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**Surplus Enjoyment:  
You Can Make Something out of Nothing.  
The Real, the Political, and the Conditions  
of Production—On the Productivity  
of an Impossibility**

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You *can* make something out of nothing. With this assertion, which I will elaborate on shortly, I do not want to just contradict the all too familiar echo of a pedagogical admonishment shaped by Christianity and capitalism – the admonishment to do ›honest‹ and productive work. Rather, my main concern is to reformulate the connection between production and excess as defined in the Marxian concept of surplus value in terms of Jacques Lacan's concept of surplus enjoyment. In doing so I intend to make this concept productive for a conception of ›queer‹ as a critical/political category with which to critique notions of representation based on the logic of identity. The excess referred to in the concept of surplus enjoyment—an excess that by necessity constitutes constructions of identity while making unequivocal determinations of identity impossible—shall be explained here as a *logical* rather than quantitative concept. I would like to pursue the idea of »*Mehr(wert)* queer« (surplus [value] queer), as formulated for the conference, in its reference to the Marxian critique of capitalism embodied by the concept of surplus value, and question it with respect to the function or use value of the term ›queer‹: to what extent can the concept of surplus value be used as a kind of re-appropriated battle slogan for a queer practice

of representation that is both anti-normative and critical of (neo)liberalism? And to what extent can we speak of ›profit‹ or ›loss‹ in this context?

The Marxian concept of surplus value, which differs from the concepts of Adam Smith and David Ricardo primarily in that it is defined as historically variable, refers first to a value that is beyond both the use value and exchange value, and—most importantly—is larger than the exchange value.<sup>1</sup> Within the system of capitalist accumulation and appropriation of surplus value, the latter itself becomes a kind of use value for capitalist interests. Yet Marx has proven wrong in his assumption that the capitalist mode of production would ultimately do itself in because of the constantly rising production of surplus value, the accumulation of capital and competition, and the tendency towards a decreasing average profit rate as a result of such exploitation strategies. Looking at what made such a utopia imaginable, the question must be asked, to what extent the production of commodities and meanings can be understood as comparable practices or in which way the connection between economic and political-cultural hegemonic structures can be critically analyzed and altered *without* reproducing parameters based on the logic of identity and *without* predicating it on the possibility of closure. Yet above all I am concerned with critically examining the concepts of economics and ethics that are related to the categories of duty and value, in order to decouple them from the imperatives of accumulation and morals. At the same time I will counter the idea of the calculability of identity as a discrete, predictable volume or ›value‹ by putting forward a critique of the logic of identity, which pursues an ethic precisely by referring to the unavailability of any extralinguistic guarantee. By doing so, I would also like to encourage a critical reconsideration of the connection between economy, politics and ethics that affects the very definition of these categories, and particularly that of the political. For it is precisely the unavailability of an extralinguistic certainty that reduces any traditional idea of ethics—that is, any absolute concept of good and proper, also in the economic sense of common property—to absurdity. And so this unavailability links all production of meaning and reality to responsibility.

## Surplus Enjoyment

Based on the above, a redefinition of ethics that goes beyond moral codes must, in accordance with Jacques Lacan, be closely linked with a theory of enjoyment or surplus enjoyment. This theory does not pursue the idea of satisfying a desire or fulfilling an ideal but refers to the continuous production of excess (Lacan 1992: 208-210, 229-230). Lacan's approach offers itself here not only because of its explicit reference to the

Marxian concept of surplus value, but also because, in contrast to Marx, it facilitates conceiving the process of production and, in particular, the *conditions* of production outside an economy of accumulation. From here, the argumentation of a critique of identity focusing on the linguistically determined preconditions of the production of values in the form of meaning, identity and reality can be linked, to take Lacan a step further, to a reconceptualization of the political and of a political subject. Production, in this context, turns out to be a process that is determined by desire and excess and, based on this, can by definition never attain closure, i.e., it is a process that can neither be completed nor, as it were, exhaust itself.

For a start, it should be emphasized that Lacan's concept of surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*) is ultimately the equivalent of his concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*), in that the latter inevitably generates an excess, a surplus enjoyment that prevents complete satisfaction (Lacan 1998: 3; Lacan 2007: 657; Hong 2000: 244). At first sight, Lacan's explicit reference to Marx's concept of surplus value seems to suggest a comparable mode of production. Surplus enjoyment as excess without use value (Lacan 1998: 3; Lacan 1992: 229-230) seems to correspond to Marx's distinction between surplus value, on the one hand, and use value and exchange value, on the other: he defines use value as a utility directly related to the physical properties of the commodity (Marx 1996: 46), and its basis is productive labor (*ibid.*: 51-53, 187-189). At the same time, labor is inevitably a production of surplus value, which transforms the factors involved—according to Marx, these are man, nature and the object of labor. We have now specified some of the substantial differences between Marx and Lacan. For Marx introduces »man«, »nature«, and »object of labor« as positively definable and quantifiable factors, in other words, he assumes they are a given »something«—the production process »disappears in the product« (*ibid.*: 190). In contrast, Lacan's concept of surplus enjoyment, which is understood as an excess without use value, i.e., as something that »serves no purpose« (Lacan 1998: 3), does not relate to quantities. It is not about more versus less enjoyment, but rather about an excess in terms of a more-than-enjoyment and hence about an unquantifiable dimension of »beyond«,<sup>2</sup> which—as a radical irretrievability—sustains the movement of desire. The »surplus« in surplus enjoyment must not be conceived as an accumulation but as a *going beyond*, in the sense of chains of reference that cannot be completed. Consequently, surplus enjoyment as the cause of desire (*objet petit a*) does not refer to a positively definable object and does not constitute a positively definable value. Rather it is about an excess of the signifier or of signifying, and thus is a *going beyond a specific meaning*, which prevents meaning from being fixed (Lacan 1977: 67-122; see Lummerding 2005: 114-116, 258-264). Therefore, the excess at issue here is

not a quantifiable one but a logical one. Accordingly, desire is determined by this impossibility of fixing meaning and hence has to be understood as determined largely by the logic of language.

True, Lacan's surplus enjoyment implies, like Marx's surplus value, an inevitable and essentially perpetual movement.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless we are dealing with two different economies here. Unlike the accumulation of capital in Marx, which, for the sake of increasing the rate of surplus value, is accompanied by an increasing and quantifiable rate of exploitation, surplus enjoyment refers to the impossibility of totality. For the *going beyond a specific meaning* that characterizes any production of meaning makes it impossible, on the one hand, to conclude, complete or fix any specific meaning; while, on the other hand, an infinite progression cannot by definition be conceived as an absolute, delineable totality. Hence, with respect to the critical notion of ›queer‹, the language-based concept of desire connected with the concept of surplus enjoyment is of multiple interest. For in contrast to an understanding of desire based on the logic of identity—an understanding that connects desire with a specific predefined (e.g., sexually defined) object and hence allows for a distinction between ›same‹ and ›other‹ or ›hetero‹ and ›homo‹<sup>4</sup>—, a concept of desire based on the logic of language makes it possible to argue for a fundamental impossibility of identity as a coherent, positively definable entity (or totality). Above all, however, this makes the function of this impossibility—which is constitutive of and hence *enabling for* each specific identity construction—*formulable*. And this, in turn, provides a basis for the anti-heteronormative decoupling of sexuality and sexual categorization.

## Sex versus Meaning

Lacan chooses the term of the *real* to define both identity as language-based, and the *impossibility* of ›completing‹ and ›fixing‹ identity or meaning in what is simultaneously its *enabling* dimension; as well as to explain why each construction of identity or meaning is simultaneously and necessarily marked by a *going beyond* (Lacan 1977: 167; Lacan 1990: 3-47; Lacan 2007: 412-443; see Lummerding 2005: 100-104, 116-117, 166-174). Hence this *real* (as impossibility), which he calls one of the three dimensions of language and distinguishes from the ›symbolic‹ and the ›imaginary‹, should in no way be equated with ›reality‹. Quite to the contrary, the *real*, as the impossibility of fixing meaning, is what makes the perpetual rearticulation of ever-new constructions of reality necessary in the first place. For this impossibility must be obscured each time anew in order to maintain the constitutive fantasy of the possibility of fixation, that is, of certainty—in other words, in order to replace ›nothing‹ by ›something‹. It is precisely

in this sense, that is, due to this impossibility of totality, that the process of generating meaning is *constitutive*, and hence produces reality (see Lummerding 2005: 126, 155-158, 265-274).

The fact that this process can only be conceived as a one of differentiation is exemplified in the question of sexuation, since existence is only available to subjects as sexuated existence. Contrary to all biological explanations, this means that existence is always the result of a differentiation that cannot draw on any biological or otherwise defined *a priori*. For this, the construction of some kind of alterity is necessary. In this sense, the language-based process of differentiation (rather than any identities or materialities ostensibly prior to this process) is *constitutive* of subjects. In order to highlight the extent to which any form of identity is hence the *consequence* rather than the basis of a differentiation, i.e. of a linguistic process (and precisely in this sense, reality), I would like to suggest rethinking, in accordance with Joan Copjec, sex as a category (Copjec 1994: 201-236). In other words, I want to suggest an anti-essentialist redefinition of precisely that category traditionally associated with essentialism, and a more radical redefinition than a mere equation of sex with specific discursive constructions of identity (for instance, gender constructions). Rather, in this new conception, sex shall be defined as a linguistically determined moment of impossibility, thus allowing the *precondition* of any discursive construction to be grasped without having to draw upon notions of ostensibly prediscursive priorisms (see Lummerding 2005: 97-148, 265-275). This impossibility of a closure or fixation of meaning not only reveals that every construction of identity is inevitably phantasmatic, but also accounts for why any translation into ›binary terms‹, into opposing symbolic inscriptions is bound to fail. For binarism implies two unequivocally delineated totalities, and these by definition are impossible. This ›failure‹, or this *going beyond a specific meaning* is therefore not only highly productive, but the only form of productivity available (Lummerding 2005: 126, 155-158, 265-275; Lummerding 2007a+b). The fact that the necessity for differentiation does not predefine or specifically legitimize any specific form of differential inscription means that no construction of identity or reality and no socio-symbolic ›norm‹ can lay claim to a privileged legitimacy over another. This also excludes invoking categories such as ›nature‹. And this is exactly where the realm of the *political* is to be located. Which is to say, the *political* has to be assigned to the dimension of the *real* and, in accordance with Claude Lefort and Ernesto Laclau, distinguished from ›politics‹, which belongs to the dimension of the socio-symbolic. While the *political* (*le politique*) refers to a confrontation with radical incoherence (i.e., the impossibility of fixation), politics (*la politique*) refers to its specific inscriptions in the symbolic as attempts to come to

terms with and temporarily cover up this incoherence with phantasmatic constructions of coherence (see Lefort 1986; Laclau 1990).

Hence, it is a decidedly political consideration to use and redefine exactly the term *sex* (as an analytical concept) to designate what is precisely not ›something‹ (existing prior to language, as it were), but to stress the dimension of the *real*—and thus the language-based necessity of a difference as such—in its constitutive function for what is always merely a temporary production of ›subject‹ in the sense of an identity position. This permits us to use precisely the concept of *sex*, which is traditionally associated with essentialism, to demonstrate the absolute unavailability of any *a priori* (i.e., a ›natural fact‹ of sorts). Thus *sex* as impossibility cannot be equated with symbolic inscriptions or constructions of difference—for instance, gender constructions—but should rather be understood as their linguistic and logical precondition on the level of the *real*, which at the same time makes its closure or fixation impossible. The dimension of the *real* does not determine what inscribes itself at the level of the socio-symbolic and hence of politics. Rather, the dimension of the *real* refers to the reason why that which inscribes itself at this level, and is hence produced as ›reality‹, can never be anything else but the preliminary outcome of hegemonic dispute—and for this very reason is contestable (see Lummerding 2005: 159-165, 265-275). Thus, any claim of ›authenticity‹ or ›immediacy‹ turns out to be a fantasy; in this sense, any construction of reality is always already mediated. This is why any articulation as a production of meaning and identity is political. It is so precisely to the extent that it cannot draw on some ›guarantee‹ or legitimacy—and this is exactly what constitutes responsibility. What's decisive is to recognize and connect two aspects, namely, both the inevitability of differentiation and the necessarily phantasmatic nature of each specific construction of difference, or the impossibility of authenticity and an *a priori* as an ostensibly extralinguistic reference, and then to accept the responsibility that ensues.

### **»Mehrwert queer«— Marketing Tool or Political Metaphor?**

Queer practices of representation can be seen as approaches to the production of meaning that are tied to the claim of contesting precisely that binary logic of identity which is the basis of thinking in absolute, calculable, and accumulable terms. Accepting the supposition that both an economy of accumulation and a binary logic are in contradiction to practices of representation that are labeled ›queer‹, we are confronted with the question of how the aforementioned claim to critique the logic of

identity or practices of such critique can be identified without undermining the claim itself by such labeling. David L. Eng's, Judith Halberstam's and José Muñoz' definition of »queerness« as a »political metaphor without a stable referent« (Eng/Halberstam/Muñoz 2005: 1), for instance, can be seen as an attempt in this direction. However, the question is how might this attempt be radicalized so as to avoid, as far as possible, phantasmatic closures, e.g., in the form of a label associated, as a matter of course, with a seemingly unambiguous meaning. ›Queer‹ as a designation, that is, as a socio-symbolic construction, and hence a construction of difference, has thus to be located at the level of politics. This would serve a purpose, i.e., ›queer‹ would, so to speak, be linked with a use value that involves its differentiating itself from that against which it is directed. Yet precisely because differentiation produces identity (meaning), this also becomes a problem in that it suggests the possibility of »being queer«—a value that can be positively defined.

To answer the ethically and politically relevant question raised here, namely, the question of how to deal with the inevitability of differentiation without reproducing a binary logic of identity, I would like to refer to the connection between the *impossibility* of identity as a positively defined entity, and the *political or responsibility* (see Lummerding 2005: 151-158, 265-275). For if the reference to an extralinguistic referent is impossible and hence an ideal of what is good and proper is unavailable outside social-discursive constructions, then ethics and responsibility can no longer be founded on morals, i.e., on an ideal of the good, but quite to the contrary must be founded on the very unavailability of any such guarantee. This means that any decision must legitimize itself, without substantiation, merely by means of its articulation within specific hegemonic contexts and in relation to other articulations—and as such remains contestable.

In order to reinforce *queer* as an analytical concept and be able to define the claim to critique the logic of identity, we have to avail ourselves of the fact that the term ›queer‹ itself cannot by definition be fixed and, like any other socio-symbolic construction, is unable to rely on an extralinguistic referent. It is precisely this fact that needs to be seen and claimed as a moment of the political. In this respect it is important to reveal over and over again that the claims and consequences of the practices designated by the term ›queer‹ are in no way reducible to questions of sexual identity, sexuality, or a critique of heteronormativity in terms of sex and gender, but extend to every construction of meaning and hence of reality. For revealing constructions of reality as merely temporary results of hegemonic negotiation processes<sup>5</sup> constitutes a necessary reference to their contestability. In order to clarify *why* every construction of reality *can* never be anything but a temporary result of hegemonic negotiation processes—that is to say, why even the coupling of sexuality and sexual

identity can only be a hegemonic construct—it is necessary to consider the dimension of the *real* (the constitutive impossibility of fixing meaning) as a precondition of production. Thus the latter is, by necessity, always defined by surplus enjoyment.

In contrast, an economic logic of value or surplus value is somewhat problematic in that it offers little to counter the currently dominating political theory and practice still indebted to the tradition of liberalism. For liberal principles—such as a liberal definition of freedom, the ideal of system stabilization, and the demand for distributive justice—draw on a logic of identity, and to this extent turn privileged and deprived members of a society presupposed identities. Consequently, the question of how such members and identities are produced is unformulable. Therefore, taking recourse to commodity production, exploitation, and a critique of capitalism that focuses on the accumulation of capital is an inadequate means for unhinging a liberal logic of identity, because such argumentation is equally based on a logic of identity.

So what is at stake is not being able to quantify ›more‹ or ›less‹ *queerness* (as a value), but rather seizing and reinforcing an inevitable movement, in which, instead of resorting to phantasmatic securities of binary constructions of identity, it becomes possible to draw upon the contestability of specific constructions of reality, while referring to their inherently phantasmatic nature. This also means to put one's own position of identity up for negotiation and, instead of ostensible securities, to seek the imposed audacity of a fundamental risk. It cannot be excluded that a ›surplus value queer‹ will be instrumentalized as a kind of use value in the form of a *label* and as a marketing tool in current lifestyle economies, and thus function as a security guarantee of a specific definition of identity. All the same it is precisely this adherence to ostensible securities that needs to be contested in terms of a critique of identity-logical positions in order to confront any construction of identity—that is to say, of meaning or reality (i.e. concrete politics)—with the moment of the political and thus keep it negotiable. It makes a crucial difference whether I merely refer to the fact that something is constructed, or whether I demonstrate *why* what I perceive as reality can inherently be nothing but a construction.

What is decisive here, especially in terms of a politics of democracy, is that the unavailability of an extralinguistic referent can be brought to bear not only with regard to subject identity but also with regard to collective identities (society or a ›community‹ is equally indefinable as a totality) as with any other reality construction. Thus, in contrast to the logic of identity and quantification (both of liberalism and a Marxian critique of capitalism), which does not only presuppose subject identities but also the existence of a specific, and hence limited, amount of defined resources (including rights) as the basis of societal conceptions, a definition of democracy that

is critical of identity cannot comply to the logic of distributive justice or minority politics. Instead such a definition has to be seen as a perpetuation of dispute that draws on the language-based *impossibility* of a specific ideal of a community or common property, and allows us to seize this constitutive *impossibility* as a condition of possibility.

## Notes

1 »[The capitalist's] aim is to produce not only a use-value, but a commodity also; not only use-value, but value; not only value, but at the same time surplus-value.« (Marx 1996: 196).

2 See Derrida's concept of *différance* (Derrida 1982: 3-27).

3 Though, as said, Marx imagined this movement as potentially finite (Marx 1996: 190).

4 Such an understanding of desire is, for instance, the basis of Judith Butler's argument for the foundations of *gender*, which, according to Butler, can be traced to the ›loss‹ of a specific relation to an *object*, a ›foreclosed desire‹ or a repudiated ›passionate attachment‹ to the ›same sex‹. This argument presupposes an already defined identity in order to be able to categorize an object as ›same‹/›homo‹ or ›other‹/›hetero‹ (see Butler 1997: 132-150, 160-166, 180-181; for a critical analysis of this see Lummerding 2005: 165-171).

5 With the term *hegemonic*, which draws on Laclau/Mouffe's reference to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, I would like to emphasize that (in contrast to romantic ideas of oppositional places or positions ›outside‹ power) there is no space without power, and thus power cannot be attributed to positions or identities, but identities are perpetually recreated in ongoing processes of negotiation (see Laclau/Mouffe 1985).

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