky's revolution of the spirit should have complemented the other two on the cultural terrain; it sought to build on them, and it should have closed the cycle of the socialist revolution.

This specific conceptualization of the interrelation between socioeconomic, political, and theoretical-cultural class struggle, having its core in the socioeconomic relations of exploitation, is even more viable today, particularly in the imperialist capitalist states, than it was in Mayakovsky's days, for at least three reasons. First, capital has really and formally subsumed culture (not without contradictions and resistance) and has turned everyday life in capitalist civil society into an extension of capitalist production. This means that culture and life in civil society are largely produced as commodities. On the other hand, the mode of living is dominantly (not totally) formed according to the consumption of commodities produced by capital for basic and other needs in what is commonly referred to as the post-Fordist, neoliberal epoch. Second, Mayakovsky's notion is highly current, because the ruling class is waging class struggle on all terrains. Accordingly, the working class needs to conduct it on “the theoretical[cultural; C.S.], the political and the practical economical” as well, to “form one harmonious and well-planned entity” (Engels, 1875, paragraph 10) to at least hold its position. Not to mention that it will have to initiate an offensive itself. The third reason for the viability of Mayakovsky's approach is that the relatively independent spheres of society and the struggles on their respective terrains are dialectically interrelated—from the bottom to the top, that is, with its origins in the capitalist production relations to the very ideas of individuals and their consumption of food (mode of living), and across the different terrains—more than ever before in the history of capitalist development.

Against this background, the struggle for hegemony on the theoretical-cultural terrain is just one among others, even more so when we only look at animals and if we theoretically abstract from the “sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind” (p. 183) that Gramsci (1996) considered to be the second indispensable element of forming a hegemony in addition to the cultural aspects. However, if animal liberation is to be realized by an animalist socialist project, it is impossible not to take into account the bourgeois anti-animal culture that justifies, obscures, and

simultaneously makes animal super-exploitation livable for the masses in everyday life. In this context, it would not be intelligent to waive the weapons which the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky developed and stored about a hundred years ago.

Applying them will hopefully contribute to building a society in which one day a poet of a future generation can take up Mayakovsky's proposal in the prologue to his famous epic and satiric representation of the October Revolution, *Mystery-Bouffé* (1921). There, the Soviet artist suggests, "In the future, all persons performing, presenting, reading, or publishing *Mystery-Bouffé* should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute." (Mayakovsky, 1968, no page number.) Maybe there will one day be a future version of *Mystery-Bouffé* (1921) that lives up to the potential regarding animals that inhabits Mayakovsky's work. Then, in the future *Mystery-Bouffé*, the clean characters not only save themselves from the unclean, but save the animals on their ark as well, using the productive forces sustainably and building a new "Promised Land" (Mayakovsky, 1968, no page number) for themselves, animals, and nature as a whole.

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