The Antisociality of Capitalism (Some Preliminary Reflections)

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Marx, Freud, and the antisocial

Marx and Freud's work and methods have been repeatedly declared outdated, unscientific, or restricted only to the geographical, historical, and ideological context in which they emerged. In Marx's case, the 19th-century industrial revolution, the critical confrontation with early economic liberalism, and classical political economy. In Freud's case, the crisis of bourgeois family and patriarchy in early 20th-century Europe. Although they certainly remained embedded in the spirit of their time, and to an extent, reproduced certain social prejudices, Marx and Freud succeeded in developing methods and a set of fundamental concepts that allowed them to glimpse behind the "phenomenological veil," questioning how economic, social, and subjective reality appears to the sensuous and intellectual apparatus of the conscious human observer. It is this displacement that, in both critical and clinical contexts, produced a "surplus," which reaches beyond their historical circumstances and, most importantly, reaffirms both thinkers' ongoing actuality, precisely in the moment of intensified social crises. In such critical times, Marx and Freud's work thus demonstrates its irreducibility to their narrow historical frameworks, as well as to some kind of "cultural heritage" of theory. Through an encounter with the crisis-ridden developments in the present, their oeuvre reinvents its emancipatory potentials, while at the same time demonstrating that both continue to cause a certain malaise – the Freudian *Unbehagen* – since they repeatedly confront us with a troublesome aspect of our social reality that one would preferably remove from the picture, ignore and, indeed, repress – namely, the inherent aggressiveness, hostility, and cruelty of the capitalist mode of production.[1]

1 Already, a superficial glimpse at their work shows that crisis is indeed a significant common object of inquiry in Marx and Freud. Or perhaps more generally, what interests them above all is the fragile and unstable nature of social bonds, as well as their destructive effects on the human subject and on society as a whole.

That Marx is again taken seriously in times of economic crisis should hardly come as a surprise. In the economic field, a crisis comes in train with the vacillation of opinions, beliefs, fantasies, and prejudices that hold the economic field together (both the discipline dealing with economic processes, or what orthodox Marxists would call the "science of value," and the societal processes of extraction, production, circulation, consumption, and financialisaton). When Marx entitled his mature project "critique of political economy," he indicated that the object of his inquiry is nothing other than the blind spot – the *bévue*, the overlooked, to use a pointed term by Louis Althusser[2] – of political economy. This overlooked concerns both the source of surplus-value (specifically, the necessary link between the exploitation of labour and extraction of profit) and the impurity of economic knowledge, the fact that this knowledge is always already traversed by something that indeed deserves to be called superstition. The latter certainly comprises the well-known operation of commodity fetishism, which envisages value as a substantial quality of commodities rather than an exploitative social relation but also, and more importantly, the false conviction that (pre)accumulated wealth is a source of social virtues and actions – in other words, that economic value stands in direct continuity with ethical or moral value and is therefore inherently capable of (re)producing sociality. Contrary to the political-economic belief in the inherent rationality of economic subjects, the calculability of their "private" interests, the assumed self-regulating and self-corrective character of the markets, and the presumably inherent tendency of the rich (capitalists, monopolies, and corporations) to reinvest their wealth and profits for the benefit of society, Marx most rigorously demonstrated that the violence, aggressiveness, and crisis-character of capitalism are not to be taken as a deviation from some normative capitalist sociality, corrupted by individual, state or corporate greed. On the contrary, they are a logical consequence of capitalism's organisation of production around surplus-value. Capitalism is an organised disequilibrium, accompanied by continuous systemic violence and obsession with the constant increase of value, or what later in history was baptised "economic growth." Behind this innocent-sounding master-signifier, Marx allows us to envisage a force that is, at best, indifferent and, at worst, hostile towards human existence as a social being and eventually against life as such.

Following Marx's "speculative" developments, surplus-value is associated with a specific force of economic abstractions (value and capital) that is overtly hostile to sociality and for which he uses the term "drive" (*Trieb*).[3] Characteristic of this economic drive is the striving for uninterrupted self-valorisation of value, its detachment from

2 Louis Althusser, "Du 'Capital' à la philosophie de Marx," in *Lire le Capital*, edited by Louis Althusser et al. (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1996), 11–12.

3 The antisocial character of the drive of capital is explicitly addressed in Karl Marx, *Capital*, *Vol. 1* (1867; reis., London: Penguin, 1990), 230–231, 254–255, 324.

every dimension that could be described as social. Instead of (surplus-)value being reinvested to improve the conditions of social life, all human activities must enforce the self-valorisation of value and contribute to its continuous extraction. In the logic of capital, Marx thus detects an active indifference of economic processes and mechanisms to the reproduction of life. The only life that matters is the life of economic abstractions. Capital is, therefore, inherently antisocial in the sense that, by actively striving to destroy living bodies, cut social ties, and destabilise environmental systems, it ultimately undermines both the ontological (planetary), the epistemological (knowledge), and the political (labour) conditions of sociality.

Even though it could hardly appear more foreign to this economic framework, Freud's work developed in a strikingly similar direction. It increasingly confronted systemic instability, aggressiveness, and violence, as well as an underlying cultural indifference towards human suffering – a cultural cruelty, inscribed in the individual mental apparatus in the guise of the superego. Despite their speculative and sometimes overtly myth-forging character (think of the figure of the obscene primal father), Freud's mature cultural writings unambiguously address the key issue of countercultural tendencies within culture, tendencies that Freud, too, brought together in the notion of the drive (*Trieb*). This was hardly done in an uncomplicated manner, since Freud proposed several names to pinpoint this problematic, antisocial dimension of the drive – the controversial death drive, and the somewhat less prominent, yet no less crucial, drive of aggressiveness. They are two manifestations of the same violent force that Freud quite explicitly associates with cultural institutions, such as religion and morality, but also with social economy. It is worth recalling that the death drive stands for violence directed inwards, onto the human psyche (the classical Freudian example being moral and sexual masochism), whereas the drive of aggressiveness stands for externalised violence, the ultimate manifestation of which is war, Freud's main object of inquiry, but which also comprises the various forms of economic violence, including colonial and environmental.[4] For Freud, the drive, too, is associated with a surplus-object called *Lustgewinn*, yield in pleasure, a notion that Lacan eventually translated as surplus-enjoyment, in explicit reference to the economic category of surplus-value. Does this imply that enjoyment is inherently antisocial? Neither Freud nor Lacan indicated this conclusion, whether explicitly or implicitly, but their critical concerns certainly suggest that the capitalist mode of enjoyment plays a crucial role in the overall increase of antisocial tendencies within society. And further, the Lacanian homology between surplus-value

4 For the most recent systematic account of the intricacies of Freud's mature *Trieblehre* (doctrine of drives), see Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence* (London: Verso, 2020), 151–183; Étienne Balibar, "Dying One's Own Death. Freud With Rilke," *Angelaki. Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 27, no. 1 (2022). See also Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 15–40.

and surplus-enjoyment ultimately suggests that the former can and perhaps even should be understood as a sort of systemic enjoyment.

Marx's *Capital* and Freud's extensive engagement with the cultural condition, such as in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, thus intersect at the point of a homologous surplus-object, as well as in indicating a strikingly similar diagnostic, according to which we live in a system that could be described as *organised antisociality*, actively dismantling the bonds that hold society and subjectivity together to extract from them an equally antisocial surplus (surplus-value, surplus-enjoyment).[5] In sharp contrast to the political-economic assumption of the inherent sociality of the markets – or even of a society of markets – Marx draws attention to capitalism's antisocial character by describing the capitalist organisation of production as "production for the sake of production" or "overproduction"; recognising the self-sufficient drive of accumulation and self-valorisation as capital's ultimate tendency; and introducing the notion of surplus-population, which comprises the thesis that capitalism progressively transforms humanity into a redundant form of life.[6]

Our present crisis – the increase in sexist and racist violence, the emergence of "surveillance capitalism," the climate emergency, the challenges to scientific authority due to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, fake news, etc. – is, at its core, a crisis of the social, or rather, a crisis of the concept of society, which was certainly enforced by the decades of neoliberalism – recall Margaret Thatcher's statement, "there is no such thing as society" – but which nevertheless extends back to the very historical origins of capitalism. Marx and Freud's contributions to the critique of capitalist antisociality remain crucial because they address the issue both on a historical and structural level. In recent decades, it became increasingly fashionable to diagnose the end of neoliberalism, the controversial epoch in which the "withering away of the social" intensified due to the failure and self-discrediting of 20th-century communism, followed by the breakdown of the universalist agenda in emancipatory politics. The neoliberal worldview promoted a most problematic, indeed an-

5 This dismantling is quite overtly expressed in the modern scientific and economic ideal, the mastery of nature, whose aggressive overtone can be hardly overlooked. We find this ideal formulated in René Descartes, albeit with more ambiguity regarding the goal of this scientific and economic mastery. Needless to add, from the viewpoint of critique of political economy and of psychoanalysis, and against the modern striving for cultural mastery of nature, the human subject falls on the side of the dominated.

6 While Marx's account of economic tendencies overtly suggests that capitalism comprises an increase in antisociality, Freud assumed a more general, and some may add, excessively pessimistic position, according to which culture as such begins to appear antisocial. Still, Freud recognises the dimension of cultural work (*Kulturarbeit*), which comprises ongoing subjective and intersubjective attempts to economise the tension between the forces that bind and the forces that unbind the social, Eros and the drive of destruction. Freud understood psychoanalysis as a component of this cultural work.

tisocial, idea of freedom, understood first and foremost as freedom of the economic sphere from every socioeconomic constraint.[7] The state may have been the first neoliberal target here, and one could add that the "withering away of the social" took the appearance of what Friedrich Engels, in another context, called the "withering away of the state."[8] Still, the neoliberal economists have been "consistently inconsistent" in their stance towards the state, on the one hand denouncing the social welfare state as authoritarian and demanding it is replaced by a "slim state," while on the other hand, they pushed for an authoritarian state, which would not shy away from rigorously implementing the most aggressive neoliberal deregulatory policies and thus become a major force in the neoliberal "dismantling of society."[9] Today's socioeconomic condition not only continues the process of the social's withering away but also accomplishes the neoliberal program of placing corporations and hi-tech companies in the function of the state. If, in the decades of neoliberalism, the corporation served as a model for the state, then today's developments show that the distinction between the two becomes blurred and the corporation imposes itself as the form of state to come (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg's ambitions with the Metaverse). Although this course of things may appear as the end of neoliberalism, it still contains the full actualisation of its antisocial and authoritarian programmatic.

Ressentimental economy

The most superficial expression of antisociality in the economic sphere is the relation of competition, which is imposed as the paradigm of social bond in the capitalist organisation of social being. Since Nietzsche, this relation is associated with a specific antisocial affect, *ressentiment*, which again resonates well with Freud problematising the increase of aggressiveness in the modern cultural condition. At the same time, this affective state leads to the very core of the capitalist striving for an antisocial "social bond" (however paradoxical this expression may seem), since it pin-

7 This neoliberal strategy translated into conceiving "freedom of speech" in terms of freedom to exercise verbal violence, to spread lies and misinformation, hence freedom from every accountability for words and actions.

8 Engels uses the verb *absterben*, which, in its organic connotation, means "to die off" or "to atrophy." That neoliberal capitalism brought about its own version of the withering away of the state has been argued by various commentators, including Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.

9 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (NY: Columbia UP, 2019). That capitalism is a system of organised antisociality was honestly formulated in Thatcher's notorious remark cited above. She concludes this slogan with something that we may call "capitalist naturalism" or capitalist self-naturalisation, for Thatcher insists that if there is no such thing as society, all that truly exists are individuals and their families.

points the tension that gradually disintegrates society through the ongoing pitting of diverse social groups against each other. *Ressentiment* thus functions as an affect through which difference is effectively invested with toxicity. However, contrary to Nietzsche's perspective, the affect in question is not simply a "pathological" or "psychological" reaction to inequality, injury, and injustice. From a more structural point of view, *ressentiment* is a material-corporeal manifestation of economic relations of competition, expressing the compulsive working of these relations in individuals and social groups. Since *ressentiment* enforces the toxification of difference, it marks social being with mutual hostility. If social being bears the signification of "being-with" and eventually of "being in common," then *ressentiment* signals the antisocial subversion of social being into "being-against," a mode of being, which matches the capitalist striving for total "privatisation" of the social and of the common, or more generally, a striving to expropriate political subjects of their bodies, their lives, and ultimately of every framework that would provide them with (material and immaterial) conditions for the reproduction of life. Marx wittily brought this problematic systemic tendency to the point when he indicated that, in capitalism, political universals are subverted by economic particulars:

> The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each. Each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the others. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest.[10]

Freedom and equality, these master-signifiers of the French Revolution, are distorted by property and Bentham, whereby the latter appears here as the peak of the utilitarian ethical-political doctrine, which explained all human actions through the

10 Marx, *Capital*, 280.

assumption that every individual strives to maximise pleasure and diminish pain.[11] Utilitarianism further exemplifies its normative and therefore idealising take on human subjectivity in its assumption that everyone acts in accordance with their private interest. By following this line of reasoning, Bentham remained faithful to the work of Adam Smith that Marx's quote explicitly evokes ("the only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each").

The relation between economy and sociality is indeed a major issue for classical political economy, and Adam Smith's attempt to tackle the problematic is probably the most "symptomatic." In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, his major treatise on moral philosophy, Smith aimed at demonstrating that human passions are organised around mutual sympathy and thus governed by an inherent equilibrium. His theory of affective sympathy rests on the notion of a neutral observer that everyone assumes both in relation to themselves and others. *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith's subsequent and significantly more influential work in political economy, seems to make an important displacement by focusing on self-love and self-interest, an affective state and tendency in the subject, which at first glance seems to contradict sympathy and instead enforce antipathy, mutual exclusion, and competitiveness. However, here too, Smith repeats his conviction in the capacity of individual self-centeredness to enter in relation with other self-interested individuals, for instance, in the following famous lines:

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.[12]

Here, then, Smith reformulates his earlier assumption of affective sympathy in terms of mutual economic seduction, which postulates the exact unproblematic relationality and symmetry (*quid pro quo*) that Marx denounces as mere appearance, masking the fact that behind the free and equal economic exchange are compulsion and inequality. After all, we are talking about the encounter between the possessor

11 Bentham thus described *utility* as "that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness … [or] to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered": Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 2.

12 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London: Penguin, 1986), 119. See also Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire. The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (NY: Columbia UP, 2016), 55–56. McGowan extensively engages with the so-called "Adam Smith Problem" resulting from the incompatibilities between *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*; see, again, McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 128–132.

of the means of production and the possessor of nothing but their labour-power, hence the dispossessed. For Smith, however, one can advance one's own benefits by accentuating the other's advantages, and thus both sides can claim just participation in profit. And to repeat, it is mutual seduction that simultaneously affirms and tames the economic relation of competition, which drives the market dynamic, and the economic inequalities, which evidently cannot be removed from the relations of exchange.

On a more speculative level, however, the neutral or impartial spectator finds its reworked and more abstract expression in the notorious "invisible hand." It is this abstract force that organises the affective and social life of self-interested individuals in a social rather than antisocial manner, thus allowing for a higher moral and socioeconomic order to emerge. It is quite significant that Smith more frequently uses the notion of Providence, which he uses synonymously to the invisible hand, but, due to its theological connotations, the expression nevertheless represents an epistemological scandal for what would be a rigorous economic science. Unsurprisingly, the "invisible hand" enjoyed popularity among liberal and neoliberal economists, while its theological flipside was actively repressed. Providence, then, in the last instance, directs the individual's actions in a way that their "ruthless" pursuit of private interest quasi-unintentionally fosters and promotes the good of society. One could almost say that Providence "positively" conspires against any rigorous pursuit of private interest, sabotaging the latter from within. Quite tellingly, in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the invisible hand appears where Smith raises the question of what motivates the rich towards a just distribution of wealth:

> The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.[13]

This hypothesis continues to echo in the neoliberal discourse on "trickle-down economics" and in the neoliberal economic myth that the tax cuts for the rich ("job creators") will quasi-automatically stimulate investments, which will, sooner or later,

13 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Penguin, 2009), 215.

benefit all society's members.[14] According to this line of reasoning, one could think that the rich are social against their will, almost compulsively – they cannot help it. However, this is not Smith's actual point, since, for him, sociality emerges spontaneously from the competitive interplay of multiple interests. There is no trace of compulsive action in this emergence, no negativity, that would split, alienate, or antagonise the rich, and the invisible hand or Providence stands for the benevolent "unconscious" synchronisation of private interests. From this point of view, self-interested competition in the free market ideally does not foster *ressentiment*, but on the contrary, it generates a harmony of higher order.[15]

However, *ressentiment*'s proliferation in the social and economic sphere seriously challenges the Smithian homeostatic conception of the capitalist market and social bonds. The increase of *ressentiment* signals the perpetuation of injustice and suffering, enforced by the very same relations of competition that make Providence's "natural habitat." What is more, and as Nietzsche's critique of *ressentiment* taught us, *ressentiment* is not simply an affective expression of injustice but a misplacement of suffering's cause, providing the subject with a substitute satisfaction. In other words, *ressentiment* succeeds in fusing social injustice and subjective enjoyment. As is often the case, given his rigorous philology, Nietzsche grounds his point in etymology: *ressentiment* comes from the Latin *re-sentire* (re-feel), where the link between affect and repetition is crucial. The main achievement of repetition is the internalisation of an external injury, which slowly but surely uncouples the affect from the actual injury. Here, we can also make a move away from Nietzsche, for *ressentiment* is not necessarily about memory and the impotency to forget, as Nietzsche occasionally insisted, but about forgetting the actual cause of suffering, or to put it with Marx, about mystifying structural causes of personal and social misery.

Once injustice is uncoupled from its actual cause, it can become part of a libidinal economy, in which *ressentiment* signals extracting enjoyment from suffering. *Ressentiment* thus, to repeat, offers the subject an "other satisfaction" (Lacan) and signals that an exploitative libidinal economy has been organised on the background of suffering's obscured structural causes. The flipside – and therefore the hidden truth – of *ressentiment* is *Lustgewinn*, pleasure as a surplus-product, resulting from enduring suffering and injustice.[16] This means also that we need to recognise in *ressentiment*

14 One could ironically repeat here, which "society"? Liz Truss, the short-serving British prime minister of September to October 2022, quite shamelessly insisted that her political priority would not be diminishing inequalities but enforcing economic growth (statements published in *The Guardian*, September 4, 2022), reconfirming that the Conservatives still foster disbelief in society's existence.

15 In the economic terrain, the formation of monopolies goes against this assumption of harmony, something of which Smith was undoubtedly aware. See Smith, *Wealth*, 222–223.

16 Of course, this "*ressentimental* libidinal economy" requires a scapegoat, in which the subjects of *ressentiment* falsely recognise the cause of their suffering.

a modality of what Freud, in his discussion of the analysand's resistance to psychoanalysis, calls "escape into illness" (*Flucht in die Krankheit*) and "profit from illness" (*Krankheitsgewinn*), which, thanks to the "oblivion" (repression), prevents the subject from working through their suffering's structural causes. Both clinical phenomena, for Freud, exemplify and radicalise unconscious resistance, which means that they stand for the resilience of the problematic structure in which the subject is embedded. In *ressentiment*, we can thus observe a systemic affect, at the juncture of subjective and structural, which stands for material expression of systemic resistance in the subject, preventing them from loosening and eventually transforming the problematic antisocial economy.[17]

Ressentiment is not simply an affective state, present in every unjust social system, but the key systemic affect of capitalism, reflecting the fact that the subject of capitalism is always already caught in the position of impotency. To repeat, a major problem with *ressentiment* is that it actively mystifies the actual causes of social misery, thus blurring the view of structural relations of exploitation, and feeding false aetiologies of suffering. Looking back at the history of philosophical confrontations with the explosion of *ressentiment* in modernity, Michael Ure distinguishes three forms of *ressentiment*: moral, socio-political, and ontological.[18] Even though the socio-political resentment is relational – directed towards others (reaction to their unjust attitude towards us, or indifference) – it continuously runs the risk of repeating the errors of ontological resentment, which rests on a problematic substantialisation or essentialisation of one's own suffering and organises an entire worldview around this operation. The interaction between moral and socio-political *ressentiment*, on the one hand, and ontological, on the other, contains a specific loop, which explains the primacy of ontological *ressentiment* and, at the same time, its derivation from the socio-political framework. The primacy of ontological *ressentiment* is retroactively constituted: derived from an unjust socio-political situation, such as economic inequality, *ressentiment* is postulated as an existential affect, which transcends the historical circumstances and imposes an affective or emotional filter, through which an individual or a social group "contemplates" reality.[19] In any case, the efficacy of *ressentiment* lies in its capacity to provide

17 According to Freud, something similar happens in melancholia, where the actual loss has been forgotten, and the subject is consumed or taken hostage by the lost object. Nevertheless, unconscious repetition forms a mode of remembering and affect a corporeal manifestation of this repetition. See Sigmund Freud, "Trauer und Melancholie," in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2000).

18 Michael Ure, "Resentment/*Ressentiment*," *Constellations* 22, no. 4 (2015). In my discussion of ressentiment, I rely on Ure's systematic historical and theoretical developments.

19 This is also how *ressentiment* becomes organised in a libidinal economy, for instance, when prohibition of enjoyment turns into a distinct source of surplus-enjoyment. For Lacan (*Le Séminaire, livre XVI, D'un Autre à l'autre* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006] and *Autres écrits* [Paris:

an efficient substitute satisfaction from that which the subject of *ressentiment* is (presumably) deprived. This substitute satisfaction is overtly marked by aggressiveness, which is directed both inwards and outwards, against the inner and the outer world, against the subject and the social bond, thus amounting to nihilism's expansion and intensification, as Nietzsche already correctly diagnosed. One could therefore repeat Lacan's occasional remark on jealousy and say that *ressentiment* is always the wrong affective reaction to injustice and deprivation, since it projects and hence misplaces their cause into the other, the neighbour.

This is where Smith's homeostatic theory of moral and economic sentiments encounters its limit. Smith assumes a harmony, which testifies to the possibility that the subjects identify with each other through their sentiments, or that they put themselves in the other's shoes, thus becoming de facto alienated from their self-interest. The affective life is thus supposedly characterised by a common pathos, shared suffering, even if this share is indirect, such as in the case of the rich, who could not be further away from the existential threats of poverty, racism, war, and other forms of violence. Being affected through the pain and the injustice experienced by others always already implies that they become objects of thought. In *ressentiment*, however, a community is formed by enforcing shared hostility, indeed an antisocial sociality, in which affective bonds are conditioned by the continuous fabrication of scapegoats, personifying and therefore mystifying the causes of existential, economic, and social misery. This implies that the field of affects must be in perpetual disequilibrium and empathic bonds are continuously dismantled. We can remark in passing that the assumption of affective empathy must not be mistaken for social bond rooted in solidarity. While empathy assumes that affective life of distinct political subjects can reach the point of equilibrium (understood as a social relation without tension and contradiction), solidarity implies the exact opposite. Because there is no such thing as affective sympathy, solidarity must be enforced as an affective response to the toxic capitalist nexus of competition and *ressentiment*. Further, whereas economic liberalism presupposes a non-alienated subjectivity, anchored in private interest (individuality), solidarity demonstrates that the human subject is constitutively alienated and decentred – indeed, a "political animal," whereby political means as much as relational. The subject is constitutively related, to others and to itself.

Liberalism can only postulate a social character of capitalism on the condition that it assumes a metaphysical foundation of sociality – a figure of the "Other of

Éditions du Seuil, 2001], 435), renouncing enjoyment was the main social imperative of capitalism. For a longer discussion of the link between renunciation of enjoyment and *ressentiment*, see Samo Tomšič, "The Politics of Resentment and Its Pitfalls," in *Populism and the People in Contemporary Critical Thought*, ed. Alexander Stagnell, David Payne, and Gustav Strandberg (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

the Other," to put it with Lacan. This is where the economic superstition inaugurated by Adam Smith and enforced by the neoliberal antisocial revolution comes in. The belief that the market's invisible hand will regulate economic greed and lead to just redistribution of wealth exemplifies this redoubling in the Other. The Market already stands for the economic conception of the big Other, the register of economic relations. Smith did not bother mystifying the religious roots of modern economic science; however, his notion of Providence and of the invisible hand mark a heterogeneity in the market dynamic and disequilibrium, since they operate as an ordering and stabilising principle in the chaotic field of competition and *ressentiment*. Only when the market is supplemented with the hypothesis of Providence can it become a "normative order," capable of self-regulation and endowed with rational behaviour. Providence unveils Smith's belief in the existence of an economic Law, purified of every excess, obscenity, and violence. Perversion of economic laws is then always external and comes about when the economic sphere is subjected exclusively to private interests, or when private interest overrides the public interest, such as in the case of monopoly formation. In the end, Smith did intuit that monopolies necessarily enter competition with the state and impose themselves as an alternative figure of sovereignty.

Next to the moral, the socio-political, and the ontological, *ressentiment* requires a structural reading, since it stands for an affect that plays the key role in sustaining the reproduction of capitalist relations and mechanisms of exploitation. Max Scheler[20] indicated such a structural reading, explicitly associating *ressentiment* with the logic of competition and the processes of valorisation (specifically with Marx's account of the circulation money-commodity-money).[21] In doing so, Scheler drew attention to systemic toxicity and rejected Nietzsche's speculations on the link between *ressentiment* and Judeo-Christian tradition. In Scheler's reading, *ressentiment* is a thoroughly modern affective state, resulting from the break brought about by the progressive expansion of capitalist relations of production into all spheres of social and subjective existence. At the core of this break lies the discrepancy between political universalism (freedom and equality) and economic universalism (commodification and valorisation) that Marx equally addresses in his discussion of the political-economic foursome (freedom, equality, property, and Bentham). In Nietzsche's scenario, in turn, *ressentiment* comes in the guise of radical envy, the subjects of *ressentiment* falsely believing that the other deprives them of their enjoyment, happiness,

20 Max Scheler, *Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen* (Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 14–15.

21 Scheler's insight into the economic function of ressentiment has been recently re-accentuated and linked with our contemporary surveillance capitalism by Joseph Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment: A Short Theory of the Present*, translated by Neil Solomon (Cambridge: Polity, 2023).

and life without lack (hence without negativity). Understood in this way, *ressentiment* necessarily economises the interplay between lack and surplus, an asymmetry we encounter at the core of the capitalist drive of accumulation and self-valorisation. The drive of capital, as Marx insisted, stands for the insatiable demand for surplus-value, but this implies that it is internally marked by a persistent lack of value. Due to this endless conditioning of lack and surplus, which makes it strive for ever more value, one could say that the logic of capital, too, comes down to radical envy and hatred – in short, that capital is *ressentiment*al. Perhaps nothing reflects this systemic *ressentiment* better than the economic prejudice that poverty is a sign of laziness, a prejudice masking the constant systemic push for radical expropriation.

Neoliberalism elevated this economic prejudice to unprecedented heights. The Austrian-born economist and a key spiritual father of neoliberalism, Friedrich Hayek, is known for founding his economic doctrine on a strong combination of market and morals, which, just as in Smith's case, are assumed to evolve spontaneously. Yet, the neoliberal spontaneism importantly modifies the Smithian order. While in Smith, Providence still functioned as a force, which presumably motivates the rich to social action, and morality thus underpins the economic sphere, neoliberalism inverted the framing. Now, it is no longer the regulatory invisible hand that conducts the economic subject's actions but individual and systemic greed. In Smith, Providence thus played the function of an ontological and ethical guarantee of the common interest, a kind of inherent goodness of the market. There is no such thing in the neoliberal reworking of classical economic liberalism, even though the Smithian notion of invisible hand continued to re-emerge in the economic debates that marked the 1990s and 2000s, albeit as a signifier with hardly any ideological efficacy remaining. With the neoliberal social engineering, from the United States via the United Kingdom to Chile, the benevolent invisible hand was replaced by a most visible fist, which aims at dismantling the social and, consequently, comes paired with an overt hatred of sociality. Social justice is henceforth understood as compulsive constraint, whereas greed is declared good, and without the assumption of Providence, the market spontaneity finally loses its phantasmatic grounding, revealing itself as what it always already was, a dangerous superstition, which functions as a key mystification of crisis-ridden and antisocial character of capitalism.

At the core of this neoliberal displacement from Smith's assumption of a regulating "Other of the Other" that guarantees the emergence of sociality out of the free market to the greedy Other of neoliberal antisociality is the conviction that society functions to constrain continuous economic growth, this presumably paradigmatic expression of the market freedom. Freedom indeed played the key role in the neoliberal unleashing of capital's antisocial tendencies, pursuing the ideal of "absolute freedom," disentangled from other political universals, such as equality and solidarity. In the prominent motto of the French Revolution, freedom still forms a "Bor-

romean knot" with these two universals, which play the double role of constraints and conditions of freedom. However, as Marx suggested, economic liberalism already pursued a foreclosure of solidarity and replaced it with "property and Bentham," where the economic universality (economic value) and particularity (private interest) turn equality into mere semblance and uncouple freedom from every political subjectivity, instead delegating it to the market. Marx's enumeration of political categories of economic liberalism explains why a social bond grounded on this ideological *quadrivium* necessarily comes paired with *ressentiment*, which reflects the predominance of aggressive impulses in constructing social relations and interactions. In contrast to this underlying social hostility, articulating freedom and equality through solidarity proposes a possible translation of what Freud continuously understood with Eros, the force that forms unions, links, and relations. On the level of solidarity, we find difference affirmed, while in *ressentiment* difference can only be met with animosity. That makes *ressentiment* perfectly compatible with "fraternal bonds," which may at first glance appear grounded on solidarity between the members of a fraternity, an exclusive, rather than inclusive solidarity, which nevertheless follows the logic of competition. A fraternity can hold together only under the condition that imaginary figures of menacing others are continuously fabricated, but, as Nietzsche already emphasised, once a subject or a group is organised through *ressentiment*, the latter is always directed both outwards and inwards – not only towards these presumably threatening others, but also towards members of my own group and ultimately towards myself. This tendency is directly linked with the understanding of absolute freedom qua freedom from constraints, which suggests that the other's freedom always deprives me of my own freedom, and further, that the very existence of difference is an absolute threat to my own being.

In her recent *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Wendy Brown addressed the intimate link between the enforcement of absolute freedom and the increase of systemic aggressiveness by breaking the main achievements of neoliberalism down to three imperatives, which are very much compatible with the Freudo-Lacanian critique of systemic enjoyment: "society must be dismantled," "politics must be dethroned," and "the personal must be extended."[22] The first imperative overtly questions Foucault's reading of liberalism and neoliberalism, according to which the imperative of modern organisation of social life (as determined in the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics) comes down to "society must be defended."[23] Instead, we are dealing with a fundamental denial of social being's primacy over individual being. The second imperative implies that the realm of politics is to be entirely subverted and hijacked by

22 See, again, Brown, particularly on *ressentiment* (*In the Ruins*, 165–169), where the argument turns to Marcuse.

23 Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (London: Penguin Classics, 2020).

the economic sphere, extending relations of competition, economic deregulation, and the imperative of useless surplus-production to all spheres of social and subjective existence. With this move, the state is "slimmed down" to the sole function of safeguarding the antisocial subversion of political life. Finally, while Brown's formulation of the third achievement suggests that the private or the personal operates as a foreclosure of the common, collective, or public, we must hear in the "private" precisely what Marx addresses under the structural drive of capital, rather than a simple predominance of personal egoism over the public interest (the latter issue already troubled Adam Smith, who, in contrast to Marx, remained restricted to the "psychological" sphere or appearance of the "personal"). The privatisation of politics indeed manifests as expropriating human beings of sociality as such, and enthroning capital as the subject of politics.[24] By accomplishing the subversion of the relation between the political and the economic, the neoliberal orthodoxy not only demands that the economic be exempted from collective management, transformation, revision, or control, but the economic doxa also insists that only by unleashing the antisocial tendencies of the socioeconomic system and of affective life can we guarantee "continuous economic growth" (which is in its essence growth for the sake of growth, and therefore uncoupled from every social value or usefulness). The self-valorisation of capital finally becomes the sole "legitimate" activity in the socioeconomic sphere.[25]

From Bentham to Sade

Marx's comment on the entanglement of political universals with economic particulars still targets the equilibrium paradigm of 19th-century economic liberalism and its theory of political passions. Even though the name "Bentham" covers basic antisocial phenomena such as private interest and self-love, it still comprises the

24 Namely, the "automatic subject" that Marx (*Capital*, 255) situates on the level of fictitious (financial) capital.

25 The tendency to enthrone capital as the sole subject of politics is accompanied by another troublesome aspect of the capitalist enforcement of antisociality, which can here be merely indicated – namely, the production of social abjects that Marx addressed through the concept of surplus-population. With that population being excluded from the capitalist relations of production, it becomes the ultimate social personification of the destiny of political subjectivity under capitalism and of the fact that the withering away of the social also implies a withering away of humanity. As Clyde W. Barrow (*The Dangerous Class. The Concept of the Lumpenproletariat* [Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2020]) recently argued, by speaking of surplus-population, Marx's mature work directly confronts an underlying dystopian dimension of capitalism, intuiting that the globalisation of capitalist relations of production amounts to a progressive lumpenproletarisation of humanity, which poses "insurmountable obstacles to a theory of revolutionary agency" (14).

naïve yet regulative hypothesis that the dynamic of economic relations can form a stable system and is, therefore, inherently capable of sociality. Marx's entire work tirelessly demonstrates that the truth of "freedom, equality, property and Bentham" is compulsion (of economic relations, which govern our social and subjective life), inequality (following from the asymmetry between capital and labour), and expropriation (reflected, among others, in the act of economic exchange, where the selling of labour-power ultimately implies being expropriated of one's body and life). Now, which proper name could best reflect this nexus between compulsion, inequality, and exploitation, as well as their embedding in surplus-production? Lacan's work offers an implicit answer to this question: Marquis de Sade.

Sade's work revolves around a feature that Lacan somewhat enigmatically calls the "right to enjoyment." According to the established readings, this right uncovers the repressed truth of Kant's foundation of morality on the categorical imperative, a peculiar form of "moral masochism," which results directly from the idea that the realm of morality must be exempted from every "pathological" (personal, individual, or psychological) motivation. However, Sade's literature, and specifically the link between enjoyment and violence (hence, again, expropriation) that Sade continuously places in the foreground, allows us to shed critical light on utilitarianism as well. We merely need to recall the "ethical maxim" that Lacan formulates for the Sadean claim for the right of enjoyment: "'I have the right to enjoy your body,' anyone can say to me, 'and I will exercise this right without any limit to the capriciousness of the exactions I may wish to satiate with your body.'"[26] The way this maxim is formulated, it directly implies the link between enjoyment and expropriation, a radical asymmetry, which suggests that, ultimately, the condition of pursuing my right to enjoy most rigorously implies destroying the other. This point resonates particularly well with Lacan's subsequent remarks on the limits of utilitarianism:

> A word here to shed light on the relationship between law (*droit*) and enjoyment. "Usufruct" – that's a legal notion, isn't it? – brings together in one word … the difference between utility and enjoyment. … "Usufruct" means that you can enjoy your means, but must not waste them. When you have the usufruct of an inheritance, you can enjoy the inheritance as long as you don't use up too much of it. That is clearly the essence of law – to divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as enjoyment.
> What is enjoyment? Here it amounts to no more than a negative instance. Enjoyment is what serves for nothing.

26 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (NY: Norton, 2007), 648.

> I am pointing here to the reservation implied by the field of the right-to-enjoyment. Right (*droit*) is not duty. Nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The superego is the imperative of enjoyment – *Enjoy*![27]

In the utilitarian, or more broadly, legal framing of the right to enjoyment, it is still possible to postulate a link between enjoyment and happiness, which is certainly at the core of Bentham's political philosophy. Here, one could indeed say that enjoyment is assumed to serve something, in the first place, avoiding pain and pursuing happiness.[28] But, as Lacan points out, right and duty are not the same, and in this precise discrepancy lies the difference between Bentham and Sade: between the right of enjoyment and the imperative of enjoyment, between enjoyment that serves for something and enjoyment for the sake of enjoyment, or enjoyment that becomes its own purpose. This is also the difference between economic liberalism and neoliberalism (or libertarian capitalism): while liberalism still believes that capitalist economic relations can organise life so that it will enforce happiness for most of society's members, neoliberalism ultimately only cares for systemic happiness, and hence for the satisfaction of the capital's drive of self-valorisation. Surplus-value thus contains the negative instance that Lacan determines in the shift from Bentham to Sade, from the right to the imperative of enjoyment. The latter may be addressed to the subject, but what is there implied is that enjoyment always belongs to the Other, and the subject is always expropriated, both of their capacity and of their right to enjoy (or, in the words of Judith Butler, to live a liveable life). To put it differently, the imperative of enjoyment is an impossible right of enjoyment, impossible because it is detached from every subject and belongs to "Nobody" (i.e., no body), or, more specifically, to the free and deregulated Market. Ultimately, only the Market possesses the right to enjoy, while the economic subjects are obliged to enjoy – precisely the enjoyment that is the market's right. This implies, however, that they must renounce every pretence to enjoyment that does not match the demand for surplus-value. The (Sadean) absolutisation of the right of enjoyment prohibits all other articulations and organisations of enjoyment, thus making of enjoyment something that serves for nothing, and this means also turning enjoyment into a key element for enforcing capitalist antisociality.

Lacan then remarks that there is one important limit to enjoyment, which needs to be taken into consideration:

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27 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar, Book XX, Encore* (NY: Norton, 1999), 3. Translation modified.

28 This is certainly one of Bentham's core illusions, that both psychoanalysis and the critique of political economy decisively drop; happiness is not to be included among the core categories of politics.

> As is emphasized admirably by the kind of Kantian that Sade was, one can only enjoy a part of the Other's body, for the simple reason that one has never seen a body completely wrap itself around the Other's body, to the point of surrounding and phagocytizing it. That is why we must confine ourselves to simply giving it a little squeeze, like that, taking a forearm or anything else – ouch![29]

No one ever saw a body devour another (or two bodies devouring each other); this could be one possible translation of the Lacanian slogan "there is no sexual relation." But the problem with capitalism is, again, that it successfully imposed economic competition as a paradigm of "social" relation, in which bodies do not necessarily surround and phagocytise each other (this is the ultimate Sadean fantasy), but they are nevertheless turned against each other, while being immersed in and, indeed, "phagocytised" by the economic Other (again, the market). Enjoyment here ultimately comes down to the imperative of work – not the work that would serve to safeguard or improve the conditions of individual and social life but work for the sake of work (value-producing work), which responds to the systemic "right to enjoy" and in which the capitalist Other indeed "phagocytises" the subject. Hence, the Freudian link between enjoyment and death again points to the problem of capitalist antisociality and the organisation of aggressiveness into an economic system, striving for continuous extraction of surplus-value through violent and painful "little squeezes."

How, then, should one react to this sinister dimension of capitalism? What is certain is that political resignation and pessimism inevitably lead to another type of affective conformism that is no less problematic than that of *ressentiment*, namely, melancholic resignation. In the end, what unites *ressentiment* and melancholia, despite all their differences, is that they perpetuate the production of surplus-enjoyment. To repeat Freud's valuable point, in distinction from mourning, where a loss is confronted and worked through, in melancholia the loss itself is lost, and the affective state begins extracting a libidinal profit from the state of loss itself (and precisely in this respect the loss can be declared lost or pushed into oblivion). This also explains why neither *ressentiment* nor melancholia cannot amount to a rigorous systemic critique, although they continuously create the appearance of militant criticism (such as in populism, when it comes to *ressentiment*, or in the melancholic positioning of critique such as in Adorno or Benjamin).[30]

Contrary to these affective vicissitudes of the critical faculty, the history of emancipatory movements draws a significant part of its affective motivation from the bonds of solidarity, which refuse to accept the destructive tendencies of the

29 Lacan, *Encore*, 23.

30 On Adorno and Benjamin, see Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory* (NY: Columbia UP, 2016).

capitalist mode of production as an overwhelming, pseudo-ontological necessity beyond our influence or control. Here, political subjectivity remains composed of symptomatic bodies, which certainly testify to the ongoing systemic violence and toxicity, but at the same time, continue to resist social dissolution. Marx's sole example of such a symptomatic body was that of the industrial proletariat, a figure of the revolting body, to which others have been added throughout the history of struggles for social emancipation and transformation: the female body and the colonial body, but also the aged and sick body, etc. This is not to say that the historical and lived experiences of systemic violence, to which these corporealities and subjectivities (not to say identities) continue to be subjected, must be compared, since such a stance re-embeds them in the (neo)liberal framework of political competition. What these corporealities do have in common, however, is the fact that their subjects are all, by possibility or reality, redundant in the eyes of the system. From a structural point of view, this redundancy is, in the last instance, the imposed fate of every subject of capitalism. The suffering bodies and figures of damaged life are social symptoms in the strong sense of the word, not only signs of capitalist antisociality running amok, but also expressions of a persevering desire for an emancipatory society. That is why resisting the framework of competition, in which liberalism strives to embed diverse emancipatory struggles, and its affective expressions (*ressentiment*) remains a key – and, at first glance, impossible – task of organising political subjectivity in these catastrophic times.

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