

# Questions of Communism: Ethics, Ontology, Subjectivity

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*This paper is both a critique and an affirmation of the “postmodern” Marxist debates on communism. It claims that any serious discussion of ethico-political concepts, such as exploitation and class justice, should include how subjectivity animates class. In particular, it insists that communism is predicated upon a shift at the level of subjectivity, in the very ideological coordinates that define what is just and what is unjust. Rethinking class analysis by locating the question of sexual difference at the ethico-political and theoretical core of class analysis makes it possible to differentiate exploitative class structures and communist class structures as two distinct modes in which communities fail to domesticate the Real of class antagonism.*

**Key Words:** Class Analysis, Sexual Difference, Marxism, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou

Injustice is not the immediate disorder of that for which justice would provide an ideal order.

—Badiou, *Infinite Thought*

Within the tradition of “postmodern” Marxism, communism as a class project has been the subject of, I shall argue, two separate yet related streams of debate. The first pertains to the meaning of exploitation as an ethical concept of class injustice and its implications for how communism is defined. The second, in contrast, has probed into the political and cultural conditions of existence of class and has insisted that the study of various *formations of subjectivity* is relevant for devising strategies of class transformation (from exploitative to communal forms of appropriation of surplus) and for imagining and enacting concrete communisms here and now. Put differently, while the former stream has focused on defining exploitation and communism without tackling the questions of subjectivity (i. e., the questions pertaining to the political and cultural constitution of concrete, “classed” subjects), the latter stream has insisted that all class structures are constituted by particular political processes of subjection and cultural processes of subjectivation. The second stream has argued that if these matters of subjectivity are not merely epiphenomenal but, rather, are integral to our analyses of the different forms of performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus, then any serious discussion of ethico-political concepts, such as exploitation and class justice, should include how subjectivity animates class.

I begin by offering a summary of what I call the ethics debate: the debate over class justice. After staging a highly stylized discussion of the two main opposing positions within the ethics debate, I argue that both approaches ground their ethics in an ontology that they assume to transcend time and space. It is my contention that the subjectivity debate is not merely addressing the question of communism from yet another aspect, but is actually offering a critique of the ontological assumptions of the ethics debate. Having said this, however, I also find it necessary, like my comrades who have participated in the ethics debate, to formulate an ethico-political principle of class justice. In the spirit of simultaneously critiquing and affirming these two streams, I will end this essay by introducing the *axiom of communism* as an ethico-political principle that breaks with the ontological project of capitalism and opens up to a new frame of justice.

## The Ethics Debate

### Who Should appropriate the Surplus?

While the contributors to the ethics debate differ as to how they define exploitation, they seem to concur on defining communism as its negation. On the one hand, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (1988, 2002) have insisted on defining exploitation as “social theft”—as a form of social organization of surplus where someone or some people receive “something for nothing.” On the other hand, Stephen Cullenberg (1992, 1998) and George DeMartino (2003) define exploitation as the “exclusion” of those who collectively or individually perform the surplus from its appropriation and distribution.<sup>1</sup> These two distinct notions of exploitation lead to two different conceptions of communism. While the “social theft” approach defines a communist class process as the collective and exclusive appropriation and distribution of surplus by its performers, the “exclusion” approach defines it as the appropriation and distribution of surplus not only by its performers, but also by other stakeholding constituencies. While the former approach designates the direct laborers to be the only constituency to collectively appropriate the surplus, the latter deliberately takes an open-ended stance: The communist form of appropriation is one in which the direct laborers are not “excluded from” appropriating and distributing the surplus that they have collectively produced.<sup>2</sup>

1. It is important to note that these two approaches are stylized positions within the ethics debate. In this sense, this essay neither claims to be a comprehensive survey of all the contributions to the postmodern Marxian debates on communism nor does it imply that the authors cited under certain positions are the only representatives of such positions. For a fairly comprehensive and subtle survey of the ethics debate, see DeMartino (2003).

2. DeMartino distinguishes between strong and weak definitions of appropriative justice. Under the strong definition, the right to appropriate the surplus is restricted to productive workers. In contrast, under the weak definition, “a class arrangement would be deemed appropriatively just provided that those who directly produce the surplus (Marx’s productive workers) are not excluded from fair and meaningful participation in its appropriation” (DeMartino 2003, 18–9). These two definitions roughly correspond, respectively, to what I term the “social theft” and

What, then, accounts for this difference? Why does the “social theft” approach insist on defining communism as the appropriation of surplus exclusively by the collectivity of direct laborers who have performed/produced it? Similarly, why does the exclusion approach shy away from defining communism as the collective and exclusive appropriation of surplus by the direct laborers? Without doubt, in order to restage the contours of the ethics debate, it is necessary to be able to address these questions. It is equally important, however, to pose yet another question: Beyond their difference, is there a commonality—a common ground that both approaches cohabit?

Let us begin by recalling some key concepts of Marxian class analysis. The term “direct laborers,” or productive laborers, is used to designate the class position of those who perform necessary and surplus labor, and as such it is distinguished from a number of other class “positions”: those who extract and appropriate surplus, those who distribute surplus, and those who receive surplus. An individual at any given moment in time can occupy more than one class position: she can simultaneously be the performer, appropriator, distributor, and receiver of surplus. In fact, for the “social theft” approach, exploitation persists so long as there are nonlaborers among the appropriators. That is, for exploitation to end, the collective of appropriators should coincide with the collective of performers.

Furthermore, for class analysis, not all the wage-laborers employed in capitalist enterprises are necessarily productive laborers who perform necessary and surplus labor. Some workers could be unproductive laborers who, though vital to the reproduction of the particular form of appropriation of surplus, are not productive of surplus value.<sup>3</sup> Preempting the possible political problems that these analytical distinctions can pose when distinguishing those who are exploited from those who are not, the “exclusion” approach has insisted that so long as all the direct laborers are among the appropriators, it is politically unnecessary to deploy the ethico-political concept of exploitation.<sup>4</sup> And perhaps more important, they claim that the “social

“exclusion” approaches. Since the “exclusion” approach purposely leaves the question of who qualifies as “other stakeholding constituencies,” a continuum of normative criteria can be mobilized to decide who should be granted appropriation rights. In addition to offering this very useful framework, DeMartino articulates a particular normative position that extends on Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach (20–2).

3. Indeed, in the context of a concrete class structure (e.g., in a complex capitalist enterprise), it may be empirically difficult to distinguish those who perform surplus labor (and therefore have a right to collectively appropriate the surplus that they have collectively performed) from those who merely facilitate the performance and appropriation of the surplus. In fact, there is a voluminous Marxian literature on how to differentiate productive from unproductive labor. See, for instance, Ian Gough (1972), Resnick and Wolff (1987, 132–41), and Cullenberg (1988).

4. DeMartino is uncomfortable with deploying the class-analytical distinction between productive and unproductive workers in the concrete context of social organization of surplus.

This is an entirely appropriate theoretical framework and accounting scheme that is useful for many purposes, as Marx demonstrated at length. But it is by no means the only viable scheme we might imagine. We might just as well designate “productive” all those workers in an enterprise who participate in creating the conditions necessary for surplus production to occur. The latter approach has the virtue of avoiding what can seem rather arbitrary distinctions between productive and unproductive laborers working side by side under identical conditions. (2003, 17–8)

theft” approach fails to acknowledge the ethical implications of the ontological notion of “conditions of existence.” Let us take a closer look at this latter point.

According to both approaches, given their shared commitment to overdetermination, the reproduction of any class structure is predicated upon *all* the conditions that enable its continuing existence.<sup>5</sup> In an exploitative class structure, the continued extraction of surplus from direct laborers is secured by a number of *subsumed class payments* that are made by the appropriators/distributors of the surplus.<sup>6</sup> These may include *inter alia* the payments to unproductive workers such as security guards, to the managerial staff, marketing experts, accountants, lawyers, financial institutions, government, and so on. Without the distributions of surplus to such destinations or groups, a class structure cannot reproduce itself. Needless to say, these destinations and groups do not exhaust all the possible conditions of existence of a class structure nor do they guarantee its continued existence.

According to the “exclusion” approach, a similar case could be made for class forms where direct laborers are the exclusive appropriators of surplus. The “exclusion” approach finds it unjust to exclude from appropriation of the surplus those who do not perform the surplus yet who provide necessary conditions of existence.<sup>7</sup> The injustice of exploitation, for the “exclusion” approach, does not lie in the “theft” of something

5. The notion of “condition of existence” is the well-known formula of overdeterminist storytelling. According to this (onto-)logic of overdetermination, every concrete social process is constituted by the contradictory push and pull of *all* the other social processes. Nonetheless, in order to be able to tell a story, an analyst needs to construct a particular narrative by specifying a *subset* of all the possible conditions of existence and tracing their contradictory effects on the investigated social process. Of course, given the epistemological impossibility of a view from nowhere, the analyst will always fall short of specifying *all*. In this sense, overdetermination is reduced to an ontological concept that reminds us that there are always other causal factors. But what if overdetermination is a concept that marks the limits of epistemology as an ontological condition? In this sense, if “to be overdetermined” entails failing to account for *all*, this is not because the all is infinite (it could well be) as the ontologized understanding of overdetermination would have it. Rather, one fails to account for *all*, because the *enunciated* content of one’s discourse, structurally speaking, will always fall short of accounting for one’s *position of enunciation*. The paradox of “All Corinthians are liars, and I am a Corinthian” is a good illustration of this structural impossibility.

6. The term “subsumed class payments” refers to payments made out of the already appropriated surplus to the “subsumed classes” such as landowners, banks, managers, sales personnel, and so forth. Unproductive laborers within a capitalist enterprise are also among subsumed classes. Note, however, that not only those who receive but also those who make “subsumed class payments” are counted among subsumed classes (Resnick and Wolff 1987, 118–9, 132–4).

7. As DeMartino (following Cullenberg [1998]) reminds us, if we are to tie the right to appropriate to one’s role in the production of surplus, then the rights should be extended beyond the enterprise.

There are those who serve the firm directly by providing conditions of existence on site (e.g., the independent electrician who contracts to rewire a machine), but there are also those whose efforts promote surplus production vitally though indirectly and off-site (e.g., the nurse who provides flu shots to its workers at the local HMO). A full mapping of all those in society who contribute in vital ways to society’s surplus production capacity would be very extensive, indeed. Shouldn’t they, too, enjoy appropriation rights? (DeMartino 2003, 18)

that rightfully belongs to its producers, but in the appropriation and distribution of surplus that excludes not only the direct laborers but also other constituencies that provide the conditions of existence for this appropriation and distribution. In short, providing a condition of existence of a class structure qualifies the conditioning social agent to have appropriative rights. In other words, the “exclusion” approach tailors an ethical stance from the ontological notion of conditions of existence; it links the right to appropriate to the status of being a condition of existence rather than to the narrower notion of being the performer of the surplus.<sup>8</sup>

In response, the “social theft” approach could easily argue that the “exclusion” approach, by loosening the relation between the labor theory of value and the ethico-political concept of exploitation, courts the danger of sacrificing the specificity of Marx’s contribution. Indeed Marx’s concept of exploitation is different from other notions of injustice and, as such, has a very precise meaning within the context of the theoretical edifice of Marxian value theory.

### Grounding Ethics in a Transcendental Ontology

Nonetheless, despite these important theoretical differences, there is something similar in the “exclusion” and the “social theft” approaches. Both demand the restitution of the unjustly extorted surplus and, whether or not they acknowledge it, both approaches graft their ethical dictum onto a transcendental political or social ontology. Let us take a closer look at the canonical interpretation of the “social theft” approach: the substance and the measure of the ontological ground are given by the living labor (i.e., necessary and surplus labor) performed by the direct laborers, and the right to appropriate the surplus is deemed to belong only to those who have performed it.<sup>9</sup> In this narrative, class injustice occurs when the ontologically sanctioned claim of direct laborers is denied and nonlaborers appropriate the surplus performed by the direct laborers. Accordingly, class justice will be restituted when those who have an ontologically sanctioned claim on the surplus (because they have performed it) are the ones who collectively appropriate it. For this framework, while exploitation entails the violation of the social ontology of living labor (alienation of the laborers from the products of their labor), communism signifies the restoration of the social to its “natural” or “true” state.

8. Not unlike the difficulties involved in distinguishing between productive and unproductive workers, there are difficulties involved in identifying those who provide a condition of existence of a class structure. In particular, the determination of what social constituencies will be acknowledged as providing a condition of existence of a particular class structure (and therefore deserving to take part in the appropriation of surplus) will always be a matter of cultural production and political contestation (Ruccio and Amariglio 2003, 239–44). In other words, while for the “exclusion” approach the ethical injunction is to be inclusive of all constituencies that provide a condition of existence of a class structure, this injunction cannot determine a priori who these constituencies will be.

9. Once again, this is only a (stylized) version of the “social theft” approach. Ted Burczak (1996/7, 2001), for instance, opts for grounding the injustice of exploitation in a Lockean political ontology of responsibilities. See also Cullenberg’s (1998) critique of this position from the “exclusion” perspective and Burczak’s (1998) response.

For instance, Resnick and Wolff have recently revamped this interpretation by foregrounding what they consider to be the psychological effects of exploitation.

Marx conceives exploitation as a crime committed against the workers and thereby against society. *By robbing workers of a portion of the wealth that embodies what their brains and muscles have produced, exploitation causes profound psychological distress alongside mental deprivations.* Lacking a conscious understanding of their exploitation, alienation, and its complex, negative social effects, the distress gets displaced often into the realm of workers' unconscious lives. There it aggravates the debilitating scourge of self-blame, scapegoating of "others," rage, violence, and depression that seems to pervade modern life. (Resnick and Wolff 2005, 34; emphasis added)

They continue on to argue that "the point of... class analysis is to expose exploitation and its social effects" and "the purpose is to motivate and better enable its victims to eliminate it—*much like any other exposed suffering or identified illness*—from their lives" (34-5; emphasis added). In other words, Resnick and Wolff insist on coding exploitation not only as a crime ("robbing workers") but also as an "illness." Accordingly, the point of class analysis is "to expose" this crime, this suffering, this illness—in short, the trauma of exploitation. Let us dwell on this point for a moment.

The verb "to expose" presumes that despite the fact that the subject is not conscious of it now, exploitation must have been experienced as a trauma.<sup>10</sup> For exploitation to be traumatic, it has to be experienced as an unexpected shock to the psychic constitution of the exploited worker. This means either that the worker always already perceives the fruits of her labor to belong to her or to be a part of her identity or that he has been subjectivated as a laboring subject prior to exploitation. The strong presence of metaphors of "crime" and "illness" and the absence of any discussion of prior social constructedness of the subjectivity of workers compels me to conclude that the workers always already perceive the fruits of their labor as something that belongs to themselves. What is crime if it is not a violent suspension of the normal, lawful way of being? What is the other of illness if it is not being healthy? I believe that the equation of exploitation with trauma rests upon an underlying chain of equivalence where communism is associated with being healthy, normal, and lawful. In other words, the ontology that informs this metaphor of trauma conceptualizes communism as the most appropriate (natural, true, healthy, etc.) state of being for the human subject.

In contrast to the "social theft" approach, the "exclusion" approach (at least a version of it) insists that the right to appropriate should belong to everyone who provides a condition of existence. In fact, given that they place the accent on the ethical implications of overdetermination, for the "exclusion" theorists, even communism qua *the exclusive and collective appropriation of surplus by productive workers* would involve class injustice. Since such a social organization of the surplus

10. In fact, if class analysis is to be "a therapeutic discourse," then to expose the trauma entails bringing what is repressed to the daylight.

would exclude unproductive workers and other constituencies that provide conditions of existence, it would amount to betrayal of the ontologically sanctioned claim of those who provide a condition of existence. Surprisingly enough, there is an “exclusionist” counterpart to the “trauma of exploitation” trope.<sup>11</sup>

The trauma of exploitation is not that something is taken from you. Rather, it is that you are cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents. Restricted to the necessary labor that sustains you, separated from the surplus that sustains the larger society, you are constituted as an “individual” bereft of a possible community and communal subjectivity. (Community Economies Collective 2001, 24)

According to this model, the trauma of exploitation is not that the laboring subject is robbed of the fruits of his or her labor, but that she has been forced to become an isolated “individual.” The underlying presupposition of this “exclusionist” version of the trauma metaphor is that the most appropriate state of being for the subject is a communal one that acknowledges the subject’s constitutive dependence to the rest of the community. In this sense, exploitation is “criminal” or “traumatic” because it violently “cuts off” the subject from the social. Communism, to the extent that it invites everyone who provides a condition of existence to appropriate the surplus (and in the limit, as DeMartino notes [2003, 21], this means *everyone*), is the only just form of social organization of surplus that can accommodate the overdetermined ontology of the social.

Therefore, despite their differences, for both approaches, *the injustice of exploitation is defined from the vantage point of an ontologized frame of justice*. Since both approaches link the right to appropriate to the presumed transcendental ontological status of a foundational subject (the subject who has the appropriative rights is either the one who performs living labor or the one who provides a condition of existence), in both cases the injustice of exploitation is defined as the violation of a natural right, the violent betrayal of the originary unity of a transcendental subject. Accordingly, the ethico-political project, or the concept of communism, that informs these approaches is to rehabilitate and reconstitute this postulated originary ontological unity of the subject.

It is my contention that the subjectivity debate is a critique of the ethics debate precisely because the debate itself is premised on the idea there is no single transcendental *ontology* but multiple and contesting *ontological projects* that are productive of different subjectivities and different frames of justice. In the next section, after offering a brief summary of the subjectivity debate, I will first proceed to explicate how it offers a critique of the ethics debate and then show the limits of this critique.

11. To be honest, this shouldn’t be surprising for me as I am responsible, in part, for the formulation of this particular position.

## The Subjectivity Debate

### Class and Subjectivity

According to my knowledge of the intellectual history of “postmodern” Marxism, the first discussion of the question of subjectivity within the context of class analysis in general, and communism in particular, is Jack Amariglio’s reading of Marx’s writings in *Grundrisse* on the forms of the commune (Amariglio 1984, 2000; Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff 1988). Amariglio argues that for Marx, because the Asiatic despot embodied the community in his “real” body, the so-called Asiatic mode of production could be considered a form of (primitive) communism. Amariglio’s key insight was to foreground the constitutive importance of subjectivity when analytically distinguishing between forms of surplus appropriation. For Marx, the “individual,” a product of a historically specific mode of subjectivation, should be seen as a condition of existence of the capitalist form of appropriation. Accordingly, because the modern notion of the individual was yet to emerge, at least according to Marx, the Asiatic despot had a very different social significance within the context of the commune. He was not yet an “autonomous individual” but was a representative of the collective subjectivity, the “common being,” of the commune. With this reading that brought the question of subjectivity to the forefront of class analysis, Amariglio inaugurated a debate and a research agenda that still continues.

Pursuing this research thread further, Amariglio and Antonio Callari (1989) offered a refreshing reading of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism as a theory of the socioeconomic conditions of existence of the particular subjectivity we call “the individual.” They discuss extensively the importance of this distinctively “modern” subjectivity for the reproduction of capitalism and its discourses, including Marxian economic thought. Through these readings of Marx’s writings, Amariglio and his various collaborators began systematically to study the overdetermination of class and subjectivity. In short, rather than conceptualizing formations of subjectivity as epiphenomenal, these readings have insisted that subjectivity formations constitute, albeit in contradictory ways, the particular shape the form of appropriation takes (be it capitalist, feudal, or communal).<sup>12</sup>

In a key essay that discusses communism from a perspective that foregrounds the concerns of subjectivity, David Ruccio questioned the notion of collective subjectivity, and he began to discuss the different modalities of collective being. His successful operationalization of Jean-Luc Nancy’s distinction between the notions of “common being” and “being in common” can be read as an important attempt to elucidate a “secular,” radically democratic form of the commune.

The latter notion (i.e., “being in common”) serves to distance the idea of community from the reductionist conception of human beings as producers, who produce their own essence through labor. Instead, community is conceived in multiplicity and difference in an open social reality. This is

12. For an excellent and thoroughgoing analysis of subjectivity and class in the context of feudalism, see Kayatekin and Charusheela (2004).

the foundation of a sense of community that can thrive on, rather than attempting to regulate and control difference. (Ruccio 1992, 19)

According to Ruccio, such “secular” communisms are predicated upon the form of social agencies that are “radically different from the individuality that is constituted in a society characterized by commodity exchange” (19). In this manner, he not only complicates the category of communal/collective subjectivity but also joins other participants in the subjectivity debate in flattening the ontological hierarchy among different subjectivities that has come to inform the ethics debate: no form of subjectivity is more true than others; all forms of subjectivity are social constructions. More poignantly, if our desire is to institute communisms and cultivate communal subjectivities, Ruccio argues, then “the theoretical and political question facing critical Marxism is under what conditions—and with what effects—such a collective subjectivity might emerge within a society based on commodity exchange” (19).

It is possible to read the recent efforts pioneered by J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996; see also Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000), Jenny Cameron (1996/7), and the Community Economies Collective (2001), as well as the ongoing efforts of participants in the Subjects of Economy study group represented in this symposium, as various attempts to tackle the question of subjectivity as an operator in class transformation. In particular, the latter group has insisted on rethinking Marxism in conjunction with Lacanian psychoanalysis, and they (we) have encircled around the following research questions: What sort of political subjectivities reproduce exploitative class structures, and what subjectivities enable communal ones? What affective regimes shape, enable, or hinder communist enactments? What roles do social fantasy and *jouissance* play in economy?<sup>13</sup>

## One, Many, or Two?

To recapitulate, the central insight that the subjectivity debate offers the ethics debate is that formations of subjectivity, to the extent that they shape how we conceive ourselves in relation to others, animate the ethico-political framework within which we define what is just and unjust. In other words, there is no *single transcendental ontology*, but rather, multiple *ontological projects that are perfor-*

13. *Jouissance*, sometimes translated as enjoyment, is a key Lacanian term. It is different from pleasure in the sense that it implies simultaneously pain-in-pleasure and pleasure-in-pain. It also refers to the enjoyment derived from the transgression of the Law. It should be distinguished, however, from the concept of utility that circulates within neoclassical economics. To begin with, unlike the concept of utility, *jouissance* is not derived from the consumption of goods and services. If anything, it can be derived from the very act of consumption, as a by-product. Perhaps more important, while the concept of utility is the privileged and subjective measure of the well-being of the rational actor, *jouissance* is an affective state that the subject inadvertently finds himself entangled in and suffers from. For a helpful discussion of the concept in the context of Lacan’s theory of sexual difference, see Fink (2002).

*matively enacted*.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the subjectivity theorists have insisted that each form of appropriation, animated by a different ontological project, has a distinct frame of justice. For instance, according to Jonathan Diskin, a prolific interlocutor in the subjectivity debates on communism, various versions of capitalism and socialism (and of feudalism and slavery) are nothing but particular and distinct *reconstructions* of “the social nature of production.” Perhaps more important, Diskin argues: “Socialism is not the ‘solution’ to the problems of capitalism, not its ‘inversion.’ Socialism should refer to a *particular reconstruction of the social nature of production*—a social that is not itself a reflection of the laws and contradictions or human nature but in which the economy is a cultural process” (1996, 297; emphasis added).

Diskin, like other subjectivity theorists, emphasizes the culturally constructed (or performatively enacted) nature of the economy in an attempt to distance himself from positions that naturalize the economy. Accordingly, the subjectivity theorists insist that communism is not the negation of capitalism, that it should be conceived as a novel social organization of surplus with its own unique set of contradictions. More important, they have come to insist on the necessity of occasioning a shift in the very ideological coordinates that constitute the ontological horizon of the social in order to be able to enact communism.

Failing to incorporate this insight systematically has led the various positions within the ethics debate to presume, albeit implicitly, that capitalism and communism, class injustice and justice belong to the same ontological order. Given this underlying ontological assumption, the ethics debate ends up being inadvertently stuck within (or automatically falls back to) the coordinates of the ideological horizon of the capitalist social ontology of the “exchange of equivalents.” In other words, in their shift from their indictment of the injustice of exploitation to their conceptualization of communist justice, for the most part, neither the “social theft” nor the “exclusion” approach registers a qualitative dislocation at the level of subjectivity. Both approaches conflate the capitalist social ontology with social ontology as such. Both conceive communist justice as the negation of the injustice of exploitation, thus

14. According to Donald MacKenzie, the notion of *performativity*

points to the fact that the categories of social life (gender is the prototype) are not self-standing, ‘natural’ or to be taken as given, but are the result of endless performances by human beings and (an actor-network theorist such as Callon would add) by nonhuman entities and artifacts as well. The economy, Callon points out, is performed by economic practices, including marketing and accountancy, and by the all pervasive practices of metrology (the bringing of disparate and what could be regarded as qualitatively distinct entities within standardized systems of quantitative comparison, such as weights and measures). (2004, 305)

The gender theory reference is to Butler (1990). In his comprehensive introductory essay to an edited volume of social anthropological studies of markets, Michel Callon uses the concept of performativity in a controversial manner when he concedes the existence of *homo economicus*: “but [he does not exist as] an a-historical reality; he does not describe the hidden nature of the human being. He is the result of a process of configuration” (1998, 22).

fail to question the ideological horizon of the capitalist social ontology of the “exchange of equivalents.”

Nevertheless, if there is no transcendental positivity to ground our ethical stances, if all there is is a multiplicity of ontological projects, if there are no noumena beyond phenomena, then how will we formulate an ethical stance? We have already observed that both the insistence of the “social theft” approach on grounding class justice in the labor theory of value and the attempt of the “exclusion” approach to found an ethics of inclusion in overdetermination have failed to incorporate the insight that social ontology is performatively enacted. Having said this, however, it is also difficult to formulate a clear-cut ethical stance from within the subjectivity debate. If anything, a key working assumption of the subjectivity debate is that there is no universal ground, no privileged vantage point from which we can arbitrate what is just and what is unjust. But where does this proliferation of ontological projects leave us? Perhaps more important, from what vantage point do we claim that there is no single ontology but only multiple ontological projects performatively enacted? Isn’t this an ontological speculation issued from a metaposition? Don’t these competing, particular ontological projects, seen from afar, constitute the ontic content of an overarching social ontology, even if it is an overdetermined ontology? As if on a Möbius strip, in their effort to break from grounding ethics in a transcendental ontology, the subjectivity approach also ends up implicitly postulating a transcendental ontology.<sup>15</sup>

How are we, then, going to break from postulating a transcendental ontology and still formulate an ethical stance? Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a way out. On the one hand, it offers a radical critique of all discourses that aim to ground their discourse in the security of a transcendent ontology. On the other hand, it insists on the constitutive failure of all ontological projects to fully constitute themselves. In other words, as Joan Copjec puts it, “the real displaces transcendence” (2002, 5).

The Lacanian Real is not the thing in itself that representation aims to approach in the limit. Nor is it the performatively enacted sociosymbolic reality. It is, rather, the very impossibility of the language (or the symbolic order) to represent itself as an “all”: “Outside language, there is nothing that could evaluate it” (Zupančič 2003, 139). In this sense, Lacan formulates an ethics of the Real, an ethics that “takes off from the proposal that being is not-all or there is no whole of being” (Copjec 2002, 7). For Lacan, various ontological projects are nothing but so many different ways of trying to make up for the absence of a beyond as a positivity. Nevertheless, this absence of a transcendent beyond should constantly be foregrounded, for it is this unacknowledged belief in the existence of such a “beyond” that makes representation function and gives it its lure. It is important to note, however, that being, for Lacan, is not-all, not because there is no transcendent ontology but because each ontological project fails to represent itself as a whole from without. If there is any

15. As Slavoj Žižek argues, “the moment we introduce ‘thriving multitude,’ what we effectively assert is the exact opposite: underlying all-pervasive Sameness” (2002, 73).

transcendent condition, it is this very impossibility of any ontological project to constitute itself as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

Lacan approaches the question of ethics through his theory of sexual difference where he argues that there are two ways in which ontological projects can stumble onto the Real or fail to constitute themselves as a whole, as an “all,” as a stable and secure identity. In other words, Lacan rejects the alternative between a single, transcendent ontology and many ontological projects and instead argues that being as such fails to “be” in two different ways. In the next and final section of the paper, I will begin to rethink class and communism through a Lacanian theory of sexual difference and ask if different social organizations of surplus can be sexuated.

## The Axiom of Communism

### Sexuating Class

For Lacanian psychoanalysis, sexual difference is neither the biological seat of subjectivity nor merely a cultural product that results from the subject’s identification with a gendered subject position. Rather, sexual difference, or *sexuation*, refers to the two distinct modalities in which social subjects fail to achieve a stable and secure (sexual) identity. Lacanian psychoanalysis claims that the cost of entering the sociosymbolic order is to be barred forever from achieving a complete and coherent identity. Nevertheless, the failure to achieve a complete and coherent identity can happen in two different ways or, to put it slightly differently, there are two different ways in which the question of identity is posed. Sexual difference refers to these two paths to failure. In this sense, all gendered identities (from heteronormative to queer) are nothing but fragile, contingent, inconsistent constructions that make up for the absence of an ontologically secure sexual identity.

Sexual difference is not a firm set of “static” symbolic oppositions and inclusions/exclusions (hetero-sexual normativity that relegates homosexuality and other “perversions” to some secondary role) but the name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question—something that resists every attempt at its symbolization. Every translation of sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) is doomed to fail, and it is this very “impossibility” that opens up the terrain of the hegemonic struggle for what “sexual difference” will mean. (Žižek 2002, 61)

Sexuation, therefore, is not a secondary process; it is the very process in which the question mark of identity, the very question of subjectivity, is inaugurated. And as

16. One important implication of this framework that foregrounds the failure of being pertains to the category of trauma. For Lacanian theory, trauma is neither the denial of an originary unity of identity (as in the case of the worker who is separated from the fruits of her labor) nor the imposition of a particular identity (as in the case of the worker who is constituted as an “individual”). What is traumatic is neither the denial nor the presence, but the absence of an identity.

such, Lacan's theory of sexual difference has much wider implications and applicability, especially in relation to the questions of epistemology and ontology. In his *Seminar XX*, further delinking the concept of sexualization from both biological sex and sexuality, Lacan (1998) *formalized* sexual difference into logical formulas along the lines of Kant's dynamical and mathematical antinomies (see Copjec 1994; Žižek 1994; Fink 2002).

According to Copjec's (1994) very influential elucidation of Lacan's use of the Kantian antinomies, there are two different ways in which the sociosymbolic order fails to constitute itself as a systemic whole. *Either*, as the dynamical, or masculine, antinomy goes, the sociosymbolic order can constitute itself as a closed and systemic totality governed by the Law ("All is submitted to the Law") if there is an exception that is beyond the Law ("There is one that is not submitted to the Law")—and hence the failure to constitute an "all" for the Law is predicated upon the exception. *Or*, as the mathematical, or feminine, antinomy goes, if there are no exceptions to the Law ("There is none that is not submitted to the Law"), then language will fail to constitute itself as a closed and systemic totality for there will always be another element that can be added to the list ("Not-all is submitted to the Law").<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that in this formulation, the feminine logic of non-all is neither a logic derived from the masculine logic of the exception nor is it the symmetrical other of the latter. They are simply two different ways of failing to constitute a stable and secure identity. Nonetheless, Lacan does claim that the feminine logic of non-all offers us a framework to rethink ethical discourse. This is due to the fact that "the proposal that there is no whole, no "all" of woman . . . is fundamentally an answer not just to the question of feminine being, but to being as such" (Copjec 2002, 6). In other words, even if Lacan's ethics of the Real "takes off" from the feminine logic of non-all, he "must be understood to be making a claim about ethics in general, rather than proposing a separate ethics of the feminine" (7). In this sense, the privileged logic of the Lacanian ethical discourse is not the masculine logic of exception, but the feminine logic of non-all.

Rethinking class analysis in conjunction with Lacanian psychoanalysis, therefore, requires locating the question of sexual difference at the ethico-political and theoretical core of class theory. Such an effort entails the differentiation of class structures as different modes of posing the question of subjectivity—not at the level of the individual subjects who participate in class processes, but at the level of the social organization of surplus. Accordingly, exploitative class structures (capitalism, feudalism, slavery, and so on) and communism are two different and distinct modes in which communities fail to domesticate the real of class antagonism: that is, fail to solve once and for all the questions who will produce a surplus, how much should be

17. The dynamical antinomy, for Lacan, is a logical formalization of Freud's theory of the obscene, primordial Father (thus this antinomy is structured according to a "masculine logic") who had access to all the *jouissance* of the world: His sons had to murder Him in order to constitute the so-called regime of brothers. The mathematical antinomy, on the other hand, enabled Lacan to further clarify what he meant with his highly controversial slogan "La Femme n'existe pas."

produced and for whom, and what to do with the surplus. In other words, just as the feminine is not the “inverse” or “negative” of the masculine, communism is not the “inverse” of exploitation.

## From Capitalist-All to Communist Non-All

Özselçuk and Madra (2005) have argued that the logic of capitalist exploitation resembles the masculine logic of the exception. The board of directors of the capitalist firm, receiving “something for nothing,” constitutes the exception to all the other members of a capitalist enterprise (from productive laborers to subsumed classes), all of whom have to give “something” to get “something.” In this sense, capitalism does constitute itself, at least formally speaking, as a closed and systemic totality within which everyone, including the board of directors in its position as the distributor and receiver of surplus, has to do something for his/her/their share of the living labor, with the sole condition that they do not question the constitutive exception: the exclusive appropriative rights of a group of nonlaborers (that is, the board of directors).<sup>18</sup> This formalization of exploitation through the logic of exception embraces the definition of exploitation suggested by the social theft approach. In other words, exploitation, or getting “something for nothing,” is indeed a crime—an act of injustice. Undoubtedly, it is an act of injustice, or an act of theft, only if one accepts the bourgeois morality of the “exchange of equivalents” as one’s frame of justice. Put differently, the injustice of capitalist exploitation is conceivable only from within the horizon of the capitalist ideological formation that presupposes, as it posits, “the individual” as its ontological ground zero.<sup>19</sup>

18. This slightly paradoxical framing of the logic of exception is predicated upon the often neglected distinctions between class, power, and culture (Resnick and Wolff 2002). It is the capitalist class structure (and not the power relations that animate the capitalist class structure) that resembles the masculine logic of exception. In that sense, just as all gendered identities are singular attempts to provide an answer to the question mark inaugurated by sexuation, there can be a multitude of different sets of “conditions of existence” (cultural, legal, political, and so on) that would make it possible for the board of directors to be *the first receiver* of the surplus regardless what its members do. Moreover, after this board receives the surplus, it still needs to struggle to keep the surplus in its hands. In that sense, its members still have to do “something” to receive their salaries qua board of directors. Nonetheless, this is a distribution of the already appropriated surplus.

19. In fact, naming and exposing this theft can be strategically useful.

By strategically marking the exceptional status of the capitalist appropriator as completely unfounded, Marx exposes the violation residing at the heart of the capitalist law of equal exchange: within the sphere of circulation everyone is considered to be equal, but once one moves into the “hidden abode of production,” the discourse of equality evaporates into thin air (Marx 1990, 279–80). In the Marxian canon, this scandalous suspension of the bourgeois order of formal (market) equality is nothing but the moment of exploitation. (Özselçuk and Madra 2005, 90)

If communism is, first of all, a *refusal* of the exception that constitutes the capitalist-all, couldn't we *formalize* it through the feminine logic of non-all? On the one hand, the communist refusal of the exception means that there is no one who can exclusively appropriate the surplus ("There is no one who is not submitted to the Law"). On the other hand, if there are no exceptions, then there can always be some other constituency that could join in the appropriation of the surplus ("Not all is submitted to the Law"). In this sense, communism entails *giving up* all fantasies of wholeness, harmonious reconciliation, and the ultimate telos of an ideal order that puts an end to the immediate disorder of injustice. Put differently, the logical corollary of the refusal of the exception is to accept that there will always be "another one." As a result, the communist refusal of the exception dynamites the ontological project of the capitalist-all, and it inaugurates a new ontological project.

What, then, is communist justice if it is not an ideal order that puts an end to the immediate disorder of capitalist, feudal, and other injustice? Communist justice is something akin to the egalitarian axiom that Alain Badiou has articulated in a recent essay on the relation between philosophy and politics. An axiom, he claims, is not a positive social program that describes an ideal order, an end point, or a telos. Rather, he argues, "it is a political maxim, a prescription," an entry point, a principle that would guide one's actions, one's research, one's choices, and so on: "The difficulty with most doctrines of justice is that they seek a definition of justice and then they try to find means for its realization. But justice, which is the philosophical name for the egalitarian political maxim, cannot be defined. For equality is not an objective for action, is an axiom of action" (Badiou 2003, 72).

Badiou's axiom of equality is given in singular statements that emerge from within events such as the one that can be found in the sixteen-point decision of 8 August 1966, during the cultural revolution in China: "Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement, let them determine themselves the distinction between what is just and what is not" (see Badiou 2003, 71).

In short, for Badiou, a political orientation that formulates a concept of "justice" that is not "merely the absence of injustice" (69) should be formulating an axiom that affirms that "people think, people are capable of truth" (71). We could read what Marx (1966, 8) has offered us in his analytical yet impassioned *Critique of the Gotha Programme*—"from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs"—as a singular statement that offers us a Marxian version of the axiom of equality.

To begin with, this singular statement has nothing to do with what Lacan calls "the service of goods (*le service des biens*)," or what Badiou calls "the harmonization of the interplay of interests" (2003, 73). It occasions a break with all bourgeois notions of justice (whether the Lockean labor theory of property or the law of the exchange of equivalents). It does not wish to institute a fair system for the distribution of wealth/income or to harmonize the contesting interests of social constituencies (be

they individual or collective). It simply refuses to have any exceptions (“from each,” “to each”).<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, the refusal of the exception that characterizes the communist axiom is not refusal in the service of a particularistic demand. Rather, communist refusal transcends the particular ideological/classed position of the one who refuses and performatively enacts and institutes a universal stance. And precisely in this sense, the refusal of the exception is simultaneously a refusal to be the exception. In other words, a necessary condition of asserting the axiom of communism is to *give up* one’s interests, one’s state of being invested in the *ancien régime* that has come to structure the very frame of justice.

Let us concretize the communist axiom by way of a brief reading of the recent debate on U.S. Social Security reforms.<sup>21</sup> Here we have the interesting situation of an institution that may have already materialized the communist axiom being attacked. The “pay-as-you-go” system is indeed a materialization of the “from each according to his ability, to each according to their need.” Those who can work and produce today can give to those who cannot (the disabled), to those who have worked enough (the retired), and so on. One may object that the social security system pertains to the moment of distribution and not to the moments of production or appropriation. Moreover, even though on paper workers and employers should share the tax burden, most economists believe that regardless of who writes the check, it is the workers who end up paying for social security (Michl 2005, 2). In this sense, to claim that the current social security system is a materialization of the communist axiom should appear controversial, if not outright delusional. Despite all this, I would like to argue that the struggle over the social security system is not a struggle between parties who have different ideas about how to save the system, but an outright attempt to rearticulate and reframe the very idea of social security along the lines of the logic of capitalist exception.

As it is well known, the Right wishes to privatize the social security system and argues that this is the only feasible way to solve its long-term solvency problems. In defense of the current structure of the social security system and against the privatization scheme, some commentators have argued that the predictions of the

20. In fact, one of the most devastating critiques of the liberal notions of distributive justice comes from psychoanalytical discourse. The category of *jouissance* as “something that tends to experienced through envying others who enjoy” (Gillespie 2004, 15) dynamites all attempts to institute a just (equal) “service of goods” and renders such liberal efforts unfeasible (see also Copjec 2002, 158–76). This, of course, does not mean that we should cease to pursue equality. Rather, Copjec argues, “the problem is no longer to ensure that everyone has an adequate portion of the pleasure she wants, but to ensure that she wants it in the first place . . . The problem with pleasure is any of the countless reasons we invent to forsake it. What we find most difficult is hanging onto and enjoying the pleasure we have. It is this dissatisfaction we thus impose on ourselves that leads us to demand the same dissatisfaction of others” (2002, 173–4). Therefore, the reference to the category of “need” in the second part of the axiom of communism, “to each according to their needs,” should be taken seriously.

21. Undoubtedly, the Social Security reform debate is only one among many places where the communist axiom can be found or asserted. For instance, in their contribution to this symposium, Ken Byrne and Stephen Healy (2006) find the axiom in the context of cooperative enterprises.

board of trustees (pertaining to productivity growth, demographics, and so on) are unrealistically pessimistic. Others, who have conceded that “prefunding” (through expanding the share of the Social Security Trust Fund and diversifying its portfolio) is more sustainable than the “pay-as-you-go” system, have found “personal” accounts to be inefficient and risky.

Nevertheless, if there were only one new insight that all the preceding discussion could offer on this concrete and burning public policy debate, it would be to insist that these defenses, though very insightful in their own ways, are conceding too much to the Right. In fact, the Right may have already won the debate and instituted its own “masculine” ideology if it has successfully reframed the pay-as-you-go system as a system of reciprocity, a deferred exchange: young people pay the social security tax not because it is a social responsibility of those who can to look after those who are in a position of need, but because they know that if they pay it today the next generation will pay for them. Once the idea of social security is framed in this way, regardless of the concrete institutional arrangement (“pay as you go” or “prefunding”), we are already within the ideological horizon of the capitalist social ontology of the exchange of equivalents, and the Left has already lost the debate. Once framed in this way, the path to privatization is merely a matter of time. In other words, the struggle is at the level of subjectivity—at the level of the representation of social security in public discourse.

Therefore, against this attempt at capitalist restructuring of social security, we should be audacious enough to assert the communist axiom. We should refuse the exception and demand to finance social security from the already appropriated surplus. Citing the obscene levels that wealth inequality has reached in the United States, Tom Michl (2005, 5) suggests a new wealth tax to finance a plan to prefund social security. Such a strong demand may not sound so audacious if social security is hegemonically understood as a matter of responsibility, not as a deferred exchange or a personal retirement plan.

## Conclusion

Let us try to summarize and recapitulate our arguments. This essay is both a critique and an affirmation of the “postmodern” Marxist debates on communism. To begin with, it offers a critique of the ethics debate from the vantage point of the subjectivity debate: it claims that any serious discussion of ethico-political concepts, such as exploitation and class justice, should also include how subjectivity animates class. In particular, it insists that communism is predicated upon a shift at the level of subjectivity, in the very ideological coordinates that define what is just and what is unjust. The interlocutors of the ethics debate, because they did not explicitly incorporate an analysis of the performative enactment of social and political ontology into their discussions of the matters of ethics, ended up grounding their ethics in a positive ontology that transcends time and place. The participants in the subjectivity debate, on the other hand, while they rightly insisted on the performatively enacted nature of social ontology and introduced the highly useful idea of competing ontological projects, also inadvertently ended up postulating a single meta-ontology

(of many ontological projects). In this sense, this essay offers a criticism not only of the ethics debate, but also of the subjectivity debate from the vantage point of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Rethinking class analysis by locating the question of sexual difference at the ethico-political and theoretical core of class analysis made it possible to differentiate exploitative class structures and communist class structures as two distinct modes in which communities fail to domesticate the Real of class antagonism.

Finally, by sexuating class (i.e., the forms of appropriation of surplus), we ended up affirming both sides of the ethics debate. On the one hand, when we found it necessary to expose the scandal of exploitation from within the bourgeois frame of justice, we ended up affirming the “social theft” approach. On the other hand, when we formulated the communist axiom, precisely because it refuses the exception, we ended up affirming, in a sense, the inclusionist definition of the collective appropriation of surplus where no one is excluded. In this sense, the framework offered in this paper (as well as in Özselçuk and Madra 2005) offers a resolution of sorts to the ethics debate.

Let us end this essay by noting that Marx’s singular statement betrays a fundamental trust, an affirmation “which has neither a guarantee nor a proof” that “people are capable of truth.” In this sense, maybe even risking going against the grain of Marx’s own qualifications that precede the statement, we should insist on reading “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs” as a political maxim. If it is taken as a political maxim, then it cannot be read as a description of a Utopian social organization of surplus that is postponed to a distant future when the forces of production will develop to such an extent that everyone can be privy to whatever it is that they demand. Rather, it becomes a universal demand that can be militantly enacted in every instance, for everyone, one by one, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

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