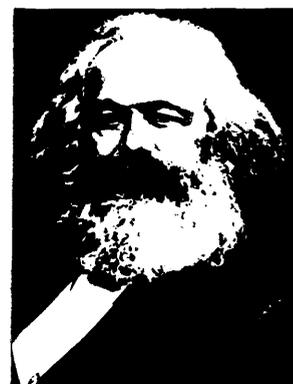




# Peter Rabbit and the Grundrisse



Rosa and Charley Parkin

There can be no such thing as an innocent reading of the Tale of Peter Rabbit. As that most perceptive analyst of the later manuscripts, Enid Blyton, puts it: 'We must pose this work the question of the specificity of its object, its relation to its object. The only reading of Peter Rabbit which speaks to us through the congealed layers of the past-becoming-present is a symptomatic reading - a reading in which we listen attentively to Beatrix Potter's silences.'<sup>1</sup>

So much is of course clear to the average reader of this epochal work, this work which has not only transformed our collective perceptions of rabbitness (*Kaninchenlichkeit*) but which has contributed a new chapter to the political economy of the cabbage patch. It is our contention in



this brief monograph that Peter Rabbit marks a watershed in Potter's philosophical development, a distinct epistemological rupture from the earlier problematic of the Herne Bay manuscripts (above all, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* and *Jemima Puddleduck*). Nothing more tellingly illustrates the completeness of this scientific metamorphosis than the contrast between the rather schematic hermeneutics of the Nutkin-Puddleduck period and the sure grasp of the principles of comparative political economy manifested in Peter Rabbit. The dramatization of the conflict between Peter and Mr. McGregor in the celebrated garden scene brilliantly pinpoints, in a so brief episode, those acute contradictions and levels of overdetermination characteristic of pre-capitalist cabbage production. The revelatory instance (Potter's favoured methodological device) is that 'moment' when Mr. McGregor, chasing Peter from the garden, seizes the rake and aims a blow at the fleeing creature. Through an inspired stroke of trans-

formative symbolism, in which the *essence* of the rake changes from that of tool to that of weapon, Potter lays bare the irresolvable antagonisms of a sub-feudal order in which the role of producer and the role of warrior are indissolubly linked yet totally incompatible in their binary opposition.



It is quite clear from our reading of the unpublished drafts and revisions of the early manuscripts that Mr. McGregor is to be understood as an embodiment (*Träger*) of that class of small peasant proprietors from whom baronial landlords extracted in direct and unmediated forms surplus value in the dual forms of military service and corvée labour.<sup>2</sup> However, we must state quite emphatically that despite certain surface similarities the role of Mr. McGregor in the productive process is not to be equated with that of the Seven Dwarfs, as so many theorists from Schumpeter onwards have argued. The extraction of surplus from the productive labour of the Seven Dwarfs by the Royal household (Snow White) was a mediated political form, though ultimately backed up by terror, which is a condition more akin to the Asiatic mode of production than to sub-Feudalism. Failure to appreciate this crucial distinction has led to quite understandable confusion among the readers of these works - though unfortunately we cannot go into the important question of whose self-interests are in fact being served by these not accidental attempts at mystification and concealment.

The thesis we wish to advance is that the entire episode between Peter and Mr. McGregor, quite apart from the 'rake' scene is decisive in marking a conjuncture in the transformation of Peter Rabbit from an object of history to the real subject of history. It is precisely at that 'moment' when Peter is threatened by the 'rake' that he gets his blue jacket caught on the fence, and can only make good his escape by abandoning

it. Again, in this capsule statement, we have Potter's brilliant portrayal of the self-emancipatory act - the shedding of the 'jacket' conveys to us of course the throwing off of servile, anthropomorphic status imposed by the structures-in-dominance of the ideological state apparatus. It is during Peter's tearful monologue in the potting shed that the full significance of his act comes home to him: i.e. that he has finally and irrevocably entered the realm of history as a reflexive agent. From this moment on he will be marked out by his kinsmen, Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail (who chose to remain in the ever-pre-given-structure of the warren) as a figure of destiny: the singular and heroic figure for which all Potter's earlier works have in a sense prepared us.

None of the previous manuscripts matches the theoretic grandeur and philosophic presence of *Peter Rabbit* - including the much overrated *Tale of Mrs. Tiggy Winkle* which, notwithstanding Lukacs' extravagant assertions to the contrary, still bears the unmistakable traces of the Herne Bay period.<sup>3</sup> It is quite clear from a symptomatic reading of the Preface to the second edition of the Czech translation of *Tiggy Winkle*, published after the final (Putney) draft of *Peter Rabbit*, that Potter expresses serious reservations about the internal structure of the argument. There is a tacit recognition of the failure to give full weighting to those forces bearing upon Mrs. Tiggy Winkle's actions which can only be accounted for as a result of the over-determination of conjunctive instances within the given totality of the farmyard. What this does in effect is to present us with a completely de-historicized hedgehog-subject.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to imagine Potter falling into this same trap in any of her later analyses of pre-capitalist economic formations.

Our attempt to produce a correct reading of *Peter Rabbit* deliberately poses the problem of what it is to read. Only in answering this question can we feel confident in our task of rescuing Potter's contribution to science from the hands of those who seek to reduce this work virtually to the level of a fairy tale.



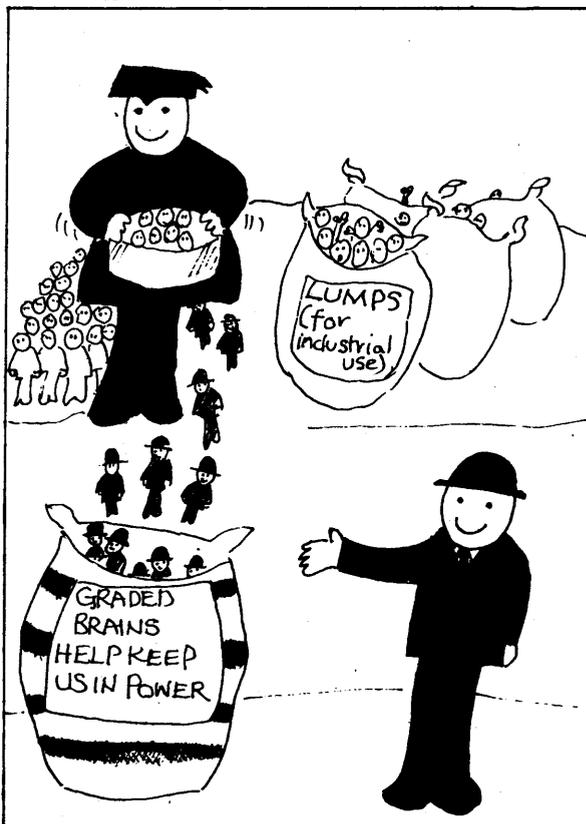
## Footnotes

- (1) Enid Blyton, *Lire le Peter Rabbit*, Paris, Maspero, 1968
- (2) See Nicos Poulantzas, 'Hegemony, Surplus and Unproductive Labour in the Cabbage Patch: a reply to Miliband', *New Left Review* LXIV, 1970
- (3) G. Lukács, *Weltgeist, Naturgeschichte und Symbolsbegriffe bei Frau Tiggy Winkle*, in *Beatrix-Potter Studien VIII*, 1956
- (4) Adorno's biting comment is here very much to the point: 'The thought to which a positive hypothesis of anything outside the immanence of the dialectic is forbidden, overshoots the subject with which it no longer simulates as being one'. T. Adorno, *Spasms*, Frankfurt, 1972. This passage could have been written specifically with Mrs. Tiggy Winkle in mind.

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