

I

Political Economy and the Proper

The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few. In this sense, the theory of Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.

—*The Communist Manifesto*, 223

[S]ystematic community, the deliberate negation of property, is conceived under the direct influence of the property prejudice; and it is property that is to be found at the root of all communist theories. . . . The members of a community, it is true, have no property, but the community is the proprietor, and proprietor not only of goods but of persons and wills. It is because of this principle of sovereign property, that labor, which should be imposed on man only by nature, becomes a human commandment.

—*QP*, 203; *WP*, 196

Although the recent texts on community cannot be reduced to the classical debate between Anarchists and Marxists, it would be wrong to overlook it. To varying degrees each philosopher appeals to the spirit of the anarchic aphorism—no gods, no masters, *and* no property. In fact, each has taken up and pushed this mantra well beyond simply reversing and opposing gods, masters, and property. Nancy continues to search for ways to deconstruct Christianity, Agamben has written several archaeological expositions of economic theology,

and since the 1980s Esposito has sought to elaborate on various impolitical fissures that will disrupt the enclosure caused by political theology. The second precept is largely, but not exclusively, addressed through their critiques of metaphysical philosophy, especially the notion of the subject. In the substantive chapters on each of them, I return to the first two tenets repeatedly, but for the purposes of the opening chapter of this book, I want to focus on the third, which is at the forefront of each of their texts on community. Each attempts to conceive of community beyond the *dispositif* of the proper. Over the course of this chapter, I provide a rough outline of the rise of this political economy in the West, starting with Locke.

I have chosen to start with political economy before turning to Heidegger's ontology of the proper in the second chapter to demonstrate how significant this tradition is for the texts on community, especially Esposito's and Nancy's.

One cannot ignore the large shadow cast by Heidegger on the texts about community, as his work serves as the primary philosophical resource each draws from, especially Nancy and Agamben, but to commence with Heidegger would lead us down a treacherous path. For starters, we would have to deal with his retrograde politics, a problem that has proven to be a source of great consternation in the secondary literature on each of the three philosophers.¹ Heidegger's critics also charge him with obscurantism, a charge that has also been laid on our three main philosophers. Étienne Balibar, for example, praises Esposito and Nancy for their rigorous deconstruction of the role of property in the constitution political borders in an essay called "Citizenship without Community" in *We, The People of Europe* (2004). Elsewhere, however, he takes issue with those who seek to deconstruct the proper, notably Derrida. Such efforts, he argues, represent a shallow, postmodern, and, by implication, ideological defense of the liberal archetype of the possessive individual. What else can come from Derrida's call for "ex-appropriation" than Heideggerian wordplay, such as that between "*Eigen*, *Eigentum*, *Eigenschaft*, and *Ereignis*" (2002, 313)? Heideggerian eschatology, he continues, may lead to "an *Enteignung* [dispossession], a depropriation or disappropriation of the subject, of what is 'proper' to the subject (*Eigen*)," but, he asks, how formidable is political resistance when its source is etymology? To

oppose appropriation as the lever for revolutionary social changes, he concludes, is a de facto promotion of a radical form of alienation, *abyssal alienation*, by which he means a radicalization of difference (2002, 315).

It is precisely the terms of this critique that Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy address, not solely in the so-called “jargon of authenticity,” but in their political and economic horizons. Balibar’s critique goes beyond simply indicting them for being Heideggerians, because it presses up against a much broader problem that each philosopher has struggled with: trying to formulate a type of politics that avoids, rather than counters, the trappings of the *dispositif* of the proper. Nancy’s and Agamben’s vehement opposition to formulating political prescriptions and ascribing to any operative type political practice, for example, has become a sticking point among their critics.² We might even call these critiques updated versions of the longstanding dogma held by Marxists that the anarchic refusal to combine economic appropriation with political appropriation (i.e., the state must be seized along with the factories), leads to an utterly impotent form of politics. Each of the three main philosophers we examine in this book, however, has provided a litany of tools for rethinking precisely how the dogmatic call for appropriation, or worse, re-appropriation, represents nothing more than an ideological defense of the *dispositif* of the proper. What if politics are no longer conceived in the aporetic dialectic of alienation and appropriation? Moreover, what if community itself is no longer constituted as something that is proper to those who belong and thus improper to those who don’t?

Before we get to these questions, much context must be provided. Over the course of this and the next chapter I have selected a handful of themes that must be covered before I turn to the substantive investigations of the three philosophers. What follows is not a comprehensive overview of the broader problematic of proper, but rather a rough sketch. In this chapter, I provide a brief account of the role of the political economy in modern Western political theory. Then I examine, in broad strokes, the three authors’ general critique of the role of the proper in formulating community. I end by addressing their common goal of dis-containing community. In the second chapter, I return to each of these issues, explicitly addressing them in relation to Heidegger’s ontological philosophy.

I. The Proprietary Confusion

If we were to pinpoint a central moment in the genealogy of this dispositif, we would have to begin when the West set out to colonize the rest of the world. Pope Alexander VI's Papal Bull of 1493, the enclosure movement in England, and the social contract tradition epitomized by John Locke's theory of property, are three formative moments in what is now an unrelenting and all-encompassing process. Today, we are well beyond the point of "primitive accumulation" as the relentless drive to appropriate things has engulfed everything that has stood in its path. In our contemporary neoliberal era, we are running out of objects to convert into property.³ Very few are immune to the proper, as conservatives, liberals, and communists alike are dogmatically committed to this now hegemonic dispositif. At its core rests the modern model of the proprietary subject. Although Hugo Groitius was the first to articulate this subject, Locke's version became the archetype that we still employ today.⁴ In paragraph 27 of his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke famously claimed:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a *property* in his own *person*: this no body has any right to but himself. The *labour* of his body and the *work* of his hands, we may say are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state of nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *property*. It being by him removed from the common state of nature hath placed it in, it hath by this *labour* something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this *labour* being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.

Locke's liberal doctrine of property represented a radical break from the two conventional doctrines of his time—"acquisition"/"conquest" and "legal division" (Arendt 1998, 110). Property and ownership had been viewed as human inventions that were supported by human laws, but Locke argued that the human is by nature a proprietary being. There are two essential elements in this new model of the

subject, which has had drastic effects on modern thought: he elevated the personal as the principle domain of property, and he created a stark division between the proper and the common.

First, above and beyond the *animal laborans* or *Homo faber*, Locke's human is a *Homo approprians*. She is not just an owner of herself, but also of all that she produces through her labor. This formulation established a modern paradigm of property, which grounded ownership in the idiom. Second, *Homo approprians* is also an anticommunal model of the human. Prior to his reversal, the natural world was largely viewed as a common world. In the commons there were no distinctions between things held or not held because everything stood in its preappropriated and natural state. Everything could be shared and put to common use. In Locke's formulation, however, the proper is constituted through the very negation of the common as uncommon. This uncommon orientation rests at the very core, perhaps the essence of the proper.

Both these elements are present in the central activity of the appropriating human: *taking* things and rendering them one's own. Locke claims, for example, that property begins with the act of "taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state nature leaves it in" (1980, §28). Taking a good from the common, however, is not enough to constitute it as private property, for this can only occur when laborers "add" to it. This appropriative action therefore consists of two moments—first, taking something from the commons, and second, converting it into a fabricating thing. In the process, part of the subject is transferred into the thing, which according to Locke is enough to claim the thing as an extension of one's own private sphere. The thing becomes a part of that person, and therefore the appropriator should be entitled to exclusive ownership and enjoyment of the thing, with the proviso that one should never accumulate excessive amounts of property. The act of appropriation not only "inclose[s] it [the appropriated thing] from the common" (1980, §32), he argues, but it also creates a private boundary that "excludes the common right of other men" (1980, §27). It constitutes an "enclosure," "boundary," or "distinct territory" that shields the private proprietor from the commons (1980, §37). The liberal state, therefore, has a duty to protect the "private rights" of those who bear "private property," and not just the commons (1980, §28). The state, he famously announces, must serve the "mutual *preservation* of the lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, *property*" (1980,

§123) or simply “*the preservation of their property*” (1980, §124). It is this very extension of property to include not just estates (belongings) but also lives and liberties that becomes the *raison d'état* of the modern liberal state. Locke's invasive model of property is, of course, formulated as a late defense of the enclosure movement. It would take a few more centuries for the idiom to completely appropriate the proper and the proper the idiom, but Locke set the wheels of this proprietary confusion in motion.⁵

* * *

In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt claims that when Locke extended property to include the personal, he created a menacing confusion that continues to confound modern political thought and politics. He gave the modern state a contradictory mandate: to protect a person's right to invade and to protect a person's right to an exclusive domain. On the one hand, the state was elevated as the guardian of private property. It was charged with the role of preventing the commons from further intruding into the public sphere (1998: 111). On the other hand, he failed to distinguish between political and economic rights because his notion of property is all-encompassing. Thus, the state was tasked with defending private property in general.

From Arendt's republican perspective, Locke's economization of politics created a major impasse. To become a genuine *zoon politikon*, there must be a clear separation between the *idios kosmos* and the *koinos kosmos*. The *oikos* is supposed to shield the *idios kosmos* from the common, and political beings must have their own personal space to reflect and develop on their own accord. In capitalism, however, the private is completely exaggerated. Property over things is confused with property over one's person, and the state is obligated to preserve private property in general. The net result is a pervasion of privacy. Modern states, she contends, privilege the “privative trait of privacy,” mere privation, which is a kind of privacy that the Greeks attributed to “idiots” (ibid.). This is a far cry from the positive sense of the private, which the Greeks referred to as “the privacy of ‘one's own’ [*idion*]” (1998, 38). This is her famous thesis that in modern societies the blending of the public and the private spheres leads to an erosion of both. When the *koinos* is mixed with the *idios*, neither performs its proper function. If everything is property, we no longer have a common world, but a

social world. Put in Fenichel Pitkin's terms, the big "blob" of the social destroys the common (1998).

What is striking about Arendt's critique of the conflation of the proper with the idiom is her subtle reflection on the modern paradigm of political economy. When the political is dominated by the economic, the result is mass political privation. Moreover, when property is retranslated into political terms—the possession of the fundamental democratic right to individual autonomy—the political subject represents a mirror image of the economic private proprietor. Beyond Locke's appeal to the *animal laborans* as the source of property, the central political conflict for *Homo approprians* is based on property and, of course, its central political-economic activity is appropriation. The conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletarians is one between bad versus good forms of appropriation. If the private appropriation of the bourgeoisie is simultaneously economic and political, the only way the collective form of appropriation by the proletarians can be truly revolutionary is if their appropriative response is likewise economic and political. Either way, appropriation becomes the medium of human relations. "The body," she argues, "becomes indeed the quintessence of all property because it is the only thing one could not share even if one wanted to" (1998, 112). Yet, she argues that the body is ideally a private entity that cannot be divided or shared (*koinos*). When the state regulates appropriation, the economic and political senses of property are confused, and the idiom is confused with the proper. This confusion between the economic and the political is addressed by Agamben and Esposito in their biopolitical writings, which I return to in later chapters, but for now it is necessary to focus on the classical accounts of this problem. Although it is not possible to cover the entire literature concerning Locke's conflation of the proper with the idiom, or, to put it differently, his proprietary confusion, it is necessary to address a few introjections that will help set the stage for the three substantive chapters in this book. I briefly examine the early critiques of this confusion raised by Marx and Proudhon. Then I will briefly turn to C. B. Macpherson's and Étienne Balibar's writings on this problem.

* * *

Marx and Proudhon actually held very similar positions on the proprietary confusion. Both were critical of Antoine Destutt de Tracy's sensualist reading of Locke. In a rarely cited passage in the second

part of the first book of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels consider the distinction between property (*Eigentum*) and personal peculiarity (*persönlichen Eigentümlichkeit*) (1998, 245–48; 1954, 210–12). They criticize Destutt de Tracy and Max Stirner for reducing personal peculiarity to property. Such an etymological reduction, they contend, represents an ideological defense of private property. Destutt de Tracy, they argue, serves the interests of private property when he treats “individuality” as an “inalienable property.” By holding that “*propriété, individualité* and *personnalité*” are “identical,” they claim, the “the me [*moi* in French] includes the mine [*mein* in German]” (1998, 245; 1954, 210). Personality (the me) is confused with private property (the mine). Marx and Engels dismiss this simple *jeu de mots* of *propriété* and *personnalité* as a “liberal” interpretation of socialism. They also accost Stirner for his *Wortspiel*, which is really a *Wortverdrehung* (twisting, distortion of words) of *Eigentum* (property) and *Eigenheit* (peculiarity or character). Stirner carries this “theoretical nonsense” to the extreme point when he “declares” that the *Eigen* (proper), which he reduces “to the concept of property,” is “an eternal truth.” He thus provides an ideological defense of private property when he exploits “the etymological connection between the words *Eigentum* and *Eigen*” (1998, 246–47; 1954, 211). Such etymological nonsense, they note with a berating tone, leads Stirner to reduce the indispensable “to have” to private property. Could one not “have a stomach ache” in a communist society, they ask, without reducing it to the register of property (1998, 246; 1954, 211)?

Marx and Engels argue that those who reduce the person to property weaken the communist cause. Private property would be enlisted to defend the personal against the forces of communal property, but in “reality” the personal cannot be reduced to property because “I only have property insofar as I have something vendible, whereas what is peculiar to me [*meine Eigenheit*] may not be vendible at all” (1998, 247; 1954, 211). Although “private property” has “alienated [*entfremdet*] the individuality, not only of people, but also of things” in capitalism, the distinction between property and personal peculiarity is not erased (*ibid.*). They are only indistinguishable in the worldview of the bourgeoisie, where the “sphere of synonymy” between “*propriété Eigentum und Eigenschaft*” and “*property Eigentum und Eigentümlichkeit*” appears to be a reality (1998, 248; 1954, 212).⁶ Private property becomes the common measure, that is, commodification in a double sense,

of everything.⁷ Derrida cites this passage in *Specters of Marx* and in *Margins of Philosophy*. In the earlier work, he argues that this “critique of etymologism” raises the question about “the history and value of the proper—*idion, proprium, eigen*,” which is found not only in Marx and Engels, but in “several others (Plato, Leibniz, Rousseau, etc.)” (1982, 216, fn. 13). It is not without significance, he remarks, that Marx and Engels chose to use “the proper” as their “example” in this passage.

Five years before Marx and Engels started writing *The German Ideology*, Pierre Joseph Proudhon’s *What Is Property?* was published. Proudhon argues that Destutt de Tracey made a “puerile confusion” by reproducing the metaphysical prejudice that “everything which man could call his own was identified in his mind with his person” (*QP*, 50; *WP*, 52). This “false analogy” led him to equate “possession of things” with “property in the powers of the mind and body” (*QP*, 50; *WP*, 53). It created a tautological characterization of property as “the property of the property of being a proprietor” (*QP*, 50; *WP*, 52).⁸

Destutt de Tracey’s confusion is based on a defense of the modern liberal reading of “sovereignty.” Proudhon claims that the democratic notion of sovereignty replaces the monarchic model of the grand Master with multiple self-mastering individuals. To justify self-mastery, individuals have to be conceived of as private proprietors and as sovereign masters. Liberals such as Destutt de Tracey confuse the economic with the political in order to constitute a sovereign subject. A sovereign man is treated as if he is a “proprietor even of his own faculties,” deplores Proudhon (*QP*, 50; *WP*, 53). Proudhon has two problems with this reduction.

First, the traditional concept of sovereignty as “*the power to make laws*” is a “relic of despotism” (*QP*, 28; *WP*, 30).⁹ In reference to the nineteenth-century distinction between reason and passions, he argues that democratic sovereignty is based on a simple shift in the rule of passions from one person to several (*QP*, 27; *WP*, 29). As the mere “expression of the will,” sovereignty is inseparable from the passions. It is not based on justice, which appeals to “law” as the “rule of reason.” Therefore, he concludes, the events of 1789 were merely a slight “progress[ion]” in sovereignty, not a “revolution,” and Rousseau’s social contract, based on the general will, represents a continuation of the antiquated sovereign paradigm (*QP*, 28–29; *WP*, 29–30).

Second, by failing to distinguish between “acquired” things and “innate” qualities, the “right of property” is generalized to include the

“right of [personal] domain” (*QP*, 49–51; *WP*, 52–53). Idiomatic qualities are thus reduced to the judicial “right of domain over a thing” (*QP*, 49; *WP*, 52).¹⁰ Beyond the linguistic confusion of property qua quality and property qua economic thing, he is also troubled by how this operation draws from the metaphor of the self-mastering subject. He dismisses this by raising the aporia of self-reflection to argue that one cannot “own,” “dominate,” even “control” one’s faculties as a “sovereign master”; rather, one can only make “use of them” (*QP*, 50; *WP*, 53). Moreover, since a despot is satiated by self-satisfaction, she is dominated by her senses rather than intellectually in control of them. Therefore democratic political economy represents a pluralization of despotism.¹¹

There is a second strain in Proudhon’s critique of the property prejudice that brings us back to Locke’s *Homo approprians*. In his proclamation that “*la propriété, c’est le vol!* [“property is theft!”],” he does not just challenge the bad form of appropriation, like Marx, but he also questions how property itself is constituted. In a subsection of chapter 5 called “Characteristics of Community and Property,” Proudhon argues that the social contract represents nothing more than an ideological tool devised by conspiring thieves who aim to enhance their private interests at the expense of the commons (*QP*, 1867; *WP*, 2005). This critique has been repeated many times by social and political theorists. Rousseau, for example, admitted that the social contract served as a weak substitute for communal relationships.¹² Proudhon’s critique is based on a distinction he makes between classical and modern notions of property. He argues that the modern notion of property creates a particular type of prejudice that is antagonistic to community. With romantic undertones, he appears to be advocating for a resurrection of the classical model. Classically, he argues, property was viewed as something that was *held back* from others. To appropriate and convert something into property was an exclusionary act. It blocked others from having direct access to the good. Property thus was conceived as an exclusive enclosure that was antagonistic to the commons. On the flip side, the commons was conceived as a place that was open and inclusive. It was a place where everyone was expected to unreservedly share with each other. In the commons, people were less inclined to hold things back to be used exclusively for themselves.

This is, of course, an exaggerated reading that paints a picture of the commons as the place where sharing happens in absolute terms, which

is a romanticized and problematic image of community. Yet Proudhon does appear to insinuate that the commons is the place where sharing occurs without reservations. This ideal, he claims, is present in the eighth commandment, “Thou shall not steal” (*QP* 205, *WP* 198). “The Hebrews,”¹³ he continues, understood *lo thi-gnob* as “‘Thou shall not steal,’ that is, thou shall not hold back/retain [*tu ne retiendras*], thou shall not put anything aside for thyself.” To be openly received into the commons, then, one must openly “bring all that he has” without “secretly” holding back a portion for himself. In other words, nothing is set apart, withdrawn, hidden, or concealed because the commons is ideally an open place. To enter the commons, one must *let go* of possessions and proceed with open hands. Letting go in this formulation is an activity that releases one’s grasp over the good, which is different than making a gift of one’s goods as if they were things that could be offered as a contribution, like a tax.

Proudhon’s main concern in this passage is the possession of goods or objects. He did not carry this analysis as far as contemporary theorists of community have by extending the opening to include individual identity. Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy summon the powers of dis-containment to the fullest extent possible to thoroughly disrupt the appropriative disposition of the modern subject, whereas Proudhon was merely concerned with highlighting the privative orientation of the modern model of property. The three contemporary theorists also have Heidegger’s distinction between the primary modalities of holding and letting go to draw from, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. Nevertheless, Proudhon’s critique of the property prejudice provides an interesting opening for challenging the standard model of *Homo approprians* as the creature who is defined by its *capacity to take things*.

The classical model of exclusionary property oscillated between holding and letting go, and only the modern model treats property as invasive. It oscillates between the modalities of taking and giving. Proudhon argues that the primary source of this particular conception of private property is thievery. His proof for this claim is etymologically based. In Latin, he claims, theft (*le vol*) is either referred to as *fur* (“I carry away”/“*j’emporte*”) or *latro* (“I conceal myself”/“*je me cache*”) (*QP*, 205; *WP*, 198). His reference to carrying away is consistent with most Indo-European languages, which treat theft as an action that carries away (*deferre* is the root of “differ” and “defer”) something

from the commons. In this thieving sense of property, property is no longer constituted as holding something back from the commons in an exclusionary manner, but as taking something from the commons for oneself. It is an invasive action. This sense is also present in the second term. *Latro* translates as “robber” or “bandit.” It stems from the Ancient Greek *latron*, who was a hired, noncitizen mercenary or anyone else who provided a service for pay. In legal terminology, “conceal” (*concelare*) is synonymous, but only indirectly connected, with *latitare*, which is an act of hiding away from creditors, that is, to lie hidden (*latere* or “latent” in English). Like the differing act, larceny is an act that separates a good from the commons, carries it away, and converts it into a private good. The *latro* is an economic entity without political identity. A “robber,” Proudhon argues, “is a man who conceals, carries away, and diverts a thing which does not appertain [*appartient*] to him in any manner whatsoever” (*QP*, 205; *WP*, 198).¹⁴ In this act, the thief separates, conceals, and ultimately closes herself off from the commons. Thus, in both senses the thief rips and tears the commons apart, deprives it, and then hides the stolen object in her own private *oikos*.

Proudhon even proclaims in sheer hyperbole that this modern conception of property took hold when the “*argot* of thieves” was standardized in the French language and then codified in French Law (*QP*, 205; *WP*, 198). His primary evidence is based in his misreading of the etymology of “the thief” (*le voleur*). *Voler*, he claims, derives from “*faire la vol*, from the Latin *vola*, palm of the hand, means to take [*prend*] all the tricks in a game of cards, so that the *voleur*, the thief, is the beneficiary who takes all, who gets the lion’s share” (*QP*, 205; *WP*, 198).¹⁵

Although Proudhon’s scholarship is wanting, he does provide an interesting interpretation of how property is conceived by modern liberal philosophy. He argues that the property prejudice leads us to treat property as something that is invasive and thus constituted through the modality of taking. The invasive model of property creates a new image of the commons. In the classical model, ownership derives from holding things back from the commons. The commons was not conceived of as the container of property, but as a place without property that was open and inclusive. But with the modern property prejudice and the invasive activity of *Homo approprians*, we end up with a perverted image of the commons. Common property is perpetually in conflict with private property. To protect or even enhance common property, it must invade

and appropriate the private. But this is a proprietary, thus privative, notion of the commons, which is closed, exclusionary, and in the end uncommon.¹⁶

Today we really cannot speak of a commons, but of a public. In neoliberal discourse, the state steals from private owners to enhance the public. Nowhere is this reversal more apparent than in the neoliberal discourse of “taxpayers.” A taxpayer, as opposed to a citizen, must pay a tribute on behalf of the public. Since private property reigns, the tribute is taken from the taxpayer. Politicians employ this rhetoric to continue their attack on the public sector and public property. But even mainstream left-wing political parties have succumbed to this reversal. When they demurely speak of taking taxes from the taxpayers, they justify it on the grounds that the taxes will be used in the interest of the public; in other words, they will be given back to the public. It is received not as a gift, but as a return on the investment.

* * *

Notable social democratic interpreter of Locke, C. B. Macpherson, sheds additional light on the proprietary confusion. In *The Political Theory of Individualism*, he argues that seventeenth-century liberal democratic theory was based on the notion that an individual has a “possessive quality.” The individual was conceived “as essentially the *proprietor* of his own *person* or *capacities*, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as a part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potential, was read back into the nature of the individual. The individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is *proprietor* of his *person* and *capacities*” (italics added, 1962: 3). As the “possessive market society” expanded, humans were not only defined by property, but their personal property was further divided between “labour products” and “possession of personality” (1962, 48). Personal freedom and autonomy now had two new preconditions: one must be in possession of and have control over oneself, and one must own the things in one’s immediate world. This formulation resonates with Proudhon’s reading of the proprietary confusion. For Macpherson it resulted in a complementary system of rights based on

property. The right to possess private property in things could only be secured when complemented by the right to possess one's own person. In advanced capitalism, this confusion is nearly complete, because now the possessive individual is conceived solely in the narrow sense of economic property (1978). Like Arendt, he partially attributes this reduction to how labor is treated as if it is one's "own" and exclusive property (1975, 97).

As a representative of the New Left discourse of the 1960s and '70s, Macpherson sought a revised solution for socialism. He argued that this could only be accomplished by reversing the liberal framework of property. Property must be treated as a "right to not be excluded"; thus, the "means of labour" should become a "non-exclusive right" (1975, 98–99). Macpherson's claim rests on a distinction between property over things and property over oneself. Things should be distributed and shared across the community in a fair and just manner. Individual capacities, however, are personal and separate. They should not be confused with property over things.

Macpherson's solution falls within the "technological determinism thesis" Marx employed in the *Grundrisse* when he speculated that automated production could put an end to hard labor. Many in the New Left advanced this position in their euphoric celebration of the postindustrial society.¹⁷ Advances in industry gave rise, some thought, to a postscarcity era where the basic necessities for life could be provided to everyone. Industrial production could be fully "automated" and hard labor was no longer required to meet our basic needs. Humanity could be released from the shackles of labor, we could restrict the division of labor, and human capacities would no longer be converted into property. Thus, human capacities could be placed on the proper side of the political-economic scale and legally protected by the political right to individual autonomy.

Macpherson's thesis is situated in the discourses of the 1960s and '70s. We know that the utopian dream of a fully automated, utopian society where everyone was freed from the realm of necessities, the so-called knowledge economy, has not only failed to produce a liberated humanity, but it is been marked by even further economic polarization, environmental degradation, and global conflict. In Italy, the reception of the postindustrial thesis has been remarkably different than in North America. From the *Lotta Femminista* wages for housework campaign,

to the broader post-*operaismo* campaign, radical Italian theorists have sought to rethink the revolutionary formula beyond the trappings of workerism (*operaismo*), and even beyond economism. Instead of conceiving of “immaterial labour” as liberating, many have argued that today most knowledge and emotional workers make up the growing masses of the precariat. If there is to be a liberating element in this type of work, it is the liberation from the machines and the *operativity* of capitalism. This frees people from the slavery of the factories and opens new possibilities for thinking about a global movement in very different terms than the traditional theories of revolution. Hardt and Negri’s “multitude,” for example, represents a postworkerist model of the revolutionary subject. I mention this here because both Agamben and Nancy draw from this alternative reading of operativity in their work, only both do so while trying to radically disrupt the property prejudice.

* * *

In the article I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Balibar interrogates the “reversal” of possessive individualism (2002). He also seeks to rectify the division of the possessive individual into economic and political property. He begins with a lengthy exegesis on Locke’s model. At the core of this model, he argues, the possessive individual is defined as the “individual-*qua*-owner” (2002, 300). He then uses this model as a template to distinguish between three popular “reversals” of the “bourgeois worldview”: Marx, Derrida, and Rousseau. I will focus only on the first two analyses.

The template of the possessive individual, Balibar argues, acts as an ideological front that distracts us from the exigency of the “collective subject.” Since it is cut from the image of a private proprietor, we are less inclined to communal property, and thus to community. This explains why Marx appeals to “collective appropriation” to overturn private property (2002, 311). Marx’s “speculative formulation,” Balibar argues, is contingent on a “dialectical reversal”: “the expropriation of the expropriators [as] an ‘appropriation’ by society and individuals in it of the very means and forms of the conditions of appropriation—an ‘appropriation of appropriation’” (2002, 310).¹⁸ Translated, this means that when the appropriative apparatuses of capitalism—means of production, state, etc.—are collectively appropriated, and the expropriating class is itself expropriated, a new template is established

for the proper. What “appropriation of appropriation” means, however, only makes sense in light of his critique of Derrida.

Balibar situates Derrida’s “eschatological reversal” on the other end of the scale. Derrida’s “ex-appropriation” merely deconstructs the proper. Balibar’s argument rests on the same logic Marx used against Destutt de Tracy and Stirner. Derridean philosophy, he argues, is unsuitable for politics because it merely engages in the Heideggerian game of word association (2002, 313). Like Marx, he questions “the doublet of *property* and *propriety*” that results in a “more fundamental notion which is neither ap-proprietation nor ex-proprietation, but simply ‘proprietation’” (ibid.). This fits with “Heideggerian speculative etymology,” which reads the “‘event’” as “forever to come, unpredictable and incalculable” (Ibid., fn. 26).

Balibar strategically formulates this argument to deliver the normative claim that to oppose appropriation as the lever for radical transformation is to promote a radicalization of “alienation,” by which he means a radicalization of difference (2002, 315). That is, without appropriation, subjects are left in the conditions where their identities are heteronymously determined. But is either Balibar’s call for the collective appropriation of the appropriated or Derrida’s ex-propriating propriation a solution for the *Homo approprians* of modern political economy?

Proponents of political economy usually, and often unintentionally, confuse personal identity and personal property when dealing with the difference between alienation and appropriation. This is evident in the various interpretations of Marx’s essay on alienation. In *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, for example, Paul Ricoeur argues that mediated identity can only be realized through an “objectification” (*Vergegenständlichung*) process (1986, 36–39). A subject must first exteriorize its interior before it can re-interiorize it and realize its capacities. If this process is fluid and without external interruptions, the subject experiences it as “estrangement” (*Entäußerung*). Estrangement, he argues, is unavoidable given that the process takes place within our plural conditions. It only becomes “alienation” (*Entfremdung*) when an other takes a subject’s externalization, appropriates it, and then treats it as if it were their own property.¹⁹

Ricoeur exaggerates the autonomous exigency in this dialectic. A laborer becomes alienated when she internalizes the heteronymous

and falsely identifies with it as if it is her own, which prevents her from asserting herself as a species-being (1986, 41–43). Here species-being, especially in Marx's manuscript, represents the human capacity to objectify and appropriate. To develop one's capacities, cognitive and bodily, one must first objectify oneself and then, in the second instance, appropriate this objectification. When difference intervenes between the first and second instances, alienation takes place. When one's capacities are appropriated and made to serve another's interests, yet one still identifies with them as if they are one's own, one is no longer capable of autonomously asserting oneself—even if it is just “relatively autonomous,” a catch phrase signifying the aporia of the theory of autonomy. One becomes deferential, even subservient. Many labor process theorists, ranging from Gramsci's early critique of Fordism to Harry Braverman's critique of Taylorism, have pointed to the alienating effects of capitalist division of labor between those who conceptualize and those that execute tasks. One's capacities, which form the very basis of one's species-being, become heteronymous and objectification becomes alienation. To appropriate appropriation, in this sense, would mean to appropriate the structures of authorization in order to allow for people to be in control of their own capabilities, to render them proper to themselves and nonalienating.

II. The Dialectic of Alienation and Appropriation

In their political writings on community and the proper, Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy do not give Proudhon the attention he deserves. His early and crude ruminations on the property prejudice helped to establish a critical discourse on the role of property in mainstream political thinking that spans from the left to the right. We might even call Proudhon the progenitor of this critique. After over a 160 years, what Proudhon viewed as a mere prejudice has metamorphized into the comprehensive, axiomatic, and hegemonic *dispositif* of the proper. Each of the three contemporary philosophers challenges this *dispositif* on multiple fronts. It is based in the metaphysics of the subject, it reduces difference to sameness (or identity), it is trapped in the ontotheological search for an original foundation, it creates an inclusion/exclusion framework, and so on. Each likewise arrives at the same conclusion: because the *dispositif* of the proper creates a series

of enclosures, it prevents us from thinking about relationships and thus community.

A predominant feature of the *dispositif* of the proper is the dialectic of alienation and appropriation. When community is conceived as the product of this dialectic, community is constituted through the collective act of negating, overcoming, and appropriating alienating conditions. This formula of negating the negation, the lack, is repeated in most theories of collective emancipation, including anti-imperialist, national liberation, feminist, queer, antiracist, and communist politics. Today, the target of appropriation carries well beyond concrete forms of economic property. The proper now extends into such abstracted forms as personal identity (rights discourse, theories of recognition, or other forms of identity politics), ideas (self-determination, autonomy, or intellectual property rights), bodies (birth control, euthanasia, or aesthetic freedom), and collective identities (strategic essentialism, national identities, or cultural patents). Even theories that openly concede that the subject, collective or individual, can never be rendered whole continue to work within the parameters set out by this *dispositif*. Appropriation continues to act as the horizon through which salvation can be obtained.

When community is conceptualized as the finished product of the dialectic of alienation and appropriation, it is reified. Traditionally, Esposito argues, community is treated as “the thing itself that is opposed to its own annihilation [*proprio annientamento*]” (*CI*, 146; *CE*, 136). As something that is realizable, the realness of community works to immunize us from the “explosion (or implosion) of the nothing,” that is, from nihilism. Esposito argues this immunization imperative actually results in a nihilistic model of community. His argument, which is similar to Nancy’s, is astute. When community is hypostatized and subjected to the dialectic of alienation and appropriation, we are expected to commit a twofold act of appropriation to qualify as proper members of a community. By characterizing community as a thing, and not just a simple nomination for relationships, each is expected to appropriate not only property but the community itself. This second appropriation constitutes the right, even privilege, to claim partial ownership over the community. Without this second appropriative act—possibly the symbolic appropriation that completes the productive appropriation in Nancy’s analysis—each would be merely engaged in an individualistic act of appropriation, which is the commonplace characterization of nihilism.

Nowhere is this collective nihilism more apparent than in the tautology of participation and sharing that factors in most revolutionary formulas: each revolutionary member must participate *in* the taking while simultaneously taking part *of* the participative activity. The former requirement is easier to comprehend: each must be a participant in the taking of expropriated materials, alienated identity, the state, and so on. Each takes her share of, appropriates, what had previously been taken away from her. As an end in itself, this activity is not conducive to community because it is primarily conducted for private, and often disparate and antithetical, purposes; that is, if it serves a purpose at all. For example, during riots participants engage in fleeting appropriative acts that are not translated into a properly communal action. They seek neither to transform their relationships with each other into communal relations, nor to transform their broader circumstances of shared privation into communal conditions. They merely invert the dispositif of the proper and dramatize it on a collective scale. The resulting mayhem simply reconfigures the already divisive conditions that are a byproduct of the collective nihilism that marks our times.

In the standard narrative, nihilism is contained when taking occurs on a communal scale. Each participant must appropriate the collective activity and make it proper to herself, that is, to appropriate her relationships, to take ownership over them, and to become a coproprietor of her relationships with others. Everyone must have a share in the participative activity itself. Sharing is the modality, the basis, and the bond of communal relationships. Without this shared element—sharing out, sharing in, and ultimately sharing with—appropriation remains uncommon. Without sharing, each participant engages in a negative act of appropriation that is private, individualistic, and antisocial. Esposito claims this merely amounts to a “division without sharing” (*CI*, 13; *CE*, 28).

The question these philosophers force us to address is: Doesn't this twofold appropriation absorb and nullify the division that defines our commonality? That is, doesn't it produce a condition of sharing without division? This raises another question. How can each participant appropriate the community without annihilating it, or, conversely, how can each participant be appropriated by community without being completely absorbed, and thus annihilated, by it? Either way, containing community or being contained by community creates a serious aporia for the dialectic of alienation and appropriation. This aporia is found in all zero-sum formulations of this problematic that are promoted by

those who appeal to *Homo approprians*. Jean-Paul Sartre's exhaustive, yet failed, efforts in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* testify to this aporia (1991). To appropriate relationships, to make them each and everyone's own, to make them proper to one's person and every other person involved, to qualify them as "ours," yet simultaneously "yours" and "mine," to depart from the "me" and become the "we," is to negate the exteriority that is necessary to be in—not have—a relationship with another in the first place. Appropriating their relationships renders their relations nonrelational, which is why Esposito calls Sartre's work a "great communitarian failure" (*CI*, 138; *CE*, 133). The dispositif of the proper provides but two alternatives to this dilemma: private individuals such as those found in the social contract tradition (division without sharing) or a hypostatized community that absorbs its subjects (sharing without division). Neither is a relational condition.

Jargon aside, this strain is of paramount importance for our neoliberal era. Today, the political is not just defined within the horizon of the economic, because the economic is simultaneously defined with the horizon of the political. The two have collapsed into each other such that it is nearly impossible to speak of one without enlisting categories originally belonging to the other. The traditional critique of political economy, that private interests dominate the public sphere, no longer carries the semantic breadth to adequately cover what has actually happened. It stands today as a naïve victim of its own accomplishments. Any solution it can proffer is immediately circumvented and recalibrated as yet another dimension of the dispositif of the proper. Regardless of where one is situated along the mainstream political spectrum, from left to right, when one speaks of politics one is forced to enlist economic categories. In our time, it is not just the public, or politics, that have been fused with the economic, but the political itself. To be clear, I am not claiming that the economic dominates the political, but that the political and the economic are now indiscernible. Although this general problematic originates in Aristotle's politics, its modern rendition has its theoretical basis in Locke's early formulation of *Homo approprians*.

Rights-based discourse is a key, yet bewildering, site for the implosion of the political and the economic. Whether the issue is the power that transnational corporations have over states in the global south or the ever-expanding powers that a shrinking group of global elites hold