**FEBRUARY 5, 2014**

**The Onion Has Become America's Finest Marxist News Source**

**BY**[**EMMETT RENSIN**](http://www.newrepublic.com/authors/emmett-rensin)

[**Share**](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116479/onion-americas-finest-marxist-news-source)

**F**rom coffee shops to college campuses, this country still has plenty of publications dedicated to radical politics. But only one is breathing new life into a far-left movement mostly vanished since FDR dropped dead. It isn’t [The Socialist Worker](http://socialistworker.org/). It’s not [*The Militant*](http://www.themilitant.com/), either. And it isn't [*Monthly Review*](http://monthlyreview.org/), [Political Affairs](http://www.politicalaffairs.net/), [World Socialist Website](http://www.wsws.org/), or [*Worker’s Vanguard*](http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/). Rather, the vanguard of revolution—the paper most dedicated to the overthrowing capitalism in the United States today—is none other than[The Onion](http://www.theonion.com/).

Since their move to Chicago two years ago, "America’s Finest News Source" has taken on a decidedly darker—and more subversive—bent. Nothing in The Onion suggests explicit support for a communist solution, of course, but looking back on the humor magazine’s punchiest political barbs of late, one can’t help noticing that many of the jokes—what you’re meant to “get”—are just less obtuse, much funnier versions of capitalist critiques in *The German Ideology*and other Karl Marx classics.

The joke behind [“Man Briefly Forgets Hotel Staff are Not Human”](http://www.theonion.com/articles/man-briefly-forgets-hotel-staff-are-not-humans,35047/?ref=auto) would provoke chuckles from even the most crass conservative, but the truth it gets at—that capitalist commodification not just of goods, but of humans' subjective agency in the form of labor, is tantamount to the dehumanization of the working class—is straight out of young Marx’s *Manuscripts of 1844.* “They’re all so lifelike,” hotel client Peter Adler says in the piece, no doubt contemplating the palpably unnatural material relations of capitalism, “I keep forgetting to just walk right by and act like they’re not even there.”

If only we could all stop forgetting, The Onion seems to cry, then the revolution would be nigh.

It doesn’t stop with the obvious, communist-tinged class warfare gags. More often than not, The Onion delves into deep cuts from the Marx-Engels oeuvre. [“Laid Off Man Finally Achieves Perfect Work-Life Balance”](http://www.theonion.com/articles/laidoff-man-finally-achieves-perfect-worklife-bala,35022/) has traces of *entfremdung,*the contention that capitalism alienates the proletariat from their species-consciousness by making them participants without control in the economic relations of their culture. The "newly unemployed" coder can finally eat better, sleep longer, and spend more time with his family! "I'm even cooking more," he says. "Everything just feels right." We laugh because we know that only complete overthrow of the master class and a restoration of “natural” labor relations will give us the balance we seek so fruitlessly in dating sites and cable.

[“Majority of Office Supplies Used to Apply for Different Job”](http://www.theonion.com/articles/majority-of-offices-supplies-used-to-apply-for-dif,35158/), [“Interns Treated to Informative 30-Minute Q&A With Totally Miserably Employees”](http://www.theonion.com/articles/interns-treated-to-informative-30minute-qa-session,35029/), [“Area CEO Likes To Think of Family As Small, Close-Knit Business”](http://www.theonion.com/articles/area-ceo-likes-to-think-of-family-as-small-closekn,34852/)—all clear indictments of false consciousness, arising inexorably from bourgeois dogma as it perverts our very understanding of fulfillment, family, and success. Society is sick with capital; attempts to work within the system only lead to comic cycles of futility.

But perhaps the most salient example of The Onion’s Marx-inspired skewering is last months’  [“All-Knowing Invisible Hand Of Free Market Once Again Guides Millions In Profits To Nation’s Bead Stores.”](http://www.theonion.com/articles/allknowing-invisible-hand-of-free-market-once-agai,35016/?ref=auto) The joke is far from subtle. But it wouldn’t be so obviously if you didn’t intuitively buy into the theory of commodity fetishization, and know that the natural use of capital as a convenient common denominator for the exchange of material goods has been supplanted by a system wherein commodities are little more than frivolous intermediates for the conversion of capital into itself. The beads themselves don’t matter! That we assuage this clear perversion of material distribution with mythologies about the “Invisible Hand” and its accompanying capitalist morality play is even more thoroughly Marxist: Stories like these are just post-hoc rationalizations; like all non-materialist philosophy, they seek to rationalize the dominant economic order, not explain it in a real way.

If the idea that this represents some latent Marxism in our culture seems far-fetched, just try imagining a *New York Times* editorial making the same point: “Seven Figure Profits for Plastic Bead Industry Make the Efficiency and Virtue of Consumer Capitalism Suspect.” Except you can’t imagine that. It’s valid point, but much too radical. It sounds like an Onion headline.

So does “Continued Existence of Cows Disproves Central Tenets of Capitalism.” Except that isn’t from The Onion—it’s a [37-page paper](http://karlan.yale.edu/p/Cows-2012-09-22.pdf) from the National Bureau of Economic Research, exploring why, in India, "livestock investments may persist, even with negative returns." But it quotes, atop its very first page, an Onion piece from which it cribbed its title, "[Continued Existence Of Edible Arrangements Disproves Central Tenets Of Capitalism](http://www.theonion.com/articles/continued-existence-of-edible-arrangements-disprov,19856/)":

In theory, the market should have done away with Edible Arrangements long ago," said American Economic Association president Orley Ashenfelter, who added that one of the crucial assumptions of capitalism is the idea that businesses producing undesired goods or services will fail. "That's how it's supposed to work. Yet somehow, despite offering no product of any worth whatsoever, this company not only makes payroll every week, but also generates strong profits.

See? The real Marxists are catching on.

Of course, you don’t need to have actually read *Theories of Surplus Value* to “get” the Onion’s jokes. Fans of *Preface to The Critique of Political Economy* aren’t enjoying some punch line beyond more casual readers’ reach. Rather, the very universal accessibility of The Onion reflects just how deeply ingrained Marxist critiques of capitalism are in our culture. At a time when our moderate president is [called](http://www.politico.com/blogs/politico-live/2014/01/weber-obama-is-a-kommandantinchef-a-socialistic-dictator-182128.html) a "socialistic dictator" by a sitting congressman, it’s telling that one of our most universally beloved sources of comedy is so sympathetic to a far more radical ideology.

What it tells us is that we’ve accepted Marx’s basic view of capital so thoroughly that we treat it like obvious, intuitive truth—the kind necessary for any kind of broadly appealing humor. The idea that “The Invisible Hand” is a truly stupid way to find moral virtue in our excess consumption of plastic beads is pure Marxism. We’re just not allowed to call it that.

Given this disconnect, it’s unsurprising that withering critiques of American capitalism have found their most popular outlet in the nation's leading satirical newspaper. From King Lear’s Fool to Samuel Clemens, humor is often the cover by which the radical reaches the mainstream. I don't believe The Onion’s writing staff is consciously promoting Marxism, but that only emphasizes the point: Cognitive dissonance or not,*Das Kapital* has so thoroughly permeated our understanding of capitalism that we’re seldom even aware that we are citing it. It’s become a kind of cultural white noise—always present, but rarely acknowledged.

Among mainstream U.S. publications only The Onion, under the guise of satire, can get away with openly channeling this contradiction. No doubt the intent is more opportunistic than deliberately subversive, but the point remains: With Americans continuing to struggle in the long wake of the Great Recession, and a populist wave taking aim at the country’s ever-widening economic inequality, the timing has never been better for dark humor about the failures of late capitalism. And so The Onion resonates. As the saying goes: It’s funny because it’s true.