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### Marxism in *Tender is the Flesh*

What would it take to reduce the social taboos and moral concern of murder and cannibalism to something almost indiscriminate? How long would it take for the public to move past their reservations of systematically growing, slaughtering, and consuming human flesh? It seems that with capitalism involved, it might not take long. When the pressure is just right—social, political, religious, economic—cannibalism could perhaps become venerated within a single generation. Author Agustina Bazterrica explores the power of capitalism within her novel *Tender is the Flesh*, translated by Sarah Moses. In this story, a sudden and mysterious virus has rendered nearly all contact with non-human animals as deadly; animal meat became fatal. In response, the government replaced animal farms with human farms, with individuals referred to as “heads,” like heads of cattle. Humans are raised, bred, slaughtered, skinned, hunted, and tortured. Key features of capitalism like ideological and repressive state apparatuses explored in Marxist philosophy heavily inspire and facilitate this literal transition to humans as commodities. To reinforce these ideas, the state both sanctions and encourages the production of human meat through a constant threat of violence, propaganda, and Othering. I will explore how Agustina Bazterrica’s novel *Tender is the Flesh* embodies a Marxist theory of a culture influenced through state and ideological apparatuses by normalizing cannibalism into a government-proctored, socially accepted and idolized, capitalistic venture. This simulation is important because it is based in reality and saturated with eerie possibility, as it highlights that the strength of a capitalist

state on human morals and behavior is predictable through unified propaganda and an unquestioning population.

In this novel, the main character Marcos Tejo works within a position of power in a meat processing plant that used to be his father's before the Transition (the government term for the switch from animal meat to human meat). Marcos manages workers within the plant and the company's relationships with outside buyers and suppliers. The novel focuses on his perspective and covers a bit of what life was like before, how the Transition happened, its general effect on the population, and Marcos's story of an accidental acquisition of a female head he names Jasmine.

Food carries power; it is a significant and reliable portion of the market, as it is perhaps the only commodity of capitalism that is absolutely essential to survival and almost never free. Food as commodity plays a significant role in Bazterrica's novel, as the legalization of cannibalism emerges largely from the propaganda that veganism can not provide all essential amino acids (Bazterrica 7). In addition to its biological necessity, culture embeds food as a tool for communication. In Christian Fuch's essay "Materialism and Society", they discuss food as a powerful medium of cultural and social relations:

Food is an object that nature and humans produce. Eating food not only reproduces the human body, but also sociality, status, reputation, and power. The practice of eating is at the same time biological, bodily, psychological, economic, social, cultural, and political. In the discussed example, communication turns food and drinks into objects that mediate the relation between humans. Since communication is the production of social relations and social systems, it plays an important role in all processes and systems in society. (58)

Food is a precondition to survival, so consuming it literally and figuratively provides power. Fuch's previous example described the social and political nature of dinner conversations—the concept of eating, *consuming*, as a social event is a cultural and philosophical experience that nourishes the body, encourages social interaction and the exchange of information, and maintains relationships. The world of *Tender is the Flesh* focuses on the fabrication of the necessity of meat and the capitalistic need to consume it. With the costly expense of human meat, eating becomes more ritualistic than ever. Cuts of meat are fancified, children are a delicacy, and selectively bred products are a status symbol. In one instance Urlet, the human game warden, discusses the ritualistic nature of eating something alive: “There’s a vibration, a subtle and fragile heat, that makes a living being particularly delicious. You’re extracting life by the mouthful...also becoming part of you. For always” (Bazterrica 137). Urlet brings to light a very obvious but meaningful fact—food powers the body. Biologically the more similar the food object is to the thing eating it, the more efficiently nutrients will be absorbed and the easier it will be to digest. Thus, eating human meat is quite literally the most efficient food for human bodies; it is an ultimate power symbol.

The world of *Tender is the Flesh* embodies Marxist philosophy by exploring the loss of humanity through capitalistic ventures, represented through the humanitarian deterioration of both those who could and could not effectively change with the Transition after the widespread acceptance of cannibalism. People either culturally adjusted with blind faith or slowly lost their minds. Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci theorizes the effect of blind faith and how this transitions into uninformed beliefs in his writing “Study of Philosophy”:

He has no concrete memory of the reasons and could not repeat them, but he knows that reasons exist, because he has heard them expounded, and was convinced by them. The

fact of having once suddenly seen the light and been convinced is the permanent reason for his reasons persisting, even if the arguments in its favour cannot be readily produced.

(339)

Gramsci suggests that when people work under faith, the fault is that their reasoning does not require logic or explanation. When cannibalism is first introduced to the fictional and unnamed country of the story, it is wrong—it is a response to hunger initiated by those who are starving because animal meat is poisonous. The government uses the animal virus and natural emergence of cannibalism to reduce overpopulation and effectively commit a mass eugenics operation (Bazterrica 6). People collectively kill their pets and as many wild animals as they can, all without proper evidence that the infection was real.

Philosophy and culture allow humans to build relationships, identity, and humanity, all of which are denied to human products. Gramsci discusses the importance of philosophy and awareness to one's humanity: “When one’s conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups...the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is...” (324). Human products are not provided any level of education. Their vocal cords are removed to prevent noise and communication (Bazterrica 20). They are denied any access to build identity and culture, and are thus denied an understanding of their own human consciousness. It is clear when Marcos is given an adult head to slaughter at home that she knows nothing of language or culture or philosophy, only fear (Bazterrica 30, 40, 41). A different kind of humanitarian crisis is explored by those who could not successfully Transition, like Marcos’s father. As the previous owner of the animal slaughterhouse, Marcos’s father could not accept the reality of farming humans and effectively lost his mind (Bazterrica 9-10). He spent the entirety of the book in a

high-care nursing home, prone to outbursts until his death. Apart from some individuals not convinced through government propaganda, the mass-acceptance of the sudden fatal animal virus is successful, in part, to the support of repressive state apparatuses.

The dystopian future of *Tender is the Flesh* receives success in its new meat eating industry largely due to the support, propaganda, and direct involvement of the government in its production and maintenance. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser discusses the role of the government as repressive state apparatuses in *Ideology and “Ideological State Apparatuses”*: “The State apparatus, which defines the State as a force of repressive execution and intervention ‘in the interests of the ruling classes’ in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat, is quite certainly the State, and quite certainly defines its basic ‘function’” (1289). Repressive state apparatuses include “the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.” (Althusser 1290), and they play a large role throughout Bazterrica’s novel in normalizing and proliferating cannibalism. In this normalizing process, renaming meat helps the people assign human meat as Other: “[The government] gave human meat the name ‘special meat.’ Instead of just ‘meat’, now there’s ‘special tenderloin’... No one can call them humans because that would mean giving them an identity. They call them product, or meat, or food” (Bazterrica 8). The removal of identity makes consuming people easier, as the meat is not someone’s mom or aunt or brother, but instead a nameless product to be purchased and consumed. Effectively, the government used *language* as propaganda. This is further explored in Vaz Quincó and Vasques Vital’s “Law, Viral Mutations, and Spectral Tropicality in Agustina Bazterrica’s *Tender Is the Flesh* (2017)” paper:

This is the continuation of necropolitics—a management of symbolic and real death aimed at maintaining the lives of privileged populations (Mbembe). However, this politics of

death is elevated to another level in response to the vicissitudes of the pandemic. The process of legalising cannibalism, in turn, is shaped by a technical and neutral language regulated by laws, serving to normalise horror, erase the humanity of the victims, and conceal violence behind legal and sanitary terminology. (4-5)

This theme of normalizing language is seen throughout the book in all uses of human product—meat, hunting for sport, skinning and tanning, breeding, etc. All of these ideas are horrifying to the story's characters if viewed outside of the State's use of particular language designed to reinforce the differentiation of the product from the consumer. The use of language is further reinforced through Althusser's idea of interpellation, or the idea of recognizing oneself as a subject to an ideology, to a system (Althusser 1306). For the heads, the absence of identity and paradoxical presence of interpellation forces them into a confusing acceptance of their place as a non-human Other subject, leaving no autonomy, indulgence of culture, or relationship outside of agitation. This intense Othering was necessary to the success of cannibalism. However, alterations to cultural norms cannot only be reinforced at the state level. Social groups also play a central role in the emergence of this new culture.

Ideological state apparatuses within Bazterrica's novel fill the cultural gap of cannibalistic acceptance by teaching individuals, through social programs, new social norms. In his same text, Althusser discusses the role of ideological state apparatuses:

I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions...much the larger part of the Ideological State Apparatuses (in their apparent dispersion) are part, on the contrary, of the *private* domain. Churches, Parties, Trade

Unions, families, some schools, most newspapers, cultural ventures, etc., etc., are private.  
(1291)

While the government sets laws, regulations, and official language, it is the ideological institutions that reinforce social norms and provide expectations for how events like the Transition should be handled. The fictional country in *Tender is the Flesh* contains multiple social groups and ideas that exemplify this concept. For instance, there is a rise of a religious movement full of those who believe that donating their flesh, being slaughtered as human heads are, is the most righteous thing one can do; they are called the “Church of Immolation” (Bazterrica 130). Marcos and everyone at the plant hates dealing with the Church. After all, the plant’s products are not real people, they are special meat. The Church’s legal authority to sacrifice humans who have lived full, conscious, knowledgeable, cultural lives “jeopardized the whole false structure built around the legitimization of cannibalism. If a person with a first and last name can be eaten legally, and they’re not considered a product, what’s stopping anyone from eating anyone else?” (Bazterrica 130). The government sets rules for who is allowed to be eaten, and ideological apparatuses socially uphold and give meaning to those rules. After all, the difference between human and product is only visible to willing participants of the state.

The blurred lines set by ideological state apparatuses are only further confused by another social group, the Scavengers, a group of lawless cannibals who eat humans outside the confines of the law. Their brutality peaks when they attack a transport truck to steal, kill, and eat the human heads on board. However, they don’t just attack the product. The Scavengers kill and eat the driver Luisito, a man with a name. In a conversation about what happened the processing plant owner, Krieg, highlights the suggested addiction of human meat by describing the Scavenger’s behavior as if “...they’re in a trance. Like they’ve become these savage monsters”

(Bazterrica 200). Krieg's comment invites two interpretations. First is the suggestion of a trance-like state, suggesting their behavior matches that of addicts. This addiction is not literal, but instead an addiction to capitalistic consumption; it is an addiction to the idea of meat and the falsification of its necessity. Second, Krieg suggests that the Scavengers are monsters not for their brutal killing of tens of live human heads that were on the truck, but for the single murder of Luisito. The plant systematically kills product every day, but what separates them from Scavengers is the slaying of a person with a name. Lecturers Salam Fadhil Abed Altaee and Muhannad Salman Obaid Al-Qaraghoulhi discuss this capitalistic and curated relationship to meat in their paper, "The Hyperbole of Consumption and Exploitation in *Tender is the Flesh*: A Glimpse Through Marxist Lens":

All the relations on this world are determined by meat and its availability. Having been raised exclusively non-vegetarian, the characters in the book could not imagine [a] world without meat or the option of adapting veganism. Marcos emphasises how important it is to maintain cordial relationships with people in power who operate breeding centres, no matter how depraved they and their actions might be" (6).

Capitalism certainly permits cruelty, but in this case capitalism *expedites* cruelty. Bazterrica explores human depravity through the characters that run a butcher shop, a game center, a breeding center, and a skinning/tanning center. As a spokesperson for the plant, Marcos frequently visits and maintains relationships with these people. Marcos was the nonconformist in this scenario—the enforced ideological systems privilege industry leaders to see human heads as products, animals. Thus, unfortunately their cruelty is not far from what was expected when the product was non-human. This lamentable paradigm is seen throughout ideological state apparatuses within the book, and does not end with religion and work.

Other highly influential ideological state apparatuses for Althusser are family and school, as children are indoctrinated into society in large part by these influences. In Bazterrica's world, legislation was recently passed that allows families to purchase their own living product, maintain them, and slaughter them as they see fit (within the confines of the law)—domestic head. Marcos's sister Marisa purchases a living product and keeps her locked in a fridge. She has a book, "Domestic Head: Your Guide to Death by a Thousand Cuts" (Bazterrica 195) that she references in order to slowly consume the female over time—an arm for a birthday, a leg to show social status, an ear for a snack. Through the language and Otherness assigned to the female, Marisa is able to legally torture and leisurely consume another human. Marisa's children were not alive before the Transition, so cannibalism is their only reality. They play inappropriate games like "Exquisite Corpse" (Bazterrica 100) and try to "guess what Uncle Marquitos tastes like" (Bazterrica 99). As young children, they do not understand the difference between people and product, but instead pick up on the jokes and games played by other children at school and what they see at home. This example highlights the necessity of family and school in creating and shaping the fictional lens that allows a person to assign and differentiate Otherness as it is socially understood. Regardless, an economy is not run on children's perceptions. In order to subsist in a capitalist state, drastic social and legal transitions such as cannibalism also need to, in some way, contribute to the economy.

In Bazterrica's novel, the production of human meat mirrors that of animal meat in the nature of its economics; in the name of efficiency and maximizing profit, welfare is often neglected. This is reflected in society's consumption of human meat. As so often happens, marginalized groups were the first to be affected by this culture-shift: "In some countries, immigrants began to disappear in large numbers. Immigrants, the marginalized, the poor. They

were persecuted and eventually slaughtered” (Bazterrica 6). Although this is a fictional world of the hyperbolic effects of capitalism, its representation of discrimination is not imaginary. Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto explore the relationship between capitalism and racism in their article “Racism and Support of Free-Market Capitalism: A Cross-Cultural Analysis”:

The fact that support of market capitalism and racism correlated positively across at least two significantly different cultures like Sweden and the United States is especially intriguing against the background of theoretical models within economics which maintain that genuine, free market, capitalist systems will tend to attenuate rather than contribute to ethnic and racial discrimination (see Cymrot, 1985). (395)

These authors suggest that the reality of capitalism does not reflect the theoretical model, which should give more intentional racial equality under free enterprise. Instead, capitalism escalates racial discrimination. *Tender is the Flesh* demonstrates these findings first through the targeting of marginalized communities, and further through breeding. As the human industry grew, fewer people were plucked from the street. Instead, they were bred. The first generation of artificially bred products were termed FGP, “First Generation Pure” (Bazterrica 17). These humans were also cultivated for the leather market, which purchased product based on skin color. At one point, Marcos is conversing with Señor Urami at his tannery. While discussing skin value, he “points his finger at a very white example with marks on it. He says it’s one of the most valuable skins...” (Bazterrica 12). Even in this dystopian environment, certain skins are deemed more valuable than others. Later in discussion with a breeder, Marcos submits a request from Señor Urami:

‘Gringo, I need black skin.’

‘I’m actually just negotiating to have a lot brought over from Africa, Tejo. You’re not the first to put in a request.’

‘I’ll confirm the number of head later.’

‘Apparently some famous designer is making clothes with black leather now and demand is going to skyrocket this winter.’ (Bazterrica 25-26)

Their conversation highlights the morbidity of diminishing people to the color of their skin. The cannibalism industry opened up the opportunity to do to humans as many industries had otherwise done to animals, thus expanding both cruelty and racism through selective and artificial means, furthering the designation of Other. Within this discussion, it is impossible to consider this story without also reviewing breeding practices. Human reproduction is perpetuated for economic gain, so miscarriages and stillbirths are especially detrimental. In order to reduce the likelihood of these events, female breeders often had their arms and legs removed to eliminate the possibility of causing harm to the growing fetuses (Bazterrica 22). These females not only have their voice boxes removed, but are kept from any development of communication, culture, philosophy, or identity as we understand it. As horrific as it is to experience these atrocities first-hand, the plant workers themselves also faced difficulties adjusting.

The main character in Bazterrica’s novel, Marcos, goes through an extensive loss of self and feelings of alienation throughout the novel that can be largely attributed to the demanding nature of his work and the gift of a female FGP for him to raise. However, he is not the only person affected by his work. As previously discussed, his father lost his mind after the Transition. Another processing plant employee, Ency, slowly falls into a psychotic episode and eventually tries to free the live product before committing suicide: “But Ency began to change. Little by little. Ency seemed quieter...Ency was shouting, ‘You’re not animals. They’re going to

kill you. Run. You need to escape,’ as if the head could understand what he was saying” (Bazterrica 75). Ency was a normal worker who eventually could not handle the intensity of inhumanity he was regularly exposed to. The processing plant experiences high turnover despite high wages due to the nature of the job (Bazterrica 54). Compared to Ency, Marcos’s journey followed an inverted character arc. He initially adjusted to the Transition well enough, but at the end of his story his psychic break occurs with an acceptance of cannibalism through the abuse of Jasmine, the FGP human head he was gifted. In a weak psychological moment he rapes Jasmine, effectively committing a crime worthy of death by slaughter. She becomes pregnant and eventually survives the difficult birth of Marcos’s child. Immediately after the baby is safe, Marcos stuns Jasmine and drags her to the barn to slaughter after successfully providing himself and his formerly estranged wife with a new healthy child. They are ecstatic and Jasmine is dead, slain in the name of the system Marcos once scorned. In the end, capitalistic ideals and the desire for a family triumph over a human sense of right and wrong.

Marcos’s fall from grace follows a trajectory predicted by the alienation of capitalism and the politics of life and death. Original Marxist philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels discuss the devaluation of the working man in “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”: “So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the dominion of his product, capital” (657). The more a worker becomes a worker, i.e. the more he produces or involves himself in work, the less separated from work he becomes; he is work, employment. As a person puts their body and soul into work, they have less to give outside of what they contribute to capitalism. The reader can see this throughout Marcos’s story. He is already troubled and hateful of the system in the beginning. As time goes on he becomes more and more

enraged until eventually the system gives him the thing he wanted most—a healthy child. At the end of the novel it is insinuated that Marcos is now an active, willing participant in cannibalism culture, remarking that he killed Jasmine because, “she had the look of a domesticated animal” (Bazterrica 209). This sudden jump into the culture reflects an example of necropolitics, or state control over death; death weaponized. In Mbembe’s book *Necropolitics*, he says:

My concern is those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations. Such figures of sovereignty are far from a piece of prodigious insanity or an expression of a rupture between the impulses and interests of the body and those of the mind. (14)

While Mbembe does seem to focus on sovereignty, the concept of necropolitics can be applied on the macro and micro scale. Mbembe is expressing concern over the people who make decisions that directly affect the ability of a nation’s citizens to stay alive; the body itself is a political issue. Marcos is participating in state-sanctioned cannibalism on the micro-scale—he decides that Jasmine is no longer useful and himself becomes an active micro-participant in the macro-scale necropolitics of human death and consumption. Bazterrica expresses these politics throughout the book, but especially in the character arc of Marcos Tejo.

Agustina Bazterrica’s dystopian novel *Tender is the Flesh* displays an eerily realistic Marxist hyperbole of capitalism. The civilian characters within the novel accept their positions as rule-following members of a society. Through repressive state apparatuses the government creates state-sanctioned, highly regulated factories that raise, slaughter, and prepare human meat. The practice is socially accepted through ideologies formed in their ideological state apparatuses—through what the children are taught at home, religious groups that view the meat as

a righteous sacrifice, and the outcasting of those who don't follow the proper rules of cannibalism. However, in order for the practice to be continued in a capitalist society, it must be economically productive. The human meat industry is highly profitable and even branched out to the selling of high quality skins, human hunting, and fanciful breeding. Finally, working in these factories tends to cause a loss of self, particularly for Marcos Tejo. His downfall was not only due to his exposure to inhumanity and terrible people, but also his internal controversy of how to label Jasmine—unwanted, partner, surrogate, food. The way that capitalism perpetuates cannibalism and cruelty eventually overwhelms him and he loses his remaining sense of self, partially because of his own return to the bourgeoisie designated through the killing of Jasmine, the return of his wife, and the new baby. In the end, he killed Jasmine after she served her purpose. Bazterrica's work is an extreme example of social compliance and the worst of capitalism. Even though the novel is fictional, its ideas render the story eerie, as the reader clearly recognizes similarities to their reality. This eeriness encourages the reader to make connections and understand how readily this transition passes and the detriments of blind faith and social compliance. *Tender is the Flesh* is a stark commentary on the human condition, capitalism, and a warning about the power of acquiesced social and political change.

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