

## MARX'S SEVEN METAPHORS OF LABOUR AS DEATH

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867/1887) through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) isolating and studying seven conceptual metaphors that frame labour under capitalism as a process of death. Employing a concordance-based textual analysis, it explores the metaphors of: metamorphosis, vampirism, werewolf hunger, necromantic animation, militarisation, decimation and vegetation. All these converge into conceptualising labour as the slow annihilation of life. Each framing reveals a distinct dimension of capitalism's mortuary logic. Capital's perpetual transformation is construed as contingent on: the absorption of living labour, the monstrous appetite for vitality, the spectral animation of commodities, the militarisation and disciplining of the labouring body, the decimation of the labourer's life expectancy and the reduction of survival to vegetative existence. Collectively, these metaphors articulate Marx's vision of a system that lives only by consuming life

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Capital, Capitalism, Conceptual Metaphor Analysis, Cognitive Linguistic Analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

Marx's *Capital* is not merely an economic treatise but a work of profound metaphorical tapestry. Lakoff and Johnson posit that metaphors reveal the conceptual frameworks underlying human thought, whereby abstract domains are understood through more concrete source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This framework enables a rigorous linguistic analysis of Marx's figurative constructions, revealing how metaphor organises and shapes his critique of political economy. Following the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), this study systematically identifies the metaphorical constructions through which Marx personifies capital, frames production as predation and depicts labour as a process of curtailing life expectancy. Each metaphor is extracted within its concordance line which functions as a unit of analysis, evidencing the lexical realisation of metaphorical mappings. The procedure involves: determining the contextual meaning of the lexical items behind the framing, marking metaphorical usages, reproducing the cross-domain mappings and analysing their implications. The study proceeds through seven sections, each corresponding to one metaphor and explicates the cross-domain mappings through which Marx envisions labour's relation to death.

### 1. Metamorphosis: Capital's Perpetual Transformation

#### Concordance Line:

It is not merely that an accelerated accumulation of total capital, accelerated in a constantly growing progression, is needed to absorb an additional number of labourers, or even, on account of the constant metamorphosis of old capital, to keep employed those already function. (Marx, 1887, p. 441)

**Source Domain:** Biology (metamorphosis, absorption and transformation)

**Target Domain:** Capitalism's process of accumulation

**Cross-Domain Mappings:**

Metamorphosis → Perpetual transformation of capital

Absorption of nutrients → Absorption of labour-power

Growth and reproduction → Economic expansion

Marx describes capitalism as a system that must endlessly expand or collapse. Its capacity to persist depends on the continuous "metamorphosis of old capital" (Marx, 1867/1887, p. 441). The biological term metamorphosis evokes transformation through consumption, as organisms absorb substances necessary to their change. Similarly, capitalism absorbs labour to sustain its transformation. The labourer is the nutritive substance through which capital metamorphoses. Marx's metaphor therefore exposes the system's paradox. Its life depends on the death of those who feed it. Any deceleration in accumulation threatens systemic collapse.

## 2. Vampirism: Capital as a Mythical Beast

**Concordance Lines**

Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour (Marx, 1867/1887, p. 163)

The prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night, only acts as a palliative. It quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour. (p. 175)

**Source Domain:** Ravenous monstrosity (vampire, blood and consumption)

**Target Domain:** Capitalist exploitation of labour

**Cross-Domain Mappings:**

Vampire → Capitalism as undead life sustained by the consumption of blood

Blood → Labour-power as life essence

Feeding → Extraction of surplus value

Here, capital is not merely metaphorically undead. It is parasitic. Similar to how a vampire is construed in popular culture, capital lives only through the life it drains from others. The extension of the working day “quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour” (p. 175). Blood becomes the necessary condition of capital’s survival and labourers the vessels of its extraction. Through vampiric imagery, Marx conveys the mortal danger of work under capitalism where life is consumed.

### 3. Werewolf Hunger: The Monstrosity of Surplus Labour

#### Concordance Line:

But in its blind uncontrollable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working day. (Marx, 1887, p. 179)

**Source Domain:** A mythological creature (werewolf, hunger and transgression)

**Target Domain:** Capital’s drive for surplus extraction

#### Cross-Domain Mappings:

Werewolf → Capitalism as a bestial, uncontrollable force

Hunger → Desire for surplus value

Overstepping bounds → Moral and physical transgression of human limits

Marx’s metaphor intensifies this bestial logic (Marx, 1867/1887, p. 179). The werewolf embodies violent compulsion and insatiable appetite. By attributing “blind uncontrollable passion” to capital, Marx underscores its transgressive nature. The metaphor frames capitalism as a predatory drive that destroys both ethical and biological limits. The capitalist’s pursuit of surplus labour becomes indistinguishable from lycanthropic frenzy. Under this conceptualisation, labour is not only consumed, but hunted.

### 4. Necromancy: The Fetishism of Living Commodities

#### Concordance line:

the whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, so soon as we come to other forms of production” (Marx, 1887, p. 50)

**Source Domain:** Magic and the occult (necromancy, enchantment and illusion)

**Target Domain:** The commodity under capitalism

#### Cross-Domain Mappings:

Necromancy → The apparent animation of the inanimate

Magic → The mystification of social relations

The Commodity and the labourer → The transference of life

Marx's invocation of "magic and necromancy" (p. 50) articulates one of capitalism's most spectral inversions: the animation of the dead and the death of the living. Commodities appear to move and desire autonomously, concealing the living labour that sustains them. Fetishism performs a metaphysical transference whereby the vitality of the worker animates the object. Marx's necromantic imagery exposes capitalism's uncanny ontology, whereby the world of things lives because the world of humans dies. Every commodity is a vessel of displaced vitality.

## 5. Militarisation: The Labourer as a Soldier

### Concordance Line:

Every individual capital is a larger or smaller concentration of means of production, with a corresponding command over a larger or smaller labour-army. (Marx, 1887, p. 438)

These are candidates for the industrial reserve army, and are, in times of great prosperity, as 1860, e.g., speedily and in large numbers enrolled in the active army of labourers. (Marx, 1887, p. 448)

The spindles and looms, formerly scattered over the face of the country, are now crowded together in a few great labour-barracks, together with the labourers and the raw material. (Marx, 1887, p. 528)

**Source Domain:** The military (army, barracks, discipline and command)

**Target Domain:** The organisation of labour under capitalism

### Cross-Domain Mappings:

Army → Collective labour force that involves mortal risk

Command → Vertical managerial control

Barracks → Workplaces

Soldiers → Labourers

Marx militarises labour to expose its disciplinary, coercive and risk involving structure. The "labour-army" metaphor positions workers as enlisted bodies governed by hierarchy and compulsion. The "reserve army" embodies latent exploitation, the unemployed who sustain wage suppression. The workplace as "labour-barracks" encapsulates confinement, uniformity and regimentation. Through this metaphor, capitalism becomes a permanent state of war, mobilising bodies in the service of accumulation.

## 6. Decimation of Life Expectancy: Labour as the shortening of life

### Concordance Lines:

After what has just been said, it will be understood that the Report of the Commission classes journeymen bakers among the short-lived labourers, who, having by good luck escaped the normal decimation of the children of the working-class, rarely reach the age of 42. (Marx, 1887, p. 173)

It attains this end by shortening the extent of the labourer's life... (Marx, 1887, p. 179)

It extends the labourer's time of production during a given period by shortening his actual life-time. (Marx, 1887, p. 179)

Hence Capital is reckless of the health or length of life of the labourer, unless under compulsion from society. (Marx, 1887, p. 181)

The consumption of labour power by capital is, besides, so rapid that the labourer, half-way through his life, has already more or less completely lived himself out. (Marx, 1887, p. 447)

**Source Domain:** Geometry and temporal measurement (length, line, shortening and life-span)

**Target Domain:** The labourer's biological existence under capitalism

### Cross-Domain Mappings:

A line has a measurable length → Life has measurable duration

Reduction in length is loss → Loss of years is loss of life

In these concordance lines, Marx conceptualises the labourer's life as a finite linear trajectory that capital actively shortens. The lifespan becomes a measurable line, susceptible to reduction and diminished through labour under capitalism. The verbs "short-lived," "shortening" and the phrase "half-way through his life" construct a metaphorical framework in which living is not simply passing through time but having measurable time taken away. Capital shortens life by converting labourers' future, the years they ought to live, into present labour-time. The more time is handed to production, the less time remains in life. Under this mapping, to labour is to lose life.

The metaphor intensifies Marx's necropolitical critique. The notion that labourers "rarely reach the age of 42" and that capital behaves "reckless of the health or length of life" frames capitalism as a system whose normal operation carries an anticipatory relation to death. Death is not an accident at the periphery of production, but a planned outcome. The labourer dies prematurely because capital treats life as a quantitative resource to be burned, not a qualitative existence to be lived.

## 7. Vegetation: Survival at the Threshold of Death

**Concordance Line:**

...in the form of alms the parish made up the nominal wage to the nominal sum required for the simple vegetation of the labourer (Marx, 1887, p. 467)

**Source Domain:** Botany (vegetation, growth and survival)

**Target Domain:** The minimal biological subsistence of the worker

**Cross-Domain Mappings:**

Vegetation → Life reduced to biological persistence

Parish alms → Systemic maintenance of bare life through the system of wages

Nominal sum → Quantification of existence in economic terms

Existence in a vegetative state signifies that life is stripped to its metabolic minimum. The worker survives, but without consciousness, agency or desire. The labourer is sustained only enough to be exploited again. The Speenhamland system epitomises this condition, where wages are supplemented to sustain minimal survival (Hammond & Hammond, 1912/2022). Existence becomes calculable in monetary terms, and life is maintained at its lowest metabolic cost. The labourer's vegetative state represents the end point of capitalism's necropolitical logic. As Marx suggests, the labourer becomes a living corpse whose continued survival serves only capital's immortality.

**CONCLUSION**

Marx's Capital contains a systematic metaphorical network in which labour and death are inextricable. Through the metaphors of metamorphosis, vampirism, werewolf hunger, necromancy, militarisation, and vegetation, Marx stages a conceptual inversion, whereby capital lives because labour dies. Each metaphor foregrounds a specific mode of mortality biological, moral or metaphysical, revealing capitalism as a necropolitical regime. Within this framework, production is not the affirmation of life but its calculated decimation. The metaphors expose the structural paradox between economic vitality and human extinction.

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