

Axiomatic Politics of Surplus[†]

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1. This paper aims to formulate a post-Marxian politics of surplus that takes psychoanalysis seriously. By taking psychoanalysis seriously, we mean taking enjoyment (*jouissance*) seriously in producing analyses of and articulating politics on the social organization of surplus. When Freud wrote about the limits of “Love Thy Neighbor!” as a moral injunction and argued that in the final analysis it is an impossible to realize ethical maxim, he was articulating a genuine critique of the utopian vision of the then (and still) hegemonic utopian socialism as a theoretical humanist discourse. Theoretical humanism was also the object of Althusser’s philosophical critique and we could define it as a broad philosophical orientation which consists of particular “scientific” discourses that are structured around a representation of the human subject as a centered, autonomous, self-conscious and fully reconciled being and that posit, as the social correlate of this particular notion of the subject, the existence of an idealized, exceptional, and fully-reconciled social order. When Lacan wrote about the possibility of an ethical politics beyond the politics of the service of goods (“Private goods, family goods, domestic goods, other goods that solicit us, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the city, etc.” (Lacan 1992, 303)), he was encircling around the surplus enjoyment as the ineradicable limit that dislocates all attempts at establishing an egalitarian and fully reconciled social order. These psychoanalytical reservations steer us towards a new appreciation of the blind spots of the modernist interpretation of ethico-political project of communism. If we are to formulate a novel politics of surplus that takes psychoanalysis seriously, we have to take these two formulas as our points of reference.
2. In a series of papers, we have tried to rethink class analysis through Lacan’s formulas of sexuation. Our entry point was to argue, along with Žižek, that “there is no class relation” and that concrete class formations, concrete formation

[†] Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Conference, March 2008, San Francisco, CA and SURPLUS EXCESS Conference, April 2008, University of California Riverside.

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of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor/value are institutionally materialized attempts to constitute a semblance of a relationship. For instance, in a typical feudal formation, the lord, the serfs, the priest, and so on are different class positions that distribute the feudal subjects into various social functions and offer a cognitive framework within which class relations are experienced. Nonetheless, just like concrete gendered sexual identities always fail to overcome the constitutive impossibility of sexual relationship, concrete class identities will always fail to stabilize and finally resolve the question of how to produce, appropriate and distribute the surplus.

3. Our main objective in rethinking class through sexuation was to think the status of *difference* in economy from a Marxian surplus perspective. Without doubt, there are differences between feudalism, slavery, capitalism, communism, and so on. But from the psychoanalytical theory of sexuation we took the distinction between the *difference within a delimited frame* and *difference as such*. The psychoanalytical concept sexual difference, as articulated in Lacan's *Encore*, is essentially a theory of difference. On the one hand, a whole is constituted through the positing of an exception that does not belong to the whole, that functions as the limit which structures the whole as a field of differences anchored around the exception. The logic of hegemony and the concept of nodal point that we find in post-Marxian political theory of Laclau and Mouffe could perhaps be conceived as an illustration of the masculine logic of exception. As such, a certain degree of difference is indeed accommodated within this "whole"—in fact, the whole is constituted through the domestication of a heterogeneous field of signifiers into chain of equivalence established in relation to an "empty" and exceptional signifier.
4. Yet this notion of difference within a field delimited by an exceptional signifier has to be distinguished from difference as such. For an illustration of our point, let us turn to Marx. Marx, when he writes about different class formations, always constructs a chain of equivalence between wage-labor, slave-labor, and serf-labor. For instance, he always uses the loaded term "wage slavery". In this sense, formally speaking different exploitative class formations themselves constitute an instance of difference within a field delimited by an exception. In this case the

exception is the fact that the exploitative class structures are all constituted around the exclusive appropriation of surplus by a figure, be it the Lord, the Slave Master, or the Board of Directors. Therefore, we ask the following question: Is there a different way of relating to the social organization of surplus? Is there a way of relating to the social organization of surplus that says NO to the exception? Is there a way of relating to social organization of surplus that opens the questions of how and how much to produce surplus and to whom and how to distribute the surplus into social negotiation and experimentation? The possibility of communism hinges on answering these questions in the affirmative.

5. Therefore, we distinguish between the masculine logic of all (the logic of exception) which constitutes a whole within a field demarcated by an exception and the feminine logic which fails to constitute a consistent whole because it rejects to posit an exception. In our understanding, communism is a non-all field, an open set. Perhaps, we can illustrate this difference by referring to the well-known difference between private/public property and commons. The former, through a legal abstraction divides, demarcates, and transforms (territorializes) a heterogeneous field into signifiers (titles) that can be exchanged as commodities or distributed through state. Commons, on the other hand, rejects to posit the exception of the Law that undergirds the legal abstraction. Commons fails to constitute itself as an all, demarcated and parcelized.
6. If communism is rejecting the exceptional status of the subject who appropriates the surplus, however, we need to ask whether or not this rejection is a hysterical questioning of the Master which arises from the hysterical subject's doubts about the authenticity, the legitimacy, the validity of that which occupies the position of the exception? In other words, we need to ask if the rejection is aimed at the particular content of the exception without questioning the structure of the exception? Without doubt, all acts are always split, always undecidable—a rejection of the particular content that occupies the position of exception always contain in itself the potential to transform into a rejection of the very structure of exception that organizes the subjects relation to the social economy of surplus.
7. But perhaps more importantly, we should emphasize that, concretely speaking, communist non-all cannot be defined by a particular institutional organization of

surplus. Communism is not a program or a model or a particular form of social organization of surplus, but rather it is an axiom that functions as a “half-said.” Writing about Kant’s categorical imperative, Copjec reminds us that “the imperative is only half- and not fully said, because it requires an actual act to complete it” (Copjec 2002, 171). And again, “the act retroactively constitutes the half-stated law” (171). As an axiom, communism “does not project an image of a just society as one where conflict would or could ultimately be resolved, where dissent, in effect, would be silenced and everyone would know his or her place.” Put differently, communism is not an end point, an ideal that we aim to approach/approximate asymptotically, but rather a point of departure, an axiom, a half-said.

8. And it is precisely this reorientation, this reconceptualization of communism as a point of departure, an axiom, rather than an ideal, that enables us to practice a politics of surplus that takes *jouissance* into account. To further elucidate this insight, let us take a detour through Joan Copjec’s exploration of the affect of “envy” in her analytical critique of Rawls’ theory of justice. The Rawlsian program aims “to locate the conditions of the possibility of justice in human reason and thus brackets those motives of self-interest—such as envy—that cause reason to swerve away from its proper destiny, which is by definition disinterested, rather than selfish” (Copjec, 2002: 164). The state of being “disinterested” is central for Rawls, for he aims to establish the rationally agreed upon principles that would found a social order in which *liberty* and *equality*, the two concepts of the political liberal antinomy, are reconciled and difference is accommodated without foregoing fairness.
9. In order to establish this set of rationally agreed upon foundational principles in a disinterested manner, Rawls invokes an imaginary state of nature where people agree upon a particular set of foundational principle without knowing their naturally determined, contingent propensities and abilities. In other words, Rawls argues that if we don’t know what benefits we can derive from a particular social order and frame of justice, we can rise upon our narrowly-defined selfish interests and make reasoned and rational decisions regarding the social order and frame of justice we wish to live in. This just order, according Rawls, should be a one that

recognizes that people have different abilities, propensities, and desires. In other words, a fair system of justice should not insist that all goods be distributed equally. But, if the social order is founded upon a social contract made behind a “veil of ignorance”, i.e., in a disinterested manner, it will be able to accommodate “the plurality of distinct persons with separate systems of ends” and a level of inequality that reflects this difference—as long as the inequalities are in place in order to improve the conditions of existence of those who are the least advantaged and the positions of privilege are equally accessible to everyone without any discrimination.

- 10.** Our aim is not to engage with the details of the Rawlsian program—it is essentially just another one of countless other modernist (and undoubtedly ingenious) programs that offer “speculations about prescriptions for, or the regulation of, what [Lacan has] called the service of goods” (Lacan 1992, 313). Nor are we interested in identifying the ideological presupposition of this liberal utopia of reconciliation of freedom and equality. We are, rather, interested in locating the limits of this project as marked by the psychoanalytical critique and the notion of enjoyment as embodied in the affect of “envy”. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the coordinates of the economism (or shall we say theoretical humanism) within which the Rawlsian program operates. On the one hand, it relies on an understanding of human nature that requires economic incentives (inequalities, privileges) to perform “efficiently” (in a manner that improves the standard of living of the community, that induces “economic growth”). On other hand, it aims to tame it by imposing a limit on it (inequality is admitted only to the extent that it benefits the least advantaged). Furthermore, the system is deemed fair and uncontestable as it would be established as an outcome of an imaginary originary social contract that would be agreed upon by autonomous, self-conscious, rational individuals who are ignorant of their position within the new social order (and hence can be reasonable and disinterested when deciding on the principles that would found that order).
- 11.** Copjec begins her critique of the Rawlsian program by questioning the relation that Rawls posits between envy and justice. For Rawls, envy is an impediment. For Copjec, via Freud, envy, far from being an impediment for the realization of

justice, is its “very condition of existence” (164). She argues that regimes of justice and equality are defense mechanisms against the destructive intensity of the hostility unleashed by the envious subject (164). A similar reading of Freud can be found in Žizek’s recent critique of *Multitude*: “The demand for justice is thus ultimately the demand that the excessive enjoyment of the Other should be curtailed, so that everyone’s access to *jouissance* should be equal” (Žizek 2007, 55).

12. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan articulates the structure of envy and its path to destruction in the following manner:

Lebensneid is not an ordinary jealousy, it is the jealousy born in a subject in his relation to an other, insofar as this other is held to enjoy a certain amount of *jouissance* or superabundant vitality, that the subject perceives as something that he cannot apprehend by means of even the most elementary of affective movements. Isn’t it strange, very odd, that a being admits to being jealous of something in the other to the point of hatred and the need to destroy, jealous of something that he is incapable of apprehending in any way, by any intuitive path? (Lacan 1992, 237)

13. Even though the distinguishing attribute of the Rawlsian program is its ability to accommodate difference and inequality, it still fails to acknowledge this structure of envy. An important difference between envy and “ordinary jealousy” is that the former is not about the object as such. Since “envy envies satisfaction, enjoyment” (Copjec 2002, 166), it cannot be satisfied by a particular object (goods). The gap between one’s enjoyment and other’s enjoyment cannot be closed under the operative affect of envy. Nor can this deficit be satisfied by stealing the object of other’s enjoyment because envy aims “to steal enjoyment itself” (160).

14. The structure of envy can also be elucidated in reference to the masculine *logic of exception*, where an ideal (in this case other’s enjoyment) functions as an impossible limit (as in Zeno’s paradox). Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Copjec invokes the mythical regime of brothers as a regime of equality (or service of goods) based upon the murder of the father—who, qua the

exceptional figure, enjoyed life like no other. The object of envy was not the objects that the primordial father enjoyed but rather his enjoyment. Accordingly, the egalitarian regime of brothers will be established as an *all* through “the brotherly taboo against the slightest trace of *exceptionalism*” under the shadow of the exceptional primordial father.

- 15.** This example reorients our approach to egalitarian programs qua prescriptions for the organization of the service of goods. Far from being disinterested designed blueprints we can approach them as attempts to keep the destructive effect of envy under control. Yet, such responses to the exceptional economy of envy will not only fail to eradicate envy. But also, they inevitably lead to an impoverished regime where no one “enjoys.”
- 16.** Copjec argues that “the problem [of equality?] always stems from our uncertainty about the Other and thus our fear that she will not do what is right and allow *me my* desire. I am willing to place myself behind a ‘veil of ignorance,’ to abstract myself from my pathological self-interests in order to determine what is fair, but I do not know what she is doing behind her *burqua*” (Copjec 2002, 168). Once we understand that desire and pleasure are essentially social and necessarily “constituted by a detour through the field of the Other, its equitable distribution is no longer an appropriate or feasible goal” (Copjec 2002, 173). It is not a *feasible* goal for it is impossible to satisfy an envious person. It is not an *appropriate* goal for “the problem is no longer to ensure that everyone has an adequate portion of the pleasure she wants, but to ensure that she wants in the first place” (173).
- 17.** If the problem is no longer to ensure that everyone has an adequate portion of the pleasure she wants, but to ensure that she wants in the first place” (173), then we have to rethink the entire frame of reference within which we practice the politics of surplus. Our problem cannot simply be to ensure that everyone has an adequate portion of the surplus. This rationalist prescription denies the economy of desire, (and the fact that desire is desire for the Other). Neither, however, can it be the incessant and hysterical questioning of the exception. This negative prescription saps the potential of wanting by subsuming desire to the dialectics of undermining the exception..

18. If the structure of envy resembles *the masculine logic of exception*, could we suggest that the path that will enable us to gain some distance from envy passes through *the feminine logic of non-all*? Let us turn back to what Copjec identifies as the problem of jouissance in distributive justice: “the problem is no longer to ensure that everyone has an adequate portion of the pleasure she wants, but to ensure that she wants in the first place” (160).

19. In our understanding, the rejection of the very structure of exception that organizes the exploitative class formations is a condition of possibility for the articulation of a demand. In other words, we view communism as an axiom that opens up a space within which *demands* (as opposed to needs) can be articulated. Nevertheless, we need to distinguish the space opened up by the communist axiom to articulate demands as a universal right from the particularist demands by the subjects of a feudal- or capitalist-all to receive a cut from the already appropriated surplus. Failing to reject the very structure of exception, such particularist demands could easily be accommodated within the logic of exception.

20. Moreover, contra capitalism, or any other exploitative form of appropriation of surplus (e.g., slavery, feudalism), the logic of non-all refuses to assign exclusive appropriative rights to any particular set of social agents. This also includes those who were exploited under the *ancien régime*, namely the workers. Communism is generally understood to be the reparation of collective justice or the completeness of social being, which would be achieved once what is stolen from the workers is given back to them. Rejecting the substitution of one exception (i.e., board of directors) by another (i.e., the worker), the logic of non-all disrupts this fantasy.

21. In conclusion, let us try to return to Marx’s well-known maxim “from each according to their ability, to each according their need” as a possible actualization of the communist axiom with the proviso that we substitute *need* with *demand*, especially if the former is understood to be derived from a particular understanding human nature. We believe that it is necessary to read this version of the communist axiom in opposition to neoliberalism. [Since we insist on keeping the half-said status of axiom, its particular actualizations are

always necessarily contingent upon and in opposition to the equally contingent masculine formations.] Following Foucault, it is possible to define neoliberalism as the governance of the society through economic incentives where neoliberal project aims to link the distribution of the economic values (and surplus) to a fantasmatic notion of productivity. In opposition to the masculine logic that elevates a very particular notion of economic efficiency to an exceptional status, a nodal point in relation to which decisions over surplus are defined, “from each...to each” demands a radical break from the neoliberal logic.

- 22.** The very undefined status of the maxim gives its universalizing function. And finally, as it is posed as a principle that can only be actualized through experimentation rather than an ideal social order that prescribes in advance who should do what, who should get what, the communist axiom enables to cultivate a feminine relation to *jouissance*, a relation that makes it possible for us to give up the fantasy of complete *jouissance* (as articulated in the very structure of envy) and begin to enjoy our partial *jouissance* and to be able to articulate a *partial demand*. Partial not in the sense that our demand is *one* among the *many*, deserving an equal hearing in decisions over the surplus. That would mean to continue regarding each demand as the special and sacred right of the individual or the group, a position that can easily degenerate into the hierarchy of demands (which one *really* merits a cut from the surplus?) But rather, *partial* in the sense that each ability or demand is enjoyed as the “ability” or “demand of another,” meaning there is nothing complete, exceptional, and self-authenticating about our abilities and demands. This is the way we approach the undefined status and the partial enjoyment attached to the axiom “from each...to each.”