

The Gut / Der Darm

public sculpture
Schillerplatz, Chemnitz

The Head, The Gut, The Change

The cult of the head as a representation of ideas and ideologies is defunct. The hegemony of the head (depicting “heroes” as portraits, busts, or head-centered figures) is reminiscent of the Cartesian decapitation—a dualistic mutilation of the human organism—illustrating the separation of the body from the mind. This patriarchal canon of representation, which severs the head, takes it as a trophy, and puts it up for public display is probably an atavism of the act of headhunting often practiced by warriors in historic times. Headhunting's primary function was ritual and ceremonial. It was part of the process of structuring, reinforcing, and defending hierarchical relationships between communities and individuals. The practice stemmed from the belief that the head contained "soul matter" or life force that could be harnessed and contained. The head was always the supreme objective of power. Similarly, rationalistic-humanistic dualism downplays the body by omitting the topological complexity of consciousness, obscuring other body parts and completely obliterating other entities that live in the guts or on the skin. The head is credited with the ability to enliven the body; it is the commander-in-chief responsible for thinking and awareness. It is considered the locus of the faculty of reason or the aspect of intellect and consciousness, experienced as combinations of thought, perception, memory, emotion, will and imagination, including all unconscious cognitive processes. The principle of *tête coupée* in monuments follows on from this widespread belief in the head as the most important part of the body, the seat of the mind/reason, and it promotes the patriarchal dictate of logic, rationality, and cerebralism.

Monuments are political tools used to legitimize those in power. Authority connects well to the head, the body part regarded as the area enjoying primary status, the seat of the somatic government, the capital of the body. “Capital” comes from the Latin word *caput* (head) / *capitalis* (of the head), meaning “of or pertaining to the head.” It also means main, principal, dominant, important, first, chief, and it also happens to denote wealth, stock, property, principal fund, and money. The correlation “monument – head – ruling – power – money” clearly elucidates how most monuments represent selective historical narratives in an assertive, androcentric manner, focusing only on events and identities that are comfortable for political elites. On the other hand—and in a self-confirming vicious circle—the definition of monuments and memorials emphasize their commemorative functions: monuments are built (by those with money and in power) to remind people of what are considered to be important events and/or to celebrate certain individuals. But let us also recall that every act of remembrance involves forgetting. And every monument needs a new way of being grasped.

The Karl Marx Monument in Chemnitz is the largest sculpture of Marx’s head in the world. The actual head is over 7.1 meters tall, and in total the bust weighs forty tons and stands over thirteen meters high. In 1953 the East German government hired the Soviet sculptor Lev Kerbel to design the monument to celebrate the city named after Marx, Karl-Marx-Stadt (Karl Marx’s City). Since then, Marx’s big head has grandiosely risen

above the city center, radiating messages. Most of these messages, like those of all monuments out there, are read as various manifestations of power: ideological, political, social, biological.

But Marx's head alone signals an undigested past. The metaphor of digestion is a seductive one. It captures the sense in which the events of the past have seemed doomed to persist and haunt us in public life and politics. So, let us expound on seeing Marx's head through, and with, a body of bodies: the city itself. This proposed and projected body is concerned with connections and disruptions between private sensations of corporeality and historically and/or socially constructed public identities; it is a huge matrix, sensing our inner life and working on our political mind; it is a complex system with emergent properties, the place where possibilities for new futures materialize and form.

It is time to see the Karl Marx Monument differently. Let us detach from the disorder from which we rational animals suffer, and imagine the head as one part of a big organism: the head disseminates invigorating ideas around the city and prompts its bodily extensions; the body lies silent, its flesh is the buildings, its arteries are the streets, its blood cells and neurotransmitters are the people circulating in the streets. Chemnitz is the whole figure of Karl Marx dressed in the city, with the head unveiled. This spectral body embodies everyone around. As soon as we are in Chemnitz we are in Karl Marx's body, moving through it, delivering vital nutrients to this gigantic organism, producing social emotions and urban metabolic waste. Seen from this perspective, Marx's head radiates beyond the symbolic dimension of a nation, a period, a class, or a political or philosophical persuasion. It stands out majestically from this context of commemoration, idolization, and the traditional, doctrinaire function of monuments. It becomes part of communicating vessels, a peopled continuum, vibrant and alive.

One cannot acquire any particular knowledge of the nature of the world without knowing the nature of the whole man and everything that this wholeness contains. We know today that "mind" is not confined to the head, and "consciousness" does not sit in the brain. Talking about the mind without referencing the body is massively incomplete. Thoughts, moods, desires, and feelings do not originate in isolation in the mind. We are bodies with many organ(ism)s and the mind belongs to the whole body and its bodies. The concentration on the brain has long blinded us to the fact that the self is made up of more than just gray matter. "I think, therefore I am" reduces us to the head. We are not because we think. Rather, if there is a certainty, it lies in our existence as a connective organ/body in and with the world. We are *res extensa cogitans sentiens*, an extended, thinking thing, a thinking-feeling body extending into all existence. Our bodies full of intelligence, our stomachs full of neurons, our microbiota full of will to live, are all, in some sense, other "selves" within us, communicating with the brain, changing it, giving it impulses and shaping our thoughts, dreams, and desires.

As Spinoza famously puts it in an attempt to abolish the duality of mind and body, "the forces of the body cannot in any way be determined by those of the mind"¹ and "no one yet has determined what the body

¹ Benedictus de Spinoza in *Ethics*, part V, "Of Human Freedom," preface. Spinoza rejects Descartes's mind-body interactionism and the dualism of extended and mental substances as a hypothesis with "occult qualities," proposing instead a monism of substance and broadening the perspectives of bodily foundation and mental activity.

can do.”² This yet-to-be-determined aspect of bodies is perhaps why they have been treated with such mistrust and neglect—bodies change, they are out of control, and their senses and feelings are transient and unstable, whereas our ideas and concepts are far more stable and certainty/truth is permanence itself. If we follow this thread of thinking, the body exceeds our conscious knowledge of it and it can determine our actions; before we act as subjects, it is the body which acts through us.

If there is a hierarchy among our organs, the gut stands next to the brain, both occupying an equally important role. What constitutes our “selves” is created as much in our head as it is in our gut. What goes on inside our intestines is far more complex and far more intelligent than we imagine. The gut knows. Its network of nerves is known as the “gut brain” because it is just as large and chemically complex as the gray matter in our heads. Our gut is full of neurotransmitters that extend into a neural network. This network is wired directly to the brain (the so-called gut-brain axis); this is why stress and anxiety can exert such a powerful effect on our digestion and, inversely, why digestion and what happens in the gut affect our brain.³ The gut is our second brain.⁴

Boycotted by the hegemony of human reason, a clear link between the large intestine (also known as the colon), its microbiota (the multi-bodied protagonist of the gut), and the brain has long been surmised. Only in recent decades have studies started to report the causal effects of gut microbes on our brains and behavior. The trillions of live microorganisms living in the gut⁵ are the “proletariat of digestion.” They are our crucial allies, keeping us alive by processing food, while also regulating our prefrontal cortex. Lately, they have been labeled “psychobiotics.”⁶ Today, it is becoming clearer and more widely accepted that there is an underlying molecular working class in the human microbiome which is, in fact, a major biopolitical player ruling our thoughts, emotions, actions, and reactions.

² Benedictus de Spinoza in *Ethics*, part III, “Of the Affects,” p. 2: “[N]o one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the mind. ...So it follows that when men say that this or that action of the body arises from the mind, which has dominion over the body, they do not know what they are saying, and they do nothing but confess, in fine-sounding words, that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action, and that they wonder at it.”

³ About ninety percent of the mood-enhancing neuroactive molecules (from serotonin, dopamine, acetylcholine, and histamine to melatonin and many others) are produced in our gut, which also contains roughly seventy percent of our immune system. For more information, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gut-brain_axis.

⁴ “Second brain” is a phrase coined by Michael D. Gershon in his book *The Second Brain: The Scientific Basis of Gut Instinct and a Groundbreaking New Understanding of Nervous Disorders of the Stomach and Intestines* (New York: Harper Collins 1998), to refer to the network of nerves surrounding our gut.

⁵ “Of our entire microbiome—that is, all the microorganisms that teem on the inside and outside of our bodies—99 percent are found in the gut. Not because there are so few elsewhere, but because there are simply so inconceivably many in the gut,” writes Giulia Enders in her book, *Gut. The Inside Story of Our Body’s Most Underrated Organ* (Vancouver/Berkeley: Greystone Books 2015), pp. 216-217. The book exposes how our gut is at the core of who we are. The author, a microbiologist, expands on the world and work of microbes, the nervous system of the gut, the brain-gut connection and the impact of the gut on our overall physiological and psychological condition.

⁶ The concept of “psychobiotics” is defined in *The Psychobiotic Revolution* by Scott C. Anderson, John F. Cryan and Ted Dinan (Washington: National Geographic 2019). The book explains the revolutionary new science of psychobiotics and the discovery that our brain health and state of mind are intimately connected to our microbiome.

Ontologically, the head is quite small compared to the gut. The gut is the last part of the gastrointestinal tract and is home to the biggest number of living entities in our body. This makes it the most prominent ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere. It is the place of an intrinsic solidarity, which makes *The Gut*, in fact, a monument to the microbiome. Marx's microbiome surely had a great impact on his ideas⁷ (and, by extension, on how our world is today) and it certainly deserves a monument, just as much as his head does.

A new reading of the Karl Marx monument asks us to collectively throw ourselves into restoring the missing organ(ism)s in order to envisage a new (social, political, ecological, and metaphysical) body. Let's activate the vagus nerve⁸ and connect The Head with The Gut. The Head is the visual facade of a sharp-edged hyper-rationality. It is erect, vertical, and aspiring. The Gut makes the anarchic swarming more evident. It does not need a pedestal. It performs itself horizontally, lying on the ground. It is accessible, encompassing, and inclusive. Once we connect Marx's Gut to Marx's huge, chimerical body-city, Marx's Head becomes porous. It transcends the past. It breathes in the present and breathes out the future. The Head makes sense of its body, discerning its pulse, tuning to other presences and coupling with The Gut. The Gut makes sense of The Head, feeding it with essence while thinking, 'If your mind were only slightly more permeable, I'd drown you in meaning.' The "gut instinct" wants to access the brain more often, but the brain resists—a manifestation of the class antagonism and political tension in effect, one may say.

The space from head (mouth) to colon (anus) is a dynamic site of meanings. It represents the circuit on which our metabolism is dependent and the channel through which we consume (and change) the world. Inflow, outflow. The mouth is a delightful place of many different kinds of joy, situated in a privileged place: the head. At the other end, there is the anus, a body bit we are not so comfortable talking about, through which we daily come face to face with corruption and decay. Between the mouth and the anus, beauty transforms to rot and deliciousness to disgust. Representing the colon means rendering visible what is discomfiting for elites. The Gut is a place to interrogate the neoliberal appetite, which turns most things into waste at the expense of the masses in a microbiotic society (a disposable population), because once laborers have done their jobs, they are considered "excess." The colon is capitalism's end zone, essentially, and at all times full of shit.

The area between the mouth and the anus is the space for transformation. This in-between-ness—in this case the public space, the city—is where the politics of immunity and autoimmunity happens. The tract

⁷ In a paper entitled "The Nature and Consequence of Karl Marx's Skin Disease," published in the *British Journal of Dermatology* in 2008, Sam Shuster makes the case that the psychological effect of *hidradenitis suppurativa*, Marx's life-long illness, on both his personal life and his writing has been considerable. Recent research (as shown in "A Microbiome Pilot Study: The Exploration of the Gut-Skin Axis in Hidradenitis Suppurativa" by S.Y. Lam, D. Radjabzadeh, H. Eppinga, et al, 2019) demonstrates that this skin condition is linked to the gut microbiota through a gut-skin axis. One of the symptoms of this disease is alienation, a concept that Marx, a martyr to painful and distasteful boils and carbuncles for the majority of his life, put into words as he wrote *Das Kapital*.

⁸ The vagus nerve is the longest nerve of the autonomic nervous system in the human body. The word "vagus" means "wandering" in Latin. This is a very appropriate name, as the vagus nerve runs all the way from the brain stem to the colon.

between The Head and The Gut is the Body without Organs,⁹ the plane of immanence on which we can build a probiotic protopia.¹⁰ This is the space of embodiment beyond organization, beyond hierarchy or dominant reading, beyond stratification and territorialization. It is the smooth space through which movement can occur, the pharmacological expanse that could produce healthier ideas and attitudes. It is an assemblage of ill-health, comprising networks of biological, psychological, political, and socio-cultural relations. Here, we can embody our minds and mind our bodies. We are all (in) this body of Marx, we are the microbiome colonizing it and circulating within it. We all become agents carrying reflexes, circulating cytokines, activating neurotransmitters in the body of the “city with a head.”¹¹ By acting upon it as both biological and social bodies, we are changing it. We can have a tactile experience, feeling the points of contact with the streets and with the nerves of this large entity. We can have a sense of bodily presence through a *touchant-touché*¹² experience, a politico-somato-sensation that exists in an assemblage of waves, vibrations, migrations, migraines, thresholds, thrashings, gradients, grades, breaths, breaks, intensities, propensities.

We use our many bodies and their many organs, but we rarely reflect upon them. Here’s an attempt to remind ourselves we should pay more attention to the body. Not just the anthropocentric body, but to bodies as environments hosting ecosystems hosting other environments and ecosystems in miniature. We should not exchange the cult of the head with the cult of the body (the one tyrannically promoted by our narcissistic modern society), but with the re-evaluated sensible body, tasked with life's processes, connected to the world. We might also re-evaluate our monuments. Not by feeding them hatred or tearing them down as it’s happening after each clash of ideologies, nor by worshipping them as authorities of power and beliefs, but by creating new posthuman mythologies and by surrounding existing statues with monuments to other bodies: dead, alive, non-human, non-terrestrial.

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⁹ Term derived from Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology. A “Body without Organs” (BwO) consists of a body with no underlying organizational principles, and hence no organs within it. It is a post-Enlightenment entity, a body, but not an organism.

¹⁰ “Protopia” is a term coined by Kevin Kelly, defining a state in which we are no longer fighting for survival (dystopia), nor are we accepting perfection (utopia). We have become accountable for our need, our desire to perpetually chase the better. In the author’s own words, “I think our destination is neither utopia nor dystopia nor status quo, but protopia. ...Protopia is a state that is better today than yesterday, although it might be only a little better. Protopia is much harder to visualize. Because a protopia contains as many new problems as new benefits, this complex interaction of working and broken is very hard to predict.” Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable* (New York: Viking Press 2016), p. 13.

¹¹ Until 2007, the motto of the city of Chemnitz was “Stadt mit Köpfchen” (the city with heads/brains), referring to the Karl Marx’s Monument. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx_Monument

¹² *touchant-touché* (touching-touched) refers to the idea of the double nature of touch developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a framework for thinking about our bodily perception and incarnate existence, in which the sentient and the sensible is intertwined—the sentient cannot experience itself touching without experiencing its being touched. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press 1968) Merleau-Ponty focused on the ways in which our embodiment is central to our consciousness and self, pushing away from seeing these as isolatable and reducible phenomena inside the brain and toward seeing them as more distributed and relational features of our bodies in the world. Merleau-Ponty suggests the search for the self and consciousness need not be focused on the space within our skulls. Instead, we should turn our attention to the lived body.