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The Discourse and the Capitalist. Lacan, Marx, and the Question of the Surplus

1.

The way Marx introduced pre-capitalist forms of production (and in general the so-called historical chapters) in the exposition of *Das Kapital* has always been problematic and largely debated. Are they only to be considered a narrative point of reference, purely allegorical, and with no direct use in the development of the argument? Or rather does *Das Kapital* follow a historical rhetorical strategy where the entire development of past forms of production is explained until the advent of the capitalist mode of production? Or are they perhaps only logical categories that need to be considered in pure logical terms? The problem and the ambiguity relies on the fact that Marx uses a *synchronic* argument in order to explain the capitalist mode of production: against a causal relation according to which some factors would be decisive and would over-determine the entire field; a dialectic and structural explanation is preferred where all the elements already presuppose already developed capitalist relations. That is why Marx starts *Das Kapital* with the “commodity”, an element that already presupposes a form of production devoted to the accumulation of value (that is, he already starts with, in the background, the entire development of the book as presupposed). Or that is why Marx ends Volume 1 with a section on the *so-called* primitive accumulation: an accumulation that, at first sight, is not sure whether it took place or not. The only way to explain a system of relations where the accumulation of capital already presupposes the creation of surplus-value, which already presupposes capitalist production, which already presupposes the existence of money-capitals and masses of bearers of labour-power deprived of the means of production, etc. – is to posit what Michel Foucault called a “historical a-priori”: something in between a synchronic condition of possibility that defines a system of practices and relations, and a historical point of irruption that nevertheless does not have a genetic principle but it is rather definable only afterwards (*après-coup*).

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With that question in mind, it is striking how in Chapter 7 of *Das Kapital*¹, after having introduced the part on “Commodities and Money” and the part on “The Transformation of Money into Capital”, Marx devotes a section to philosophical speculation on the issue of labour in general. In the Chapter “The Labour Process and the Valorization Process” Marx takes some pages to step outside of the description of capitalism and presents a meta-historical account of the relationship between the human being and nature in terms of labour. The labour process is treated here in purely abstracted terms, independently of its historical forms, as an inter-exchange between the human being and nature: “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature”.² The human being is considered to be a force within nature itself, which by the way has the potential to negate this very belonging. He is also able, by means of the energy of his own body, to convert the natural processes in order to meet his own needs and carry out his own projects: “he sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head, and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs”.³ But of course, given that he is himself part of this very same nature “through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.”⁴ Here the account of labour is not only developed in purely trans-historical terms (therefore in terms that have never actually existed), but it remains in its pure abstracted form, external and unrelated to any historical specificity.

But there is also another crucial element worth underlining: Marx later on in the same chapter refers in different passages to the term “purpose”, the aim, the very meaning of labour activity. What defines this mythical human activity in general is the fact that it has a clear purpose: “the labour process, as we have just

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¹ In the English edition of *Capital* there is a slight difference in the division of this Chapter compared to the original edition: the three sections of Chapter 4 became proper chapters (“The General Formula for Capital”, “Contradictions in the General Formula”, and “The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power”). Therefore what is commonly known as Chapter 5 (“The Labour Process and the Valorization Process”), is here Chapter 7.

² Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1976, p. 284.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

presented it in its simple and abstract elements, is purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values”⁵; “the simple elements of the labour process are (1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work”.⁶ But he will return to this argument even more clearly in Chapter 16 – “Absolute and Relative Surplus-Value”: “man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.”⁷ Given that at the level of these general terms, *exchange value* and *value* itself had not yet entered into the picture, the relationship between human being and nature through labour is determined according to purely qualitative reasons. The human being still has the power to determine the *purpose* of his own activity: labour activity and its meaning are still joined together in the same act.

Massimiliano Tomba perceptively underlines that in the notes added between 1871 and 1872 in the revision process for the second edition of *Das Kapital*, Marx tried to address in more rigorous historical terms the question of the qualitative dimension of labour in pre-capitalist societies⁸. According to Tomba, Marx traces therein a *division* between societies whose production is devoted to satisfying a pure reproduction of themselves (therefore societies only aimed at the consumption of use-value) – which are those featuring the patriarchal family and ancient Asian communities, where the social character of labour is reduced to being a function of the needs of the community – and proper capitalist societies. In the former, which are in fact reminiscent of the “general man” at the beginning of Chapter 7, no surplus is generated because only what is needed for the basic survival of the community is produced. We could say that even though those societies are in complete control of the *purpose* of their own labour, no surplus is *strictu sensu* generated that is not devoted to the pure reproduction of the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ I refer here to a seminar in commentary form on *Das Kapital*'s Chapter 7 delivered by Massimiliano Tomba in Bergamo (Italy) on 10 April 2006. This contribution was part of an ongoing *Das Kapital* reading group coordinated in Bergamo by Riccardo Bellofiore. I owe not only this point, but a big part of my limited understanding of Marxism – and therefore the main core of the thesis of this article – to Riccardo Bellofiore. Naturally, I am the only one responsible for any misunderstanding, misreport, or mistake herein.

community itself. The purpose of labour – i.e. the aim, the goal, what a certain example of labour should be used for – emerges only when this situation of equilibrium (according to which a certain community produces goods only for its own pure reproduction and survival) is ruptured; therefore when a *surplus* is generated. The cut that separates the capitalist mode of production from allegedly ancient societies devoted to the pure reproduction of themselves, is none other than the production of a *surplus*: an element that cannot be explained in pure conservative and homeostatic terms. Something *more* than pure survival (an $n+1$). It is only when a surplus is created that a certain knot that ties together the community is broken, leaving the space for something new to emerge. A community (once again, mythical and existing in a pure non-historical space) that produces only for its own survival cannot inscribe itself in a proper history because its production cannot create anything that changes the system of equilibrium of the community itself. Its production is only a *re*-production, therefore a production that at the end of the cycle cannot but leave things as they were at the beginning. A community of that type would be a community where the production of the new, and therefore of history, would be impossible.

2.

During the years between 1968 and 1972 while developing his teaching around the theme of the discourses and the articulation of *object a* and the social and political field, Jacques Lacan made some “raids” into the difficult terrain of the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis. During the development of the theory of the four discourses (Seminar XVII, *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, during 1969-1970) for example, aside from the four discourses that articulate the relations between S_1 (master-signifier), S_2 (knowledge), $\$$ (subject), and *a* (object remainder), Lacan introduced a fifth discourse, the discourse of the capitalist: of the discourses “the most clever of them all”⁹ because it is the one that is able to productively solicit desire, and not to eclipse it. During those years, Lacan coined a neologism: *plus-de-jouir*, surplus-enjoyment, with a clear reference to Marx’s surplus-value. In Seminar XVI (*D’un Autre à l’autre* in 1968/1969), in his first lecture, *De la plus-value au plus-de-jouir*, Lacan noted that surplus-enjoyment, the object-remainder of enjoyment, i.e. the core of his teaching of those years, should

⁹ Jacques Lacan, “Del discorso psicanalitico” (1972) in Giacomo Contri (ed.), *Lacan in Italia. 1953-1978*, Milano: La Salamandra 1978, p. 48.

be thought of as homologous to the Marxian notion of surplus-value.¹⁰ As has been noted by Jacques-Alain Miller, “the construction of surplus-*jouir* is made in a fashion homological to this surplus-value. A homology is not an analogy; it indicates that the relationships are identical, while an analogy rests on a comparison of the nature of the terms themselves.”¹¹

But before going into the details of the homological functioning of the *surplus* in both surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment, it would be interesting to see, in a much earlier stage of Lacan’s teaching, how a similar (a similarly mythical) genetic question, as posited by Marx at the beginning of Chapter 7, was raised by Lacan himself regarding the question of the irruption of language into reality in the so-called “Discourse of Rome” of 1953, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*:

No one is supposed to be ignorant of the law; this formulation, provided by the humor in our Code of Laws, nevertheless expresses the truth in which our experience is grounded, and which our experience confirms. No man is actually ignorant of it, because the law of man has been the law of language since the first words of recognition presided over the first gifts—it having taken the detestable Danaï, who came and fled by sea, for men to learn to fear deceptive words accompanying faithless gifts. Up until then, these gifts, the act of giving them and the objects given, their transmutation into signs, and even their fabrication, were so closely intertwined with speech for the pacific Argonauts—uniting the islets of their community with the bonds [*noeuds*] of a symbolic commerce—that they were designated by its name. Is it with these gifts, or with the passwords that give them their salutary nonmeaning, that language begins along with law? For these gifts are already symbols, in the sense that symbol means pact, and they are first and foremost signifiers of the pact they constitute as the signified; this is plainly seen in the fact that the objects of symbolic exchange—vases made to remain empty, shields too heavy to be carried, sheaves that will dry out, lances that are thrust into the ground—are all destined to be useless, if not superfluous by their very abundance.¹²

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We can see how in this passage Lacan is trying to mythically imagine the moment when those objects that had been useful and instrumentally linked to their

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI. D’un Autre à l’autre*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 16.

¹¹ Jacques-Alain Miller, “From an Other to the other II”, *Lacanian Ink*, no. 30, Fall 2007, p. 34.

¹² Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, New York, London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, p. 225.

purpose were emptied out of their instrumentality and became symbols. Those vases, shields, sheaves, lances, in order to become gifts, and therefore in order to become the symbols of the pact between the Danaï and the Argonauts, have to be negated regarding their own immediate instrumentality. They have to become “made to remain empty” or “too heavy to be carried”. At the very moment when they are inscribed in a register Other than the one of immediate usefulness, we are already in the regime of language and signifier. A cut has been traced in those objects that separates them from themselves; and this cut creates the space in order to re-articulate their own inscription in the register of the symbolic. The signifier, according to Lacan, is able to create a gap in the being-in-itself of the metaphysics of presence where entities exist in their pure wholeness. This gap – this gesture of pure negativity – creates the condition of possibility for the contingent re-articulation of reality. Reality in this sense has a gap, a non-coincidence with itself, it is split by the bar of signification that – with a gesture of separation – breaks into pieces what before had been enclosed in itself: now it is scission, deferment, opening to its possible signification.¹³ This asymmetry in the order of reality was made possible by this self-referential and void gesture of language/rupture that was able to block the chain of causal links according to which “what it is” cannot but be “what it is”. As it is in the mythical pre-capitalist community where production cannot but be a *re*-production: where a community cannot but remain the same at the end of the cycle. We can see here how many resonances this passage has with the Marxian problem of the *surplus*. The surplus at this level, in purely abstract terms (which is still not capitalism), has in fact the possibility of opening up a new domain of production where, beyond the reproduction and the satisfaction of basic needs, a new dimension of novelty can be possible.¹⁴

3.

But is it that simple to open up a dimension of novelty? And how does this dimension of the surplus rearticulate the question of the *purpose* of labour? What

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company 2006, pp. 7-21.

¹⁴ “Surplus value in general is value in excess of the equivalent. The equivalent, by definition, is only the identity of value with itself. [...] What appears as surplus value on capital’s side appears identically on the worker’s side as surplus labour in excess of his requirements as worker, hence in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive. The great historic quality of capital is to create this *surplus labour*, superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use-value, mere subsistence.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1993, p. 325.

should this surplus be used for? And which direction should this change in the community take (given that there is a strict dialectic between the production of use-values and the re-articulation of the individual or collective human being that is working in this very production)? And what are in fact the consequences of the irruption of the surplus into the domain of production?

Marx himself demonstrated a very dialectical relation with the idea of the surplus. In the *Communist Manifesto* there are many passages at the beginning of the text where this extraordinary outburst of surplus productivity made possible by bourgeois society is welcomed as positive news:

We see, therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of Exchange. [...] The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part. [...] The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors”, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”. [...] The bourgeoisie has disclosed how it came to pass that the brutal display of vigour in the Middle Ages, which reactionaries so much admire, found its fitting complement in the most slothful indolence. It has been the first to show what man’s activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades. The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.¹⁵

But of course, as soon as we can witness the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, this very surplus is in a way occupied by a different form of *purpose*, which is none other than the pure accumulation of abstract value, and therefore money. Already in Chapter 7 of *Das Kapital*, we can see that in the second section of the chapter Marx addresses the issue of the process of valorization, and the way through which this very first mythical part will find its own historical exposure in the capitalist mode of production. From an analysis devoted only to the

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1985.

question of the production of use-values, we pass to the dark reality of the management of this very surplus: “capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value. The worker produces not for himself, but for capital.”¹⁶ It is not that in capitalism we witness a total eclipse of use-values: in the sphere of circulation we still have products that are exchanged according to the satisfaction of needs. But underlying this sphere of the distribution of different commodities according to the demand of the buyers, we find one and only one drive: that of the abstract accumulation of money. The capitalist in fact is totally indifferent toward the commodity that he is going to sell on the market. The only *purpose* of the production and exchange of this item on the market is the accumulation of more money than anticipated at first in order to buy the labour-power and the means of production:

The product – the property of the capitalist – is a use-value, as yarn, for example, or boots. But although boots are, to some extent, the basis of social progress, and our capitalist is decidedly in favour of progress, he does not manufacture boots for their own sake. Use-value is certainly not *la chose qu’on aime pour lui-même* in the production commodities. Use-values are produced by capitalists only because and in so far as they form the material substratum of exchange-value, are the bearers of exchange-value. [...] His aim is to produce not only a use-value, but a commodity; not only use-value, but value: and not just value; but also surplus-value.¹⁷

From the situation at the beginning of the chapter where we have a definition of labour according to the purpose of its product (its use-value), here we find the reverse situation: “the concept of productive worker therefore implies not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of his work, but also a specifically social relation of production, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the worker as capital’s direct means of valorization.” The worker is therefore in the end included in a process which he is no longer in control of. The *purpose* is totally in control of the capitalist drive for abstract accumulation.

Here we see the crucial relationship between concrete labour and abstractness in the capitalist mode of production. As has been pointed out by Roberto Finelli, the

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, p. 644.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

main difference between the Marx of *Manuscripts* and the Marx of *Das Kapital* revolves around the question of the relationship between concrete and abstract. In the Marx of *Das Kapital* – the one that Finelli considered useful in order to understand capitalism – Marx considered as his main object of inquiry not a humanistic subject with his tale of alienation and reappropriation, but the constitution of a pure abstracted wealth as social totality: capital as coextensive with its incessant accumulation. As is pointed out in Chapter 7: “Here we are no longer concerned with the quality, the character, and the content of the labour, but merely with its quantity. And this simply requires to be calculated.”¹⁸ For the first time in history the main protagonist of the totality of social reproduction is an abstract and non-anthropomorphic subject that subordinated the entire world of use-values and concrete human subjectivities to the quantitative and impersonal logic of its accumulation.¹⁹ Therefore what is at stake in capitalism is no longer labour as an activity (and its process of alienation in the machine), but the exploitation of labour-power in order to produce a greater quantity of pure abstracted wealth (and therefore an integrated connection between machine-and-labour-power aimed at the process of valorization). The question of the *purpose* of human activity and labour has been completely hijacked by the aimless and purposeless self-reflective drive to create more money from money through the appropriation of the activity of labour-power. The self-revolutionizing potential of bourgeois capitalism welcomed by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* revealed its true face: the opening of the possibility given by the surplus has been already shut down.

4.

In order to better understand the abstract nature of the capitalist mode of production, we should turn our attention to the studies developed by the Marxist economist Riccardo Bellofiore and to his theory of abstract labour. His research started in the Eighties as a response to the rejection of the Marxian theory of value in the debate following Sraffa’s model, according to which the determination of prices in the sphere of circulation would make a Marxian theory of value in the production process irrelevant.²⁰ Bellofiore indeed argued that the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁹ Roberto Finelli, ““Globalizzazione””: una questione astratta ma non troppo ». *L’Ospite Ingrato. Annuario del Centro Studi Franco Fortini*, no. 3, 2000, pp. 113–130.

²⁰ As a reference for Bellofiore’s work, see: Riccardo Bellofiore, Roberto Fineschi (ed.), *Re-reading Marx. New Perspectives after the Critical Edition*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009;

Marxian theory of value should be reconsidered as a macroeconomic theory of exploitation *in* the realm of production, with a strong emphasis on the role of money not only in the sphere of circulation, but in the entirety of the process. Therefore value, money, and abstract labour should be considered together as part of a unique development where the monetary essence of the product is implicit in the production process and becomes explicit only in the sphere of circulation with its transformation into money.

Production and exchange are not two separate realms, but *they are a different temporality of one and only one event that should be considered together*: the transformation of living labour into money and therefore capital. As Marx stated in Chapter 7:

This whole course of events, the transformation of money into capital, both takes place and does not take place in the sphere of circulation. It takes place through the mediation of circulation because it is conditioned by the purchase of the labour-power in the market; it does not take place in circulation because what happens there is only an introduction to the valorization process, which is entirely confined to the sphere of production. And so “everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds”.²¹

The abstract nature of labour is not something that happens only in the market through a process of equalization (from the concreteness of the product to the abstractedness of the money), but it is a dynamic that takes into account the entire process from the production to the exchange.

According to Bellofiore, capitalism should be understood as a *monetary economy of production*: money is phantasmatically already there even before the exchange, *within* the commodity as an absolute value. After it is sold on the market, it *morphs* into concrete money (money is the phenomenal form that value has to assume at the end of the circle in order to become capital).

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Riccardo Bellofiore, “La teoria marxiana del valore come teoria macromonetaria dello sfruttamento: una rassegna ragionata della letteratura”, in Roberto Fineschi (ed.), *Karl Marx. Rivisitazioni e prospettive*, Milano: Mimesis 2005, pp. 139–166; Riccardo Bellofiore, “Quelli del lavoro vivo”, in Riccardo Bellofiore (ed.), *Da Marx a Marx? Un bilancio dei marxismi italiani del Novecento*, Roma: Manifestolibri 2007, pp. 197–250.

²¹ Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, p. 302.

The key to understanding this process is the relationship between capital and labour-power. The capitalist goes into the market twice: first at the beginning of the cycle in order to buy the means of production and the labour-power. And then at the end, in order to sell his commodity. When he goes into the market at the beginning, like any other buyers, he buys the right to use the use-value of his commodities. This does not constitute a problem in the case of the means of production (which are commodities like any other; once he has bought them, the capitalist can do whatever he wants with them). With labour-power, on the contrary, there are two tricks:

1) The capitalist found a commodity whose use-value is “labour itself”: that is why he is able to extract from this commodity more value than is contained in the price he paid to purchase it (i.e. the cost of the reproduction of this very commodity). Labour-power is a *self-referential commodity*: a commodity whose use-value is the creation of commodities. A commodity that creates another (more!) commodity out of itself (like a magic hat that things can continuously come out of it).

2) The capitalist bought the right to use the use-value of his commodity, but the use-value of the commodity of labour-power remained attached to the worker himself. Differently than the magic hat, other commodities do not spontaneously come out of the commodity of labour-power. The capitalist needs to put labour-power into the production process, and he has to force it to work in order to create more value.

We have here the distance that separates labour-power from living-labour, i.e. the distance that separates the capacity (or the *possibility*) to work from working as an *activity*. The translation from the possibility to create value to its actuality is all contained in this unsurpassable contradiction. If we go back to the definition of labour that is given at the beginning of Chapter 7, the one that revolves around the notion of *purpose*, we can see here that what is alienated from the labour-power is exactly this qualitative dimension. The way the worker entertains his relationship with nature (adapting the materials of nature to his own needs) – the possible transformation of nature, and at the same time the transformation of himself – does not belong to him anymore. Bellofiore here mentions a very effective formula of Claudio Napoleoni: “[Labour-power] is a very particular commodity, because it is not an object belonging to the worker, *it is the worker himself*

in one of his own particular determinations, i.e. his being a labour-power.”²² An object can belong to different persons because it can be transferable. The commodity of labour-power cannot be transferred to the capitalist, it will always remain attached to the worker himself. In a typical inversion proper to capitalism (like in the fetishism of commodities), we have here a situation where from the worker himself being the bearer of labour-power, we have the commodity of labour-power becoming the bearer of that unfortunate appendix known as the worker.

This characteristic of non-being separatable from the body of the worker is crucial in order to understand the status of surplus in the capitalist mode of production. For the capitalist, being in possession of the labour-power does not mean only to possess that surplus that will enable him to valorize the capital anticipated at the beginning of the process. It means also (and above all) to *control the very qualitative dimension of the production*. The surplus is a quantitative object only at the end of the process when it has already morphed into money. *While* the process is happening, it is a *qualitative* object that cannot be *separated* from the body of the worker, from his subjective dimension, but also from the qualitative dimension of the production process itself (a production process that – we should always remember – is totally uninterested in the production of use-value aimed at the satisfaction of needs; it is interested in the production of use-value only because sooner or later they will morph themselves into money and abstract wealth). Bellofiore explained this in a very enlightening and clear way:

Exploitation should not be understood as the appropriation of a surplus-product or surplus-labour – phenomena largely present also in pre-capitalist societies –; it should rather be considered as command and control, direct and indirect, over the *entirety* of labour in order to obtain surplus-labour. [...] This is the peculiar circumstance of capitalism, its specific difference.²³

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We could say in the end that the control, management, and administration of the surplus-production (the way the capitalist is able to make it productive to accumulate wealth) means, in the end, not only controlling a certain time of the life of the workers (the time in excess of the labour-time necessary to reproduce the

²² Claudio Napoleoni, *Lezioni sul capitolo sesto inedito di Marx*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 1972, p. 55.

²³ Riccardo Bellofiore, “Marx rivisitato: capitale, lavoro, sfruttamento”, *Trimestre*, nos. 1-2, 1996, p. 60.

use-value of the labour-power): i.e. the amount of money that should be given to them if only the capitalist would give them what they are entitled to. This would be true only if we reduced the surplus to a pure quantitative size that could be re-distributed in fair terms. But this is not the path that Marx takes, given that he always repeats that the exchange between capital and labour-power in the market occurred on fair terms (“on the one hand, the daily sustenance of labour-power costs only half a day’s labour, while on the other hand the very same labour-power can remain effective, can work, during a whole day [...] this circumstance in a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injustice towards the seller”²⁴). The problem is, again, *qualitative*: the appropriation of the surplus *conditions the entire field of production and it is impossible to be localized in a certain place of the process*. Once the surplus has been hijacked and commanded by the abstract rule of capitalist infinite accumulation, there is no compensation possible for the worker. The only way to re-appropriate the *purpose* and the qualitative dimension of use-value is to overthrow the capitalist command of the surplus from its own critical point: the gap between labour-power and living-labour.

5.

The capitalist mode of production will never be able to overcome this rule: every cycle of accumulation is possible only through the activation of this interstitial space between labour-power and living-labour. Abstracted wealth will always be able to accumulate itself only through a descent into the production process where labour-power will need to be put into the production process in order to create commodities aimed at transforming into money in the market. It is this very distance that separates labour-power from living-labour, this obstacle impossible to overcome – this very topological fold that characterizes the figure of the worker between labour-power and living-labour, between commodity and class – that is the *symptom* of the capitalist mode of production. A symptom in psychoanalysis is what makes a subject suffer, but it is also the possibility to re-articulate a subjective position. And it is only through the political “working through” within this very symptomatic contradiction that the re-articulation of a different mode of production can take place.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, p. 301

It is at this level that it would be possible to trace a common ground (a homology) between the reflection of Jacques Lacan on the notion of *object a* and the capitalist issue of the surplus-value (as Lacan pointed out in Seminar XVI): what they both share is being a figure of the *surplus*. According to Jacques Lacan, language dug a hole in the human animal, making it a *parlêtre*: not characterized by equilibrium, wholeness and being-One, but fragmented, split, uncontrollable, as happens in the body of psychoanalysis, where the symptoms do not respond to the organization of a centralized consciousness. What Lacan defined as being characterized by a lack in the early stages of his teaching become afterwards an un-localizable *surplus*: impossible to find in any specific place, but at the same time overly present in the entirety of the libidinal space.

The first consequence is the experience of *jouissance* in the human body: an enjoyment that cannot be expelled from the body but that actually commands and subjects the body itself. The constant and restless dynamism of *jouissance* encircles the impossible contours of an un-localizable object. And it is because of this object that it is impossible to trace the difference in the *parlêtre* between the pleasure principle and the deadly *jouissance*: the two are inextricably intertwined with each other. What would be the right measure of sexuality, oral drives, etc.? What would be the difference between what is explainable only in terms of survival and what in terms of excess? Where would be the limit of one and of the other? As in the qualitative dimension of surplus-value in capitalism, the *object a* in psychoanalysis in the end over-determines the entirety of the subjective position. There are no products that can incorporate the pure re-production of the survival needs separated from the dimension of the unexplainable surplus: production is inextricably related to both at the same time. It is for that reason that the mythical society of pure reproduction could not have existed historically, but it is nevertheless posited as a logical precondition. The fantasy is that the difference between survival and excess can be traced in order to domesticate and symbolize this very excess. But the object always objects to this successful symbolization, making it impossible but at the same time always attempted.

The object of surplus is in the end everywhere but there is not a single place where it can be definitely grasped. It is, in fact, nothing other than the different morphing figures of desire. In Seminar XVI Lacan does not trace an analogy between the function of *object a* and surplus-value (as if it were a comparison or an external relation between the two), he is tracing a *homology*. Capitalism, in fact,

does not represent the same structure on a different level; in the end it activates the very same *jouissance* for the purpose of its incessant drive for accumulation. Libidinal logic is characterized by being aimless and purposeless, exactly as in capitalism, it engenders restless, infinite, and autistic productivity. There is no reason, no aim, no purpose: not even use-values, which in capitalism become a pure transitory embodiment of value. It is only a pure self-referential circle of production for the sake of accumulation (i.e. for the sake of itself).

Therefore, following Lacan, would this mean that we can only surrender to the invincible power of *jouissance*? In our libidinal life as well as in the social sphere where the discourse of the capitalist that incarnates this subjective position seems to be unbeatable? A life absorbed in pure *jouissance* is a life that is not possible to live (in Freudian terms, a drive that goes toward death). *Jouissance* can have in some cases the semblance of an external superego, but also the plasticity of something that can be remodelled, re-shaped, and morphed into something else. According to psychoanalysis, there is only one door through which we would be able to make this re-articulation possible: the symptom. And wouldn't it perhaps be the same also for capitalism? Wouldn't "working through" the symptom of capitalism (the contradiction between labour-power and living-labour) be the only way to remodel another and a different subjective position that is not caught in the *cul-de-sac* of the autistic drive of purposeless productivity? Might there not be some other ways to create a space for a different desire and productivity to emerge, outside of the subjective position of the discourse of the capitalist, and outside of capitalism itself?