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Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Fable

A: hikaaya – G: Fabel – F: fable – R: basnia – S: fábula – C: yuyan 寓言

Fables are among the most widespread of narrative forms, appearing in virtually every culture and historical period. The two most disseminated and celebrated traditions are those from ancient India (Panchatantra) and Greece (Aesopian). The 'oldest fable of the European tradition' (**Schmidt** 1991, 201) occurs in **Hesiod**'s *Works and Days*: the fable (αἶνον) of the nightingale and the hawk, who speaks the language of violence both literally and in deeds, scorning the singing bird (201–7). The critique of domination contained in the fable is confirmed by the context in which the unjust regime of the 'tribute-devourers' (δωροφάγοι; 220) is denounced from the standpoint of practical work. – The very prevalence of the form does not exclude, however, the widest possible set of divergences concerning its reputed meanings, reception and significance. These range from its dismissive relegation to the idiom of children's literature to its espousal as the epitome of folk wisdom, from its paedagogical use as an ideological apparatus in nineteenth-century European schoolbooks to its critical, even revolutionary potential as the allegorisation of social and political inequities. Fables are dismissed for being so manifestly untrue (beasts that talk, etc.) yet lauded for their exposition of some hidden truth in the guise of a lesson in life.

1. 'Any fiction with which the poet associates a certain intention is called his fable' writes **Lessing** in his *Fabeln und Fabelabhandlungen* (345), a definition repeated by **Grimm**, and much later by K. **Doderer** (1970, 7). This purely formal, aesthetic definition applies, of course, generally to virtually all speech (consistent with the etymological sense of *fabula* from Latin *fari* and Indo-European *bha*) as well as to the specific genre of the classic Aesopian fable or 'instructive animal story' (**Kluge**). At issue, though, is how a narrative form (such as a short tale featuring animal characters) articulates with a moral or lesson to make up the hybrid genre of the fable as an 'instructive tale' (ibid.), and how this genre is related to the comparable genres of the fairy tale and the parable.

While **La Fontaine**, in the preface to his *Fables choisies mises en vers* (1668), imagines the fable as an organic union of body (narrative) and soul (moral lesson), **Hegel** on the contrary refers to the inorganic of the genre, which is constituted through a 'formal fissure', which in its turn provides the key to its interpretative 'lubricity': the '*fabula docet* attached to Aesop's fables in their present day form either makes the representation flat or' has the effect that 'many other better' lessons can be drawn from it (**Hegel**, 385). Often, the explicit moral – above all, when it is 'crude' – does not agree with the action, which sometimes implies a varying or even opposite teaching. Despite his depreciatory judgment, **Hegel** thus comes upon a decisive semiological aspect of the fable, namely, 'the tendency of the narrative material to split in two and to go in two different verbal or semiotic directions – on the one hand, into narrative proper, an anecdote, in which either human or animal characters are shown doing something with certain results or outcomes; on the other, a relatively more abstract linguistic formulation, on the order of a saying or proverb, in which a kind of abstract lesson (or "moral" to use the technical term) is juxtaposed with the preceding

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narrative and offered as the latter's meaning or "lesson"' (**Jameson** 1998, 105).

The fable is therefore often located between the lapidary wisdom of the proverb or the aphorism, on the one hand, and the 'magical' plot of the fairy tale, on the other. In this hybrid situation, fables most closely resemble parables, which likewise offer a narrative embodiment of some higher truth. In the parable, however, the lesson to be drawn remains implicit though regulated by a determined code of interpretation, such as that of the Christian mysteries in the case of the Gospel parables. But to the theoretical or even transcendental wisdom a reader is to draw from the parable, the lowly fable proposes a practical sense that betrays its roots in popular and peasant culture. Here, too, we may note a difference in register between the barnyard familiarity of the animals in fables and the marvellous or monstrous beasts of fairy tales. **Lessing** rightly suggest that it is not the miraculousness but rather the stereotype of the fable animals that gives the key to the economy of presentation of the genre: 'we only need to hear named [the animals] in order to know which is the weaker and which is the stronger' (1759, 49). More exactly, this effect results from the dialectical relationship between story and moral, forcing (and thus enabling) the reader to take up a position, either agreeing with the explicitly presented teaching or rejecting or inverting it.

In its turn, this variability differentiates the fable from Holy Scriptures or the more general dimensions of allegory. 'That which you call "fables"', Günther **Anders** (1968, 101) has **Aesop** say to a listener wrongly amazed at him, 'are inverted allegories'. While the allegorist tries to 'translate insights into the language of images', the fable 'poet' tries 'to translate an image into an insight'. Like the sacred scriptures, the fable calls for a figural interpretation of its literal content, but unlike scripture or parable, the possible layers of interpretation remain indeterminate (or more accurately, are determined by the differing points of view of history and social or class position).

For example, we have the plebeian **Rousseau**'s scandalised explication in *Emile* of the fable about 'The Crow and the Fox', where he discovers the fable not to be teaching the moral dangers of vanity (from the vantage point of the crow) but the immoral value of deceit (the fox's point of view). One could just as well transcode this opposition *contra* **Rousseau** into the necessary difference in life strategies between the have's and the have not's, i.e. those whose vanity dovetails with their having something to lose and those who must resort to ruse in order to survive. Interestingly, **Lessing** himself rewrites this fable to prevent such a revisionist understanding by having the crow hold poisoned meat in its beak rather than cheese. It is the fox who is punished for his deceitful flattery, then, and dies from eating the bad meat.

2. For **Hegel**, the prosaic quality of the fable is precisely where it betrays its social roots and for him consequent inferiority as an aesthetic genre: 'In the slave, prose begins, and so this entire species is prosaic too'; **Aesop**'s 'notions are only witty, without any energy of spirit or depth of insight and substantive vision, without poetry and philosophy. His views and doctrines prove indeed to be ingenious and clever, but there remains only, as it were, a subtle investigation of trifles… because Aesop does not dare to recite his doctrines openly but can only make them understood hidden as it were in a riddle which at the same time is always solved' (**Hegel** 387).

It suffices to turn **Hegel**'s analysis on its head to reveal a dialectically materialist grasp of the fable as a genre that speaks indirectly the desires, fantasies and utopian aspirations of the oppressed while denouncing the brutality of rapacious élites who prey on the disempowered in a manner analogous to the unmerciful beasts portrayed in fables. Those beasts are thereby revealed to be but disguised humans (**Blount** 1975, 26) by a shorthand that signifies social character types through their association with received animal stereotypes (the industrious ant, the crafty fox, the innocent lamb, etc.). In the vision of the oppressed, the world is indeed a jungle or forest full of perils for the unsuspecting, a place ruled by brute force and where only trickery

and wit can save one from becoming just another victim. That the fable thus encodes social relations as encounters between beasts merely reinforces the genre's lowly status in a culture where, as **Adorno** and **Horkheimer** note, 'the idea of the human . . . is expressed in the way in which it is distinguished from the animal' (245). As they further explain, the equation between humanity and rationality relegates all forms of 'irrationality' to the realm of beasts, including those human beings such as women (though **Adorno** and **Horkheimer** could have also added the 'others' of class or race) whose inferior social position is in direct function of their exclusion from the masculine élite of power and reason.

The legendary character of **Aesop** himself dramatises this voice of the other that speaks through the fable insofar as he is represented as a social and racialised other (an eloquent slave reputedly of either Phrygian or Ethiopian origin), physically deformed – it is said – to the point of approximating beastliness as well, yet whose storytelling wit earned him freedom and fame. In a strong sense, the world of the fable is that of oral and popular tradition, the world of **Benjamin**'s *Storyteller* or in Michel **de Certeau**'s less homely vision, that babbling realm before or outside professionalised systems of writing whose discourses are consequently marked by their 'assimilation to the child, the woman, to the illiterate, to madness' (24). This populist understanding of the fable is the one that prevails in such modern critics of the genre as Annabel **Patterson** (*Fables of Power*) and Louis **Marin** (*Le récit est un piège, La parole mangée*).

3. Caution should be taken, however, before applying this methodological point of view uncritically to the *written* archive of fables (**Steinhöwel**, **Caxton**, **La Fontaine** et al.), especially given the literary reception and paedagogical application of such anthologies as texts proper for the moral edification of school children. The use of fables as instructional texts in the 19th-century French schoolroom, for example, determines their reception and understanding, instantiating a specific ISA interpellating a particular reader (the schoolchild) to derive the timeless truths of bourgeois morality from otherwise frivolous tales. In this process of didacticising and dehistoricising fables, a task accomplished by the 19th-century work of careful anthologising and editing of fables, these were only good for children and only to the extent that their lessons were appropriate to their proper moral behaviour. Once again, it is **Lessing** who makes this clear both by his insistence on the necessary and logical fit between story and lesson (i.e. no room for interpretation in his ideal fable) and by his exclusion from the canon of morally unacceptable fables (even if included in the Aesopian corpus itself). Needless to say, this canonical deployment of the fable typical of emerging bourgeois society is also where the contradiction between story and lesson becomes most acute. **La Fontaine**'s poetic rendering of **Aesop**'s fables, for instance, became a pillar of the French education system in the nineteenth century, so closely intertwined with the universalising moralism of the Republic as utterly to obscure the specific political references of a writer disgraced and exiled in the wake of the Fouquet scandal at the dawn of Louis XIV's regnum. It may occur as a surprise to the modern reader to learn that **La Fontaine** was celebrated during the French Revolution as a radical 'philosophe' on an equal footing with **Rousseau** and **Voltaire**.

4. The fable obtains its most enduring meaning as political 'allegory', with **Machiavelli**'s fox/lion analogy in *Il Principe*, **Hobbes**' development of *homo homini lupus* in *Leviathan*, and **Mandeville**'s compendious *Fable of the Bees*. With **Mandeville**, the fable turns from the representation of political ills and/or moral virtues to the philosophical exporation of social relations themselves. First published in 1705 as a short pamphlet containing a poem, 'The Grumbling Hive', with the paradoxical moral that 'private vices' have 'publick benefits', *The Fable of the Bees* grew in the course of its many editions over the next 28 years to the monumental, two-volume opus it is, as **Mandeville** added various 'remarks', essays, a 'vindication of the book', and a series of dialogues all in response to the savage polemics

aroused by the fable. The contradiction between story and lesson could hardly be made more manifest, especially when aggravated by a moral that is itself paradoxical: **Mandeville** can be read either as a cynical apologist for the capitalist exploitation of labour-power (anticipating Adam **Smith** and the liberal economics of *laissez-faire*) or as its most disillusioned critic.

Marx praises **Mandeville** for being 'an honest, clear-headed man' (*MECW* 35, 608); he nevertheless criticised him for overseeing the foundation of the dialectics of wealth and poverty. What **Mandeville**… had not yet seen, is that the mechanism of the process of accumulation itself increases, along with the increase of capital, the mass of "labouring poor", i.e., the wage-labourers, who turn their labour-power into an increasing power of self-expansion of growing capital, and by so doing must even eternalize their dependent relation on their own product, as personified in the capitalists themselves' (ibid.; trans. modified). In *Theories of Surplus Value*, **Marx** again praises **Mandeville** for his being 'infinitely bolder and more honest than the philistine apologists of bourgeois society' (*MECW* 34, 247 et sq.), this time for demonstrating 'the productivity of every possible type of profession', even that of outright criminality and evil. This is a crucial link in **Marx**'s critique of classical political economy, which would justify the capitalist's particular exploitation by the general good he does society as a whole (through the accumulation of wealth) while condemning the unproductive and wasteful graft of the criminal. Thinking through the *Fable of the Bees* even beyond **Mandeville**, **Marx** is able to demonstrate the connection between capitalist production and forms of criminality by their common desire to extract as much surplus-value as possible from their activities.

Marx often uses the genre's epistemological possibilities by exerting 'dialectical pressure' on the received moral of a fable. Consider, for instance, his repeated references to what he calls the 'absurd fable of Menenius Agrippa… which makes man a mere fragment of his own body' (*MECW* 35, 364). The fable, better known as that of 'The Belly and the Members', is traditionally ascribed to the Roman patrician named in the citation who would have declaimed it to quell a plebeian rebellion by depicting the élite in a corporeal analogy with the stomach, which if not properly fed by the subservient limbs would in turn starve the latter. **Shakespeare** put this scene on stage in *Coriolanus*, and **Brecht** developed it for his theatre as well. In the above mentioned passage from *Capital*, **Marx** turns the fable around to denounce the very atomisation not only of the body politic but also of the individual worker's body under the pre-Taylorist conditions of industrial capital. In *Value, Price and Profit*, the same fable is used counter to its traditional lesson of social loyalty to argue instead the efficacy of collective action against capitalist exploitation: 'Agrippa failed to show that you feed the members of one man by filling the belly of an other' (*MECW* 20, 104; cf. **Bloch** 1936, which contrasts the 'social fable' of **Agrippa** with that of **Mandeville**). In contrast to this revisionist use of particular fables to develop critical analogies, we also find the term 'fable' or 'fabling' used to designate the patent falsehoods by which capital obscures its material basis in social production, or used satirically as an instrument of political analysis (especially in the *18th Brumaire*). The dialectical genre of the fable is thus itself dialectically deployed in **Marx** both as a critical tool of Marxist science *and* as the very exemplum of ideology in action. **Lenin**, **Stalin** and **Trotsky**, among others, are also able practitioners of fabling in this sense, and their political speeches and writings are rife both with admiring allusions to the folk wisdom of particular fables (in their case, typically taken from **Krylov**) and with denunciations of various forms of ideological aberration, calumny and opportunism as being themselves mere fables.

5. In the contemporary world, we see the continued ideological interpellation of children through fable in their mass-media derivations pioneered by Disney and imitated by countless others. Even more cynical are the campaigns of corporate advertisers targeting children as manipulable consumers. If nothing

else, these campaigns confirm the philosophical commonplace of the world as a fable (*mundus est fabula*) that dates back at least as far as the pre-Socratic contemporaries of **Aesop** and reaches its culmination with the nihilism of **Nietzsche**, **Heidegger** and various forms of postmodernism. If the world itself is declared to be a fable, the question of the relation to the world no longer plays a role and science becomes myth, truth becomes poetry. *Fabula* then has the epistemological sense of a talking. In other words, the moral of the fable would be then nothing more than the story itself and the pleasure of its retelling.

Alternatively, fabling can be understood less abstractly as being in a constant relation of deformation or figuration to what it recounts, as being in an allegorical relation to its referent, something first theorised by **Fontenelle** – far less patronising in his view of the genre than **Hegel** and less controlling than **Lessing** – in his 'De l'origine des fables' (1689) where he sees the fable not only as the earliest form of history but also as 'the history of the errors of the human spirit' (1790, 372). This *history* of human errors is indeed what fables both disclose and propagate, urging us to read their testimony of what **Benjamin** calls the 'catastrophe' of history in their seemingly childlike narration of the unforgiving power relations between beasts that are all too human.

Nevertheless, new media also give new opportunities for counterhegemonic and popular cultural expression. On the one hand, we see in the tradition of Joel Chandler **Harris** a renewed effort to collect, augment and disseminate subaltern fable traditions, such as those put together by G. **Sylvain**, J.-M. **Awouma**, W. **Saroyan** and V. **Montejo** of, respectively Haitian, Camerounian, Armenian and Mayan fables). And on the other hand, we find the simultaneously ironic and paedagogic appropriation of the fable form by dissident movements. Don Durito, the jungle beetle, created by Subcomandante Insurgente **Marcos** of the Zapatista Liberation Army, has become a veritable icon of postcolonial resistance, disseminated as his texts and images have been by fax and internet as well as by print. In ironised allusion to *Don Quixote*, Durito tilts at the windmills of state terror and multinational corporatism with his paperclip lance and riding atop his trusty steed, 'Pegasus', who is in actuality a lowly turtle. In the course of his humorous adventures, however, Durito offers trenchant lessons on the power ruses and perils of contemporary neoliberalism, not only as it affects Chiapas but the rest of the world. At the same time, and in accordance with the fable's traditional deployment of animal characters as humans in disguise, Durito the bug also puts a human face on those whom state terror (here, that of Mexico) would deny any semblance of humanity and who therefore appear only in masked guise. As such, Durito emblematises the critical potential of the fable, even or especially in a postmodern climate of irony and cynicism. That potential comes from the ability of this formally dialectical genre to adapt itself to differing socio-historical contexts and to speak the story of those who (do not want to) hear it: *de te fabula narratur*! as **Marx** writes in the 'Preface' to the first edition of *Capital*.

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above/below, alienation, base-aesthetics, censor, comical, Enlightenment, domination, fairy tales, fantasy, fiction, humour, ideological state apparatus, ideology-critique, irony, joke, laughter, literary form, mass culture, myth, plebeian, popular culture, popularity, satire, stories, subalternity, subversive, upright gait, violence, wisdom, Zapatism.

Aufklärung, aufrechter Gang, Basis-Ästhetik, Fiktion, Geschichten, Gewalt, Herrschaft, Humor, Ideologiekritik, ideologische Staatsapparate, Ironie, Komisches, Lachen, literarische Form, Märchen, Massenkultur, Mythos, oben/unten, Phantasie, Plebejisches, Popularkultur, Satire, Subalternität, subversiv, Verfremdung, Volkstümlichkeit, Weisheit, Witz, Zapatismus, Zensur.