Verkehr, or Subversive Mobility:
Recovering Radical Transportation Geographies from Language

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Abstract

This article theorizes subversive mobility by looking at the layers of meaning connoted by a set of etymologically complex words in several languages. I examine how the semantics of words like Verkehr (German), “filibuster” (English), Yangjingbang (Shanghainese vernacular), and others, convey human experiences of physical mobility and political subversion as interconnected. This discussion is both philological and historical-geographic in orientation, using etymological inquiry to recover transportation geographies and worlds of social meaning which have become marginalized or hidden. The discussion also provides context for an analysis of the importance of not only subversive mobility but also enduring, “archaic” forms of social energy in Karl Marx’s dialectical conception of history, especially towards the end of his life.

Key Words: Subversive Mobility, Karl Marx, Etymology, Paris Commune, Canals, Vera Zasulich

Introduction

What is subversive mobility? One occasionally encounters the phrase, or its chiasmic counterpart “mobile subversion,” in the works of radical geographers and other theorists and scholars interested in a radical political conception of space. For Don Mitchell (1996), writing about the Industrial Workers of the World in California in the early 20th century, the phrase describes the ability of migrant workers to bring their political experiences with them from worksite to worksite, spreading radical, oppositional politics across a large geographic expanse. Gijs Mom, writing about the rise of trailer culture in the United States in the 1930s, refers to this culture’s initial off-grid, escapist tendencies, its “alternative vision” of modern culture, as an instance of “subversive mobility” (Mom
2015: 320). In work of my own (2015), I’ve used the phrase to describe an array of interlocking historical geographies of politically oppositional smuggling.

These are some examples of empirical subjects which have fallen under the semantic field, “subversive mobility.” But examples don’t quite get us to a definition, or a theory, of the theme. It’s tempting to approach the problem of definition by breaking down the phrase “subversive mobility” into its separate word-parts: to define “subversion” and then “mobility,” and then to look at how and where those two separate meanings might be able to meet. As I’ll aim to show in this piece, such an approach would misunderstand the human experience under consideration. That human experience is not two separate semantic clusters, but one. For radical geographers working in a more Marxist-materialist framework, emphasizing themes of class struggle and dialectical progress, that single semantic cluster expresses itself in a German word, which can be found in Karl Marx’s own written work: the word is Verkehr. A theory of subversive mobility which goes beyond a sparse constellation of vaguely connected empirical case-studies needs to think through words like this one, and the long arcs of human experience which brought such words into language.

I begin this article by overviewing some of the ways in which geographically oriented scholars have approached, framed and developed the theme of subversive mobility in recent decades. Here I assess how different analytic and discursive threads have intersected or diverged, and argue for an additional framing which is philological — that is, which seeks to identify the ways in which certain words have emerged through the ages as repositories of complicated meanings which can help to illuminate this broader field of inquiry. Next, pivoting to Marx, I examine the appearance of the word Verkehr in several of his works, in particular in The Civil War in France (1871), the Communist Manifesto (1848, cowritten with Friedrich Engels), the 1844 Manuscripts and The Germany Ideology (1846). The term is complex and semantically multi-layered, both in these works and in wider German parlance. The word’s meaning changes in subtle and politically loaded ways through different conjugations — a linguistic phenomenon Marx occasionally draws attention to through punning. For Marx and others, the word wraps up meanings pertaining to human experiences of subversive mobility — or, more precisely, experiences of the propensity of traffic and intercourse to turn the world upside down.

My aim in this study is not to become overly preoccupied with German linguistic experience to the exclusion of other languages. Thus, the next part of the article looks at several other words, from other languages besides German, which similarly communicate experiences of subversion and mobility as bound up with each other. These words include the ancient Greek hydra, especially as utilized by European writers during the colonial 17th and 18th centuries; the English “filibuster”; Yangjingbang (洋泾浜), which is a Chinese vernacular term local to the city of Shanghai; an early-20th-century New York City slang word, “chenango;” demping, a word in Dutch; and, finally, a relatively recent English verb, “to mule.” All of these are, I suggest, Verkehr-like words, and seem to have formed through comparable human political processes, experiences, and perceptions as those that engendered the layered semantics of Verkehr.

These meanings are, in many cases, somewhat archaic. Some radical geographers, perhaps especially with a dialectical conception of human progress in mind, may question the value of the article’s partially archaic and philological analytical orientation. Doesn’t dialecticism indicate that the future to be fought for will be born through the tension of the present moment, and not the remote past? The article ends by addressing this question, through an examination of an 1881 letter draft, by Marx, to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich. In this letter draft, Marx — somewhat disagreeing with, or significantly complicating, the historical-dialectical scheme of the Communist Manifesto — advocates a “renaissance” of a “superior form of an archaic social type.” I suggest that in Marx’s thinking towards the end of his life, the “archaic” world, and its constellation of meanings, appeared likelier than the bourgeois one to illuminate the radical intercourse of the age to come.
Subversive Mobility: Conceptual Threads

In his analysis of the geography of Industrial Workers of the World (the “Wobbles”) in the American West during the early 20th century, Mitchell argues that their “mobility was a double-edged sword”: both for agribusiness interests, who profited from the railways, and for the mobile rebellious laborers themselves, for whom these railways presented a means to circulate their revolutionary politics (Mitchell 1996: 60). This image of a “double-edged sword,” expressing the dialectical political tensions and contradictions latent in such transport systems — especially, but not only, the transport systems developed under capitalism during the period of interest to Mitchell in this study — is a useful place to begin in overviewing the ways in which various currents of scholarship have approached, framed, and developed the theme of subversive mobility in recent decades. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000) gravitate towards a very similar framing in their book *The Many Headed Hydra*. Here, transoceanic connections developed to benefit a mercantilist-slavocratic ruling class in the North Atlantic space-economy of the 17th and 18th centuries also “double,” in these authors’ interpretation, as means of clandestine circulation for radical oppositional experience and revolutionary potential. We will look at Linebaugh and Rediker’s study more closely later in this article.

Much of James C. Scott’s work (especially his 1998 and 2009 books) has framed the significance of subversive mobility somewhat differently, emphasizing how mobile populations like “gypsies, vagrants, homeless people, itinerants, runaway slaves, and serfs have always been a thorn in the side of states” (Scott 1998: 1). While Scott similarly develops the theme of politically oppositional mobility against the backdrop of struggle between a ruling class and a marginal or dispospossessed class, his image of a “thorn” which points only one way — as opposed to the double-edged sword which cuts both ways — is a significant divergence from Mitchell or from Linebaugh and Rediker. Scott tends to see certain patterns of mobility, which we might loosely call “off-grid,” nomadic, or semi-nomadic patterns, as inherently presenting problems of rulability to modern states; while other patterns of mobility (for example, those enabled by urban boulevard systems or railway networks) tend towards expanding the state’s territorial maneuverability and thus its power to rule. In my monograph *Transportation and Revolt* (2015), I’ve further developed this framing. In this study, the social and spatial dynamics latent in different modes of transportation take on a kind of political directionality, swinging tactical advantage to rulers or to rebels. At the same time, this study also attempts to reintegrate the more dialectical perspective of Mitchell, examining the complex “double-edgedness” of different forms of transportation. For instance, a canal system engineered to expand a ruling regime’s economic power may ultimately prove useful for rebellious canal boat people, in turn prompting the regime to perceive new advantages in technical alternatives like railways (Shell 2015: Ch. 3). The study centers much of its analysis on smuggling networks, especially instances where smugglers have had a revolutionary agenda aimed at toppling a regime. Cohen et. al. (2017) similarly associate the theme of subversive mobility with smuggling networks, but focus on smugglers with a profit-driven rather than politically revolutionary motivation.

Another, no less significant framing for thinking about subversive mobility is exemplified in the work of Zach Furness (2007; 2010), who examines radical bicycle politics, or “vélomobilities,” in Western cities during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In part, Furness’s work is about bicycle advocacy. Yet Furness also centers his attention on certain subversively mobile, politically oppositional groups, like the Provos in Amsterdam during the 1960s, whose vehicle of choice was the bicycle but who had an oppositional program extending well beyond bicycle advocacy, to a restructuring of contemporary culture and society. Furness’s concept of subversive mobility, his sense regarding which prior traditions of radicalism to link the topic back with, is heavily informed by the legacy of 1960s-era French Situationism. Situationist figures like Guy Debord saw radical potential in the mobilization of countercultural protesters in high-visibility, usually urban spaces — the aim being to visually (and sometimes physically) disrupt the psycho-spatial norms of everyday life in the contemporary bourgeois metropolis. Subversive mobility as developed in
Furness’s study (and comparable studies on topics like the “staging” of urban riots; see for example Thelle 2013) thus hinges upon visibility, or upon the act of creating a spectacle — a framing which is related to but also distinct from Mitchell’s train-riding Wobblies, Linebaugh and Rediker’s runaway slaves, or Scott’s off-grid nomads and gypsies.

During the remainder of this piece, I take analysis of subversive mobility in a different direction: a philological direction, into a world of archaic meanings. My method of proceeding partially recalls that of Kenneth Olwig in his 1996 philological study of the word “landscape.” In that study, Olwig argues that this word’s apparent semantic split into two clusters of meaning — landscape in the sense of a bounded territory, versus landscape in the aesthetic-visual sense — can be explained through an etymological search for semantic origin. This semantic root, Olwig finds, was the ancient and medieval free peasant commune which “was able to persist” on the margins of the medieval feudal order — in feudalism’s geographic “blank spaces,” by which Olwig mainly means Scandinavia and Friesland (Olwig 1996: 632). As we’ll see towards the end of this piece, Marx winds up here as well: in the half-lost human possibilities manifested by these enigmatic peasant communes which were partly “free” from, or outside of, the rigid feudal system.

Yet Olwig’s theoretical aims in his landscape study are narrow. His goal appears to be simply explaining a linguistic curiosity: the fact that the same word, landscape, can refer both to a bounded territory and to an aesthetic-visual genre. Likely, Olwig could have been more ambitious in arguing the theoretical implications of this work. I would contend that, in a philological examination of words signaling “subversive mobility,” we may certainly be ambitious in arguing for key theoretical implications; we are not looking at mere antiquarian curiosities. The recovery of meanings connected to terms like Verkehr, Yangjingbang, “filibuster,” and others, can contribute a revived understanding of deep and enduring human experiences and possibilities to the scholarly threads summarized above.

Allan Pred has theorized that “because words, expressions and other discursive elements that have…become lost are bound up with lost place-specific practices and power relations, they are one with lost worlds […] lost forms of consciousness.” To capture lost words and resurrect meanings is to “begin to conjure up the ghost of a whole language of practice and practice of language associated with a living set of social relations” (Pred 1990: 7-8, partially quoting Thrift 1985: 373-374). It is this idea of conjuring, recovery and revival of a “ghostly” array of semantic and geographic possibilities which animates this study. The two subsequent sections presented here look at Karl Marx’s articulation of subversive mobility through his use of the word Verkehr. As we’ll see, Marx’s usage of this word, with its archaic meanings and inward repository of enduring human experience, reveals a surprising revivalist energy in his own thought.

Three Months’ Traffic Between City and Country

Karl Marx’s 1871 The Civil War in France is primarily about the formation and demise of the Paris Commune which had occurred during the year-long period leading up to the book’s publication. For Marx, what proved fatal for this revolutionary urban experiment was the city’s isolation. Marx posits that France’s class of rural landlords, which had been one of the factions opposed to the Commune, “knew that three months’ free communication [Verkehr] between Communal Paris and the provinces would bring about a general rising of the peasants.” Hence, Marx writes, this faction was anxious to establish a “police blockade” around the city, which was soon achieved, and effective in quarantining these urban revolutionary energies (Marx 1933 [1871]: 47). Elsewhere in The Civil War in France, Marx observes that this spatial isolatability of Paris had been its political downfall in recent experience too: the rural French landlords and their Republican allies were simply imitating the methods of Wilhelm I’s army during the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War. As Marx notes, during the Franco-Prussian conflict, the capital became cut off from the provinces and “all communications [Verkehrsmittel] were disorganized” (Marx 1933 [1871]: 28).1

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For radical geographers interested in the spatial and logistical dynamics of oppositional political movements, the German term repeated in these observations, Verkehr, merits attention. It was, apparently, Verkehr which might have facilitated the Commune’s success, and the absence of Verkehr which spelled the Commune’s doom. Lingering on a single foreign-language word may be somewhat unorthodox in the tradition of anglophone radical geography. But, as I will argue, the way the term wraps together meanings which are often understood as semantically separate is highly significant for a radical theorization of the buildup of political struggles across space.

As quoted above, my English-language version of The Civil War in France uses the word “communication.” And, to be clear, my aim in this discussion is not to simply dismiss this word’s presence in the English-language version as somehow “erroneous” and unimportant. In fact, there is much ambiguity as to which language The Civil War in France was originally composed in: perhaps German, Marx’s native language; perhaps English, since Marx originally publicized his Paris observations as a spoken anglophone address in London; even French is a possibility, since Marx was taking notes about the conflict from French newspapers. Friedrich Engels was involved in the rendering of the spoken address into a German-language pamphlet, so it’s even conceivable that the introduction of the word Verkehr into the 1871 Paris commentaries originates entirely from Engels — though, for reasons we’ll get to, this is unlikely (Marx and Engels 1986: 666).

Nonetheless, these are 21st century translations. What did Verkehr mean in the 19th century? An 1859 German-English dictionary translates Verkehras “intercourse, commerce, traffic, trade” (Thieme 1859: II, 495). The same bilingual resource translates “traffic” into German as Handel first, Verkehr second (I, 617). “Intercourse” is translated as Gemeinschaft first, Verkehr second (and we should note, here, that unlike Verkehr, Gemeinschaft cannot be purposed to refer to sexual intercourse) (I, 285). “Communication” is translated as Verkehr, Kommunikation, and also a dozen other terms (Mitteilung, Verbindung, etc.) — which also indicates the function of the English “communication” as an imprecise catch-all.

It is striking that while the word Verkehr appears in the German language version of The Civil War in France, the German cognate of “communication,” Kommunikation, doesn’t appear there at all. Yet that cognate does appear in Marx and Engels 1848 the Communist Manifesto, as does the word Verkehr. In the German-language version of the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels always use Kommunikation to evoke a sense of expanding industrial infrastructures. The modern industrial world market, they write, “has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication [Kommunikation] by land” (Marx and Engels 2004 [1848]: 15). They contend that the bourgeoisie, through “the immensely facilitated means of communication [Kommunikation]” has drawn all peoples into “civilization” (Marx and Engels 2004 [1848]: 16).
The word Verkehr also comes up throughout the Manifesto, and almost always the term seems to mean, based on context, “exchange” — as in “means of production and exchange” [Produktions- und Verkehrsmittel]. The term tends to evoke this meaning throughout Capital as well. However, in one of the more famous paragraphs in the Manifesto, projecting the internationalization of workers’ political consciousness and the resulting emergence of what the authors call a “world literature,” the word Verkehr appears with a meaning going beyond simple “exchange.” Marx and Engels declare: “In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse [Verkehr] in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations” (Marx and Engels 2004 [1848]: 16). This usage of Verkehr anticipates the usage in German-language version of The Civil War in France: referring to something which is necessary for the formation of a common consciousness among socially and spatially unlike parts.

The 1859 German-English dictionary adds more layers of meaning to the verb-action form of Verkehr, which is Verkehren: “to turn, to turn into traffic, to turn the wrong side outward, to pervert, to convert, to change” (Thieme 1859: II, 495). An English philologist of the period adds “to overturn” as a translation for Verkehren (Key 1868: 106). With this modal conjugation, we begin to pick up some connotations of subversion implicit in the term, though at this stage the connotations are subtle. Marx, in the 1844 Manuscripts, puns on the seeming contradictions among these meanings. Marx is critiquing Adam Smith’s treatment of the political economy of agricultural land:

“These propositions of Smith [show] clearly the perversion [Verkehrung] of concepts in political economy, which turns the fertility of the land into an attribute of the landlord. Now, however, let us consider the rent of land as it is formed in real [wirklich] life [Verkehr].” (Marx 1959 [1844]: 21)

Verkehr as “life” may be accurate in a sense, and but it is a somewhat unusual translation, which entirely loses the German pun. A better translation here might have Verkehrung as “twisting and turning” and wirklich Verkehr as “the twists and turns of life’s true intercourse.” With this cluster of meanings, we get a sense of the root Verkehr as simultaneously communicating elements of mobility (traffic, turning) and also perversion, or twisting in more loaded and subversive sense.

The Mobile Crowd and an Upside-Down World

Jay Geller, a scholar in Judaic studies, has noted an additional, somewhat more colloquial meaning that Verkehr can express. Geller observes that the word can refer to a particular type of disreputable mob, or crowd. Geller points to a farcical German play in the early 19th century, Unser Verkehr (“Our Crowd”) (Geller 2011: 184). Geller’s interest is not centrally with the word Verkehr itself, but rather with the presence of anti-Semitic themes and tropes in Marx’s writings of the 1840s and 1850s. Geller contends that the word Verkehr for Marx is in fact a kind of Semitic or anti-Semitic signifier. Geller points out that the play Unser Verkehr was an anti-Semitic play, originally titled “Jewish Synagogue” (Judenschule) (197). The “crowd” of the farce’s title is in fact a boorish mob of lowly swindlers, peddlers, and so forth, matching 19th century German stereotypes of Yiddish-speaking Jews. Geller further argues that the prefix “lumpen” in Lumpenproletariat (the “criminal” part of the working class which Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto asserts should be excluded from the international labor coalition) is also supposed to be a subtle Jewish signifier. While Verkehr has to do with traffic, lumpen has to do with rags (192-197). Geller’s idea is that, for Marx, the “negative” side of the proletariat was its “rag-trafficking” side, consumed with petty street huckstering; working-class, but not in a sense which could become ennobled through its labor and thus worthy of real power.

This discussion turns up a fascinating history of how these terms were deployed in early and mid-19th century German culture. But Geller’s thesis that, for Marx, the word Verkehr connotes something distinctly Jewish is rather unpersuasive. With this word, Geller’s only strong piece of evidence identifying the term as an anti-Semitic signifier is that one anti-Semitic play, Unser Verkehr, or Judenschule. And yet, as Geller
concedes, it is actually very unlikely that Marx himself ever saw this play (185). Geller seems to be appealing to a particular habit of contemporary discourse analysis where we are to suppose that the semantic association between Verkehr and Yiddish-speaking Jews was simply “in the air,” and that Marx breathed that same air. But Marx uses the word Verkehr quite frequently throughout his works and writes about the Jews (usually negatively) quite frequently at well. If the two are linked for Marx, the textual trace of that association ought to be much more obvious. Without question, it’s possible to identify anti-Semitic, ethno-religiously anxious tropes in Marx’s pattern of argumentation during this period. And yet, focused entirely on the anti-Semitic anxieties of the younger Marx, Geller has underemphasized the more significant sense in which Marx utilizes the term Verkehr subversively: Verkehr signals some idea not of “Jewishness,” but rather of the intertwinement of human experiences of physical mobility and situational reversal. Verkehr in the colloquial sense of “crowd” seems to be less a racially-other, “Semitic” crowd, and more the amorphous mobile vulgus, the “moveable, mobile crowd,” from which the English word “mob” is itself derived (Cresswell 2006: 20).

For our purposes, though, Geller’s work in this area is extremely useful and instructive. Geller observes how when the word Verkehr is extended through its verb-action and participle permutations (Verkehren and Verkehrt), its meaning becomes more and more expressive of subversion. In the 1844 Manuscripts (Marx 2000 [1844]: 61) and The German Ideology (Marx 1998 [1846]: 544), Marx uses the term verkehrte Welt to mean not simply a “trafficked world,” or an “intercoursed world,” but rather a “world turned upside down” — an antipode where all social norms have been flipped. Nor was Marx the linguistic innovator of this sense of the participle, verkehrt, where the word refers to a quality of upside-downness. In the 19th century, the titular phrase verkehrte Welt identified a popular genre of comical drawings, where humans’ relationship to the material world was presented as satirically turned on its head: a log saws a man in half; a wagon pushes a farmer; an infant nurses a mother; a hound teaches a human new tricks (see figure 1). Always, in this genre, relations of domination and utilization are reversed (Babcock 1978).

If the word Verkehr becomes more subverted, or turned upside-down, as the root permutes or conjugates into action and participle, what happens when we go the other way? Verkehr can be broken down, into a prefix (ver-) and a root (kehr). Kehren in German is to turn, or alternately to sweep, but the root kehr is not a word in modern German. It had meaning in archaic times. Kehr is related to the Old English word chare, which refers not only to “turn,” but also to “chore” or work-task (OED Online: chare, n.1). Car, cart, and the verb “to carry” are also likely derived from the same origin, or from whatever more distant progenitor which kehr and chare share in common (Century Dictionary 1903: 926). Let us suppose that kehr, more so than a mere turn, signals a meaning more like going to and fro, doing chores with something which carries and turns, like a cart. How does “ver-,” the prefix, alter this meaning? This German prefix generally signals something like transgressing the boundaries set on a root meaning, while still in some sense preserving or subsuming the root connotation (Key 1868: 101-116). With this in mind, we can examine the conjugal progression of these expressions of human experience:

| kehr/ chare | root-term | Chore, cart. |
| Verkehr | German | Traffic, intercourse, conversion, swapping, change, mobility. |
| Verkehrt | German | Inverted, perverted, subverted, overturned, turned upside-down. |

As a hypothesis, we could speculate that the addition to “ver-” to “kehr” captured a certain moment of ancient experience when the speaker of the language stopped experiencing transport as doing chores with a cart about the locality (the agrarian commune, let’s suppose), and started experiencing transport as something pushing beyond the boundaries of the locality, establishing relations and intercourse between different human places. In this conjectural, ancient scenario, that transgression beyond the original confines of mere kehr went hand in hand with increased rates of swapping, conversion, and trade, and so we begin to see in the participle-
form, *verkehr*, a description of the eventual effect of that transgressive action: a reversal of valuation. Power swings from those doing the local chores to the people moving between places. As an aside, we can begin to identify parallels with terms in the trajectories of other languages. The ancient Greek work *peripeteia* means a sudden reversal of fortune, not unlike the new form of power experienced by the mobile people in our archaic scenario above (Baldick 2001: 189). The word is linked to *peripateo*, or peripatetic: those who walk back and forth, those who are geographically mobile (OED Online: peripatetic, n. and adj.). Another ancient Greek word exemplifying this semantic progression is *metaforo*, which for the ancient Greeks meant cart, or truck (that which carries across), but came also to refer to a swapping of meanings, as in a metaphor (OED Online: metaphor, n.).

This semantic progression closely follows the contours of the Marxist, dialectical sense of history. Geller himself, whose main interest is the current of anti-Semitism in Marx's writings (especially of the younger Marx), still recognizes this dialectical complexity. Geller puts forward that “Marx's transformation of *Verkehr* offers not only a genetic diagnosis of the historical situation, but also the recognition of the immanent dynamic that will rectify that situation” (Geller 2011: 198).

In light of these considerations, let us return to Marx commenting on the fatal isolation of Paris during the Commune of 1871. According to Marx and Engels in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, isolation is supposed to be the political weakness of the countryside, not of the city. In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels contrast the supposed class-forming power of urban industrial centralization against what the authorial pair disparage as “the idiocy of rural life” (Marx and Engels 2004 [1848]: 17). Critiquing the passage, Kafui Attoh notes that “idiocy” here (*Idiotismus* in German) means spatial isolation rather than mental stupidity. Yet, Attoh argues that spatially centralized social life, *urban* life, can also be isolating and politically debilitating in its own way — especially for the urban working classes. Using the examples of public transit access in Syracuse, New York, and Oakland, California, Attoh argues that it really is the transportation geography of the city, rather than the city's “centralized” or demographically dense qualities, which determine whether different groups within the urban area can in fact interact with each other: in commercial spaces, in civic institutions, at cultural events, or at political rallies and marches (Attoh 2017: 198). Attoh does not use the term, but the word *Verkehr*, as it appears in the German-language version of *The Civil War in France*, seems to fully capture the forms of spatial conduct among working-class groups which Attoh has in mind.

Furthermore, Marx's lament in *The Civil War in France* — his supposition that three more months' *Verkehr* between city and country would have sparked a peasants' uprising and altered the outcome of the conflict — is a reminder that not only can people in a city become isolated from each other (through the kinds of unevenly developed urban transport options of interest to Attoh), they also can become isolated, or blockaded, from the outside world. The urban laborer perhaps suffers from a kind of a double-isolatability then: a double-idiocy. The rural laborer, by contrast, is only idiotic once, due to his or her remoteness from everyone else; and that remoteness can also be, in part, a geostrategic strength, since an army cannot easily blockade a vast, sparsely populated area. Furthermore, life outside the cities may be characterized by its own patterns of *Verkehr* — patterns whose chief strength is what Marx, elsewhere, calls their *vitalité naturelle*, their natural vitality or dynamism, a theme we'll return to at the end of this article.

**Verkehr-like Words Outside of German**

I have been contending that the word *Verkehr* links mobility to subversion not just in Marx's usage but also in a wider German parlance. The existence of the word and its layered meanings stand as enduring evidence that Germanic experiences of the two phenomena (mobility and subversion) have been in some profound sense interlinked since ancient times. Yet I do not mean to make a special fetish of German semantic experience in isolation. The semantic association comes up in a range of other words, and from other languages. With many of these words (but interestingly, not with the word *Verkehr*), the mode
of mobility and the mode of subversion both have to do with water. In this section, which draws most heavily on Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) and Shell (2015), I’ll discuss several words which are especially significant as examples: the Greek word *hydra*, the English “filibuster,” the Chinese *Yangjingbang*, the archaic New York City slang term, “chenango,” the Dutch *demping*, and the English verb “to mule.” These are all Verkehr-like words in the sense of semantically linking together human experiences of mobility and subversion, or of transportation and revolt.

**Hydra**

The figure of the “hydra” looms large in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s 2000 history-from-below, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. The authors present the book as a “hypothesis” on the counters of revolutionary possibility, prior to the 19th century epoch of industrialization (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 6). Their claim is that the space-economy of the 17th and 18th century North Atlantic world was sufficiently vast and dynamic that it created a kind of proto- or quasi-proletariat which, they argue, was in part aware of itself as a class, and politically radicalized. This happened through numerous complex and overlapping social and economic processes: the triangle trade, slavery, the erection of new ports, the enclosures of the peasant commons in Western Europe, and the expropriation of the lands of indigenous peoples. Linebaugh and Rediker argue that though the experiences of dispossession and expropriation were varied, the circular currents of the North Atlantic trade system functioned as a kind of motor for solidarity-making among the dispossessed. The example of escaped West African slaves and runaway Irish indentured servants winding up as comrades together — on pirate ships, in remote runaway maroon villages, or as “motley” or “lumpen” gangs on waterfronts (28) — looms large in their discussion. Such groups sometimes were inspired by radical ideas about egalitarianism and democracy, perceiving themselves as dedicated to the overthrow of tyrants. The authors contend that rebellious cells moved from port to port, sparking revolts and uprisings, such as the Maroon Wars in Jamaica in the 1730s (194), or the Great Negro Conspiracy in New York in 1741 (179).

The fact that escape, solidarity-making, and revolt were not necessarily the “usual” experiences of either slaves or indentured servants is not as important to Linebaugh and Rediker as the fact that whenever this type of political comingling actually happened, the comingling signaled the possibility of the formation of a wider oppositional political geography. That signal, the authors contend, was not lost on magistrates and colonial officials of the period. Such people referred to the specter of the dissident-dispossessed as being like a “many headed hydra,” a foil for the Hercules of trans-Atlantic empire. By fixating on this word and its usage and cultivation during that time, Linebaugh and Rediker are able to recover an extraordinary history of rebellious activity and scheme of radical possibility. The “hydra” metaphor expressed several interrelated political meanings. One, the Lernean Hydra from Greek myth could not be decapitated; every time an opponent cut off one head, two more would grow back. At this register of meaning, the metaphor expressed the seemingly leaderless, acephalous qualities of the rebellious political forces from below. Two, in the Greek myth, the monster’s necks all connected to a body shared in common: following the metaphor, groups with different experiences were becoming one group, which elites could not easily divide against itself. This element of non-divisibility was also important for the third layer of meaning: the hydra was named after the very qualities of liquid water. Try to cut liquid water, and the element reconjoins with itself the instant the blade is removed. Water was also the transportative means by which Linebaugh and Rediker’s social hydra mobilized radical persons, weapons, and pamphlets from one part of its oceanic body to the next — that is, by which it conjured political self-consciousness (2-3).

Water is thus the name, metaphor, and material means of circulation and self-realization for Linebaugh and Rediker’s socio-political hydra. If for Marx and Engels the 19th century urban factory is the primary site for the development of proletarian class consciousness, for Linebaugh and Rediker the primary site was the hull of the 18th century wooden ship. This social setting, suggest the authors, was a kind of “hydrarchy,”
engendering mutinies and turning coerced laborer into political radical (143). These hydrarchical energies from the ships extended landward too: up canals and creeks (311).

Linebaugh and Rediker’s interest in the mercantilist 17th and 18th centuries, rather than the industrial 19th and 20th centuries, is not simply an arbitrarily selected academic focus. They argue that multiple new forces during the 19th century — the changing technics of empire (the rise of iron and decline of wood), processes of nationalization, and the rise of scientific racism — were effective in ensnaring and strangulating the hydra of their analysis. Indeed, some of the 19th century industrial processes in which Marx perceived political hope, like the institutionalization and partyification of a workers’ movement, draw a warier eye from Linebaugh and Rediker, writing from the perspective of the dawn of the 21st century. The 19th century industrial workers’ movement, the authors observe, tended to identify itself with the figure of Hercules and tended to name capitalist exploitation a “hydra” (330-331). The authors’ contention is that the 19th century workers’ movement became attracted to a Herculean image of itself because during this time its mode of intercoursing with itself completely changed. This happened in a corporeal sense, as multi-racial solidarities and “trafficking” across racial boundaries became suppressed. The mode of intercoursing also radically transformed in a geospatial sense, with the triumph of new forms of transportation whose energy-basis, coal (as opposed to wind), was politically monopolized by a ruling class.

At the same time, Linebaugh and Rediker’s outlook is not totally pessimistic — it would mischaracterize them to say that they think the window slammed shut on radical possibility during the 19th century. The “hydra” may have stopped being the most useful metaphor for the contours of revolutionary possibility during the 19th and 20th centuries — yet, these authors suggest, it may be the metaphor required for understanding those contours in the twenty-first. The penultimate line of their fin de millénaire book is telling; “Yet the planetary wanderers do not forget, and they are ever ready from Africa to the Caribbean to Seattle to resist slavery and restore the commons” (353). Do Linebaugh and Rediker expect 21st century rebels to planetarily wander in wooden ships, like the hydra of the last millennium? Maybe. Yet the reference to Seattle (and, implicitly, to the 1999 protests which took place there against the Word Trade Organization) indicates that they perceive an important analogy between the currents of the bygone mercantilist Atlantic and currents of computerized intercourse in our own time.

Canal and Harbor Jargon: Filibuster, Yangjiang-bang, and Chenango

A remarkable semantic parallel is observable in this grouping of Verkehr-like (or hydra-like) words. All of them associate the theme of subversive mobility with two interlinked transport spaces, canals and harbors. The English “filibuster” presents a prime example. Observers of American democracy are likely somewhat familiar with this term, which refers, in the American democratic context, to an obstructive act in legislative assembly. The word also refers to governmentally non-authorized raids by American private militias during the 19th century, especially on areas in Central America, the most infamous example being William Walker’s brief seizure of power in Nicaragua in 1856 and 1857. There was also a northward theater of these American “filibusters,” but with different political context and significance. In 1866, a militia of several thousand Irish Americans, many of them veterans of the Civil War, raided a section of Ontario, Canada, then a British colony. This militia was part of a trans-Atlantic secret society called the Fenian Brotherhood, which was dedicated to liberating Ireland from the British Empire. The aim of the Fenian filibuster, or Fenian Raid, was to hold a portion of British North America hostage and swap it for Irish liberation (Shell 2015: 101).

The exact origin of the term “filibuster” is ambiguous. The term entered the English lexicon as early as the 17th century. The ultimate source of “filibuster” seems to be the Dutch vrijbuiter, meaning “freebooter,” or pirate; yet at the same time, a cognate of “filibuster” first appeared in English as flibutor, meaning “fly-boatman.” A fly-boat referred to a type of 17th century Dutch craft designed with
a shallow hull, so as to be navigable in both canals and harbors. The *Oxford English Dictionary* allows that there is some etymological uncertainty here, and opines that the English “filibuster” may have a dual origin, or that *vrijbuiter* and *flibutor* share a common etymological ancestor (OED Online: filibuster, n.). Thus, the current American use of “filibuster” to refer to an unauthorized or obstructionist political act only half-captures the full semantic range of the term. This modern usage indicates that a filibusterer is, in a sense, a “freebooter,” one who engages in a rebellious act. Yet the word’s etymological relationship to “fly-boater” suggests that this social relation, between rebel and sovereign power, can have a spatial dimension as well: one in which floating objects are engaged in clandestine movements across a watery element.

It is striking that the primary means of rebellious mobility during the Fenian filibusters reflects the transportative meanings wrapped up in the word. The Fenians’ largest raid was across the Niagara River. The Irish liberationist guerillas used barges commandeered from the Erie Canal to smuggle some two thousand insurgent soldiers across Buffalo Harbor on Lake Erie, into Canada, where they occupied a British fort and created chaos in the environs. The Fenians also attempted a raid by railroad, hijacking a train near the Canadian border, but this action was unsuccessful: the train was sidetracked by American authorities before it could get anywhere near the frontier (Shell 2015: 105).

It may be simple coincidence that the more consequential raids resembled the forms of mobility suggested in the very etymology of the word “filibuster.” I would contend, though, that this coincidence is an illustration of how these sorts of words emerge and take on layered meanings. The semantic and etymological complexity of the term seems to suggest a preexisting venerable experience, absorbed by some speakers of English (and perhaps Dutch and some related tongues), with people who moved about in a particular way, *via* a particular kind of vehicle, and who by virtue of their mode of mobility wielded an unusual capacity to frustrate and rebuff formalized power. The fortuitous homonymy of words like boat/buit with booty, or fly/vli with free, created linguistic opportunities for new jargon to form, expressive of such spatial and political patterns and associations.

A second example of this theme, the Shanghainese word *Yangjingbang* (洋泾浜) emerges from a completely different historical-geographic setting — yet it similarly connotes a sense of subversive movement between canal and harbor spaces. In the Shanghai dialect of Chinese in the 19th century, *Yangjingbang* referred to a pidgin language which Chinese traders and European sailors used to communicate with each other in the city’s trading districts and along the waterfront. At a second layer of meaning, the word was also the name of a canal in Shanghai, just north of the old walled city. This waterway seems to have been named for the longstanding presence of foreigners in the city. *Yang* (洋) was a term often used in the 19th century to connote foreignness or ocean trade. English visitors to Shanghai in the late 19th century translated “Yangjingbang” as “Ocean Flowing Stream” (Taylor 1860: 80) or “Foreign Boundary Creek” (Maclellan 1889: 31). Wang Tao, a late Qing reformist thinker, observed that “the Yangjingbang area is a floating world” — an overall impression perhaps also communicated by the presence of the Chinese water radical (氵) in all three characters.

This canal, which has long since been filled in, became an important site of subversive mobility during the Taiping Rebellion, especially during 1853, when sailors along the city’s Huangpu docks used the canal to smuggle arms to Taiping rebels holed up in the walled city. Qing government authorities wrote to American officials complaining that American sailors (many of whom were sympathetic with the millenarian rebels) were making secretive use of the canals, alongside agrarian insurgents from the country’s interior. Thus, at a third layer of meaning, the word could connote these experiences of political subversion (Shell 2015: 56-57).

A third example of a word connoting a sense of subversive mobility between canals and harbors is the World War I-era New York City slang term, “chenango.” This word is similar to *Yangjingbang* in that it is local urban jargon. But while the term *Yangjingbang* has somewhat lingered in local memory, the New York City term “chenango” is all but forgotten.
During the early 20th century, the chenangos were casually employed dockworkers along the New York waterfront, a peculiar class of transient harbor “small fry” (Barnes 1915: 284). In the 1910s, the city’s bomb squad captain implicated these “chenangos” as being involved in a series of dynamite scares around the port, though the captain pointed to numerous political cells (German sympathizers, anarchists, Bolsheviks, Wobblies, Irish liberationists, and Indian liberationists are all named) as the actual architects of these attacks (Tunney 1919: 176-177). The term “chenango” then comes up over the course of some legal debates in New York State labor law between the 1930s and 1960s. After this point, New York dock work was completely decasualized and the term disappears from the record altogether (Shell 2015: 144).

What to make of this perplexing local slang? Two possible etymological origins seem plausible. Following the “canal” derivation of terms like “filibuster” and Yangjingbang, we could point to the Chenango Canal, a corridor which linked Utica, New York, to the Susquehanna River during the mid-19th century, before being abandoned in 1878. Since this canal was part of New York State’s canal system, it is tempting to suppose that this closure had something to do with transient harbor workers in New York City receiving the name “chenango.” Perhaps when the Chenango Canal closed, some of the workers migrated to New York City looking for boat work and wound up excluded from the reliable jobs. Still, if a process like this took place, it has yet to turn up in a written record.

The other possible etymological origin centers upon the bombing of the Union Army gunboat Chenango in New York Harbor in 1864, during the American Civil War. The bomb, which was disguised as a lump of coal, was smuggled onto the ship by a Confederate secret agent, killing thirty-two soldiers (Shell 2015: 137-138). The Chenango bombing, and some related smaller-scale incidents of dockside sabotage during the Civil War, were the only belligerent attacks on New York City between the War of 1812 and World War I.

I would suggest that the likeliest origin story for this local slang word actually has to mix elements of all of these histories: that of casual harbor work around New York City; that of canal closures in the American Northeast; and that of subversive harbor bombings. At some point in the late 19th century, several local perceptions seem to have become conflated together: that there had been a bombing in New York Harbor of a ship called Chenango; that there were increasing numbers of socially anonymous workers around the port; and that a large canal in upstate New York had closed down. What seems probable is that these impressions and fortuitous homonymies conjoined to give local casual dockworkers the nickname “chenango,” intended disparagingly.

**Dempingen: Suppression of Subversive Mobilities**

The Dutch word demping is somewhat like an opposing mirror to these subversion-signaling canal-harbor terms. Demping expresses the erasure of canal- and harbor-based mobilities; and also the suppression of processes of subversion or revolt. In the context of Dutch town and city planning, especially in the 19th century, the word meant water infill. Thus, many towns and cities in Holland have at least one modern avenue, cutting across the old town center, with the adjective gedempte (“filled in”) at the beginning of its name. Gedempte Oude Gracht (“filled-in old canal”) in Haarlem is an example. Demping or gedempte can refer to harbor infill as well — for instance, the extensive infill of Amsterdam’s inner harbor which took place during the construction of the city’s main railway station in the late 19th century.

At another register of meaning, the word demping refers to the suppression, or subduing, of a riot or revolt. This usage is observable during the 19th and early 20th centuries, when most of the Dutch canal and waterfront dempingen took place. A 1901 English-Dutch dictionary offered as one translation of the verb dempen: “to smoother, to quell (a riot)” (Burggencatte 1901: 117). A 1878 Dutch newspaper advertised a public lecture entitled, “Understanding the recently suppressed [gedempte] rebellion in Japan” (Shell 2015: 109). Nor, during the 19th century, was this suggestive link between hydraulic movements
and people’s movements lost on some Dutch writers. An 1886 article for the newspaper *De Nieuwe Gids* likened a working class uprising the previous summer (the so-called “Eel Riot,” or *Palingoproer* — sparked, as it happens, by administrative attempts to regulate working class Amsterdammers’ use of urban canals) to a “fiery sea swollen high with the winds of socialism” (van Amstel 1886: 6). The writers’ subsequent criticism of the failed efforts by police to execute an effective *dempen van dit oproer* (“suppression of this riot”) employs the double-meaning of the word, reinforcing the analogy of swollen seas to uproarious masses, and in turn of canal and harbor infills to political suppression.

*Mule; or, Hydra on Land*

All five of the terms above — hydra, filibuster, *Yangjingbang*, chenango, and *demping* — have to do with water. This is in part because water, being naturally buoyant, offers “intercourse in all directions” — or at least all directions along a two-dimensional plane, until hard matter intervenes. However, at least one word communicates comparable subversive mobility across land, which is the verb “to mule.” This word, of course, is derived from the domesticated equine animal, the mule — a creature praised by Che Guevara in his 1961 treatise *Guerilla Warfare* as “one of the most useful animals” for the agrarian revolutionary guerrilla (Guevara 2006 [1961]: 100). The mule is, perhaps, like a secretive transmontane ship, opening up opportunities for terrestrial trafficking and intercourse in geophysical zones which the wheel- and track-bound enemy cannot easily enter.

The usefulness of mules for those seeking illicit or rebellious mobility extends beyond the pages of *Guerilla Warfare*. Moonshiners on muleback in American Appalachia were able to frustrate and evade police authorities during Prohibition. Similarly, mule-based transport proved essential for controlling hilly rural areas in several of the major proxy conflicts of the Cold War. In Greece, Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, insurgents carrying their equipment on muleback in hilly areas had success outflanking much larger, occupying forces (Shell 2015: 16-17).

The English verb “to mule,” meaning “to act as a courier of contraband; to smuggle or carry illegally” is a more recent formation than the words we’ve been examining thus far (OED Online: *mule*, v.). The verb seems to originate with smugglers’ argot along the U.S.-Mexican border in the middle third of the 20th century (Braddy 1956: 96). The transportative connotation of the term is fairly straightforward: a human body is smuggling cargo like a mule would through some unsurveillable mountain pass. The term may also connote something racial. A “mulatto” (a term which is centuries old) traffics biological material across racial boundaries like the mule smuggles illicit cargo across political ones (OED Online: *mulatto*, n. and adj.). Of course, a mule is itself a biological hybrid; an expressed element of *Sexualverkehr* is evident here. The term “to mule” is sufficiently novel that it can give us a tangible idea of how these seemingly distinct meanings can all become semantically conjoined into one word. Perhaps, just as we have been puzzling over the multilayered meanings of *Verkehr*, etymologists in a several centuries or millennia will puzzle over the multiple meanings of “mule,” or the root “mul-” — wondering how the term could refer to an equine animal, to the act of subversive smuggling, and also to a multiracial person.

* • • *

From this exercise of looking at such terms alongside each other, we can begin to recognize common patterns and processes in how these words and their complex meanings formed. These patterns of semantic formation highlight historical-geographic experiences where certain kinds of mobility and political subversion cognitively registered as being closely bound up with each other: as being in effect the same “phenomenon,” and as meriting a single word as an identifier. I would suggest that these words, though semantically distinct, are all in a sense “grasping” at the same core meaning, as if at a kind of enduring cognitive groove or niche.

In most cases, these words’ various connotations of subversive mobility have become obscured with time. The fading of this layer of meaning can occur in a variety of ways. In the case of *Yangjingbang* and
especially “chenango,” the term remained almost entirely localized within a region that underwent rapid subsequent change and processes of local forgetting. Alternatively, some of the more widespread words have become semantically “neutralized.” In contemporary German, Verkehr’s primary connotation is “traffic” in a politically neutral sense (as in a traffic jam), rather than “subversive mobility” per se. Yet such words still offer recoverable repositories of experience pertaining to subversive mobility.

“We Should Not Be Frightened by the Word ‘Archaic’”; or, Conclusion

For the radical geographer, what is the value of peering into these semantic pasts? What do these half-forgotten layers of meaning, formed across long arcs of human experience, tell us about the present era’s struggle for the future? Marx himself was often skeptical, or outright dismissive, of certain backwards-looking preoccupations. In the Communist Manifesto, he and Engels save no kind words for what they call “Reactionary Socialism” — for those who suppose that the way to mend the human wounds opened up by industrial modernity is to go back to the pre-industrial world of meanings.

And yet, during the last decade of his life, the decade following the failure of the Paris Commune, which could not generate those “three months’ traffic” with the rural peasantry, Marx seems to have been rethinking this conviction in the Manifesto — the conviction that the future order will be born entirely through the dialectical tension of the present moment, and that the past is nothing but expired energies which have been subsumed and negated. His rethinking comes across in a remarkable piece of writing from 1881, a draft of a letter to a Russian revolutionary named Vera Zasulich. These letter drafts, which in some significant ways complicate or even reverse some of the formulations of the Communist Manifesto, have not gone unnoticed in Marxist circles. The sociologist Teodor Shanin wrote a book about the letter drafts in 1983, Late Marx and the Russian Road. Shanin’s book has gained some attention among radical scholars in peasant and agrarian studies, for reasons which will become clear shortly.

Vera Zasulich’s 1881 initial letter to Marx queried if Russia had to go through the centuries-long process of catching up to bourgeois Western Europe before the Russian workforce, still mainly agrarian and stuck in the setting of the “archaic commune,” could be ready to assert itself politically. Her inquiry is worth quoting at some length, not least because of how it anticipates questions still posed (one hopes) in seminars, reading groups, and internet chat threads to this day. “Nowadays,” she writes,

“we often hear it said that the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism and, in short, everything above debate. Those who preach such a view call themselves your disciples par excellence: ‘Marksists’. Their strongest argument is often: ‘Marx said so.’

‘But how do you derive that from Capital?’ others object. ‘He does not discuss the agrarian question, and says nothing about Russia.’

‘He would have said as much if he had discussed our country,’ your disciples retort with perhaps a little too much temerity. So you will understand, Citizen, how interested we are in your opinion. You would be doing us a very great favor if you were to set forth your ideas on the possible fate of our rural commune.” (Shanin 1983: 98-99)

Marx went through five drafts of his response letter, and the final letter to Zasulich is quite terse. By far the more interesting piece of writing is his apparent “first” draft, which Zasulich must never have seen, but which was fortunately preserved among Marx’s records. Marx composed the draft in French. The archaic Russian commune, Marx writes in this early draft, is not in fact isolated from the rest of the modern capitalist system, and “today it finds that system, both in Western Europe and the United States … in a crisis that will end through [the system’s] own elimination, through the return [retour] of modern societies to a higher form of an ‘archaic’ type of collective ownership and production.” Marx then refers approvingly to an “American writer” who has suggested that the “the new system” to which modern society is tending ‘will be a revival...
[renaissance], in a superior form, of an archaic social type’” (Shanin 1983: 107). The American writer Marx means is Lewis H. Morgan, a social theorist and ethnologist from upstate New York, whose work on the kinship structures of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) peoples was to influence not only late Marx but also Peter Kropotkin, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Darwin (Moses 2009: 2). Marx continues in his draft: “We should not, then, be too frightened by the word ‘archaic’” (Shanin 1983: 107).

To make sense of the Russian agrarian communes and their historical, as well as futurological, significance, Marx turns to the ancient indigenous communes around his home city of Trier, Germany. “In one way or another,” he writes,

“this commune perished in the midst of never-ending foreign and intestine warfare. It probably died a violent death when the Germanic tribes [i.e. the Germanic invaders from eastern Europe during late antiquity] came to conquer Italy, Spain, Gaul, and so on. The commune of the archaic type had already ceased to exist. And yet, its natural vitality [vitalité naturelle] is proved ...

Scattered examples survived all the vicissitudes of the Middle Ages and have maintained themselves up to the present day — e.g. in my own home region of Trier.” (107)

It’s rather uncommon for Marx to bring up his home city in his writing. Trier, with its marvelous city gate dating from Roman times, and its well-preserved medieval river crane, must have supplied a young Marx with a sense of a very ancient, multi-layered past. Extending the discussion, Marx takes pains to differentiate between the archaic commune, which he associates with the old Rhineland tribes and sees as having been a “spontaneous development” on the margins of Roman power, and the later feudal peasant commune, which was functional within the feudal political economy imposed by Europe’s new conquerors following the Migration Period of 400-800 AD. The feudal commune swallowed up the archaic one. Nonetheless, “thanks to the characteristic features inherited from the prototype, the new commune which the Germans introduced into every conquered region became the only focus of liberty and popular life throughout the Middle Ages” (108).

What interests Marx is thus the original, archaic commune-form, and the enduring vitality of that form and its world of conduct and meanings. What’s more, he associates this original archaic commune with the Roman period — around the time of Julius Caesar and before Tacitus, he writes (108) — that is, with the pre-feudal period. Olwig similarly anchors his analysis of the free peasant communes, from which he argues the term “landscape” is ultimately derived, on historical descriptions by the Roman writer Tacitus (Olwig 1996: 634).

If the Reactionary Socialists disparaged in the Communist Manifesto want a return to capitalism’s parent-form, feudalism, Marx here is pushing past the parent, backward to the grandparent: to the Roman-era confederal communes. Implicit is an association between that grandparent-form and the child to come (Shanin 1983: 15). Linebaugh and Rediker’s critical instincts in The Many-Headed Hydra are similar. In some ways, their “hydra” resembles the transgressive, dynamic, and fluid organizing spaces of the internet age. To understand the form that radical politics are likely to take in the 21st century, they find the grandparent-form — the contours of revolutionary possibility in the 18th century — more instructive than the parent form, the workers’ party movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

What are we to make of Marx’s use of terms like renaissance and retour (or, in the German translation of the draft, Rückkehr, which intriguingly contains the root kehr)? His idea doesn’t seem to be simply that the future child, the liberated Russian worker, will become the same as his or her grandparent (or great-grandparent), the archaic rural communard. Rather, Marx’s attention to this ancient experience highlights how, under certain circumstances, the remote past can sometimes better illuminate what is to come than can the present. Marx’s advice to Vera Zasulich is not for the revolutionary movement in Russia to embrace the archaic Russian commune in its original form, but rather in some higher form. He advocates a modern commune based on new machinery and, as he puts it,
on “collective labor” (113). From today’s standpoint, it’s somewhat difficult to see the phrase “collective labor” as applied to rural Russia without thinking of the horrors of the famines in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Yet those famines were a consequence of a Soviet bureaucracy which deemed the humanity and knowledge of the rural peasantry beneath contempt — an attitude Marx does not share in this letter draft. He writes:

“The Russian peasant’s familiarity with the ‘artel’ arrangement [a 19th century Russian cooperative association of craftsmen living and working together] would facilitate the transition from fragmented to collective labor, already practiced to some extent in the jointly owned meadows for the drying of grass and other ventures of general interest.” (113)

This hardly sounds like an arrogant, monstrously dismissive bureaucrat eager to asphyxiate the peasant class for its backwardness. Marx’s projected idea of the modernized agrarian commune is vague but seems to entail a political valorization of and reverence for peasant knowledge.

And yet: what of the rural commune’s problem of “isolation” — referred to in the letter draft (and very much in the spirit of the Communist Manifesto) as its chief “debilitating feature”? Marx’s proposed solution is rather uncreative, especially given the inspired surrounding discussion in the draft. Marx advocates “a peasant assembly chosen by the communes themselves — an economic and administrative body serving their own interests.” But what would stop power within this assembly apparatus from pooling in the bureaucratic centers, or at the tops of the chains of command? When Marx and Engels discuss the formation of a politically self-conscious industrial proletariat in the Communist Manifesto, the breaking of this class’s isolation is not just a matter of electing representatives; it is also a matter of establishing patterns of Verkehr, of traffic and intercourse, among laboring groups separated by past experience. By sifting through the complex meanings signaled by Verkehr and semantically comparable words, as we’ve been doing, we’re able to fully appreciate the central importance, in Marx’s thought, of establishing such mobility patterns. So, how will the members of Marx’s projected archaic-futuristic rural commune establish analogous patterns of Verkehr among the archaic-futuristic rural communards? How can the “return” to archaism also subsume and preserve what’s been achieved following archaism: intercourse in all directions, and a world turned upside down?

When we look at the series of Verkehr-like words discussed in this article, most are inclusive of some idea of geophysical intercourse beyond cities. The “hydra” occupies not just the ports but also the oceanic currents, the swamps, the canals, the remote sylvan maroon villages. The “fly boats” suggested in the etymology of “filibuster” are mobile in urban harbor and extra-urban canal alike. The term Yangjingbang suggests connection with the sea. The term “chenango,” though urban, partially seems to evoke a lost, rural canal in upstate New York. The form of transportation alluded to in the verb “to mule” retains its usefulness in rural, especially mountainous areas. Contained in all these terms, as in Verkehr itself, is the suggestion of a radical transportation geography in which urban and rural idiocies alike are swept away, and we return to a higher set of human possibilities.

References


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SUBVERSIVE MOBILITY


—Chare, n.1
—Filibuster, n.
—Metaphor, n.
—Mulatto, n. and adj.
—Mule, v.
—Peripatetic, n. and adj.


Endnotes:

1 The German-language sources for each work by Marx under consideration are listed in this article’s references section.

2 The original French letter is in Marx (1967 [1881]) and other French-language sources.

3 The phrase vitalité naturelle is underlined for emphasis in the original French draft by Marx.
Figure 1. Oehmigke & Riemschneider, *Die verkehrte Welt* (The upside-down world), engraving, circa 1860.