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Baraneh Emadian

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Marx and Lacan: The Silent Partners (on Tomšič's *The Capitalist Unconscious*)

Samo Tomšič: *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*
London, Verso, 2015, 248 pp., £19.99 pb., £55.00 hb.
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The relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis has been frequently debated; nonetheless, one rarely comes upon a thoroughgoing, in-depth treatment of this connection. The Capitalist Unconscious is therefore a belated but welcome inquiry into the points of intersection between the two, a project whose contours could be traced back to the works of Marx and Freud. It is in the work of Lacan, however, that this correlation between Marxism and Psychoanalysis becomes visible. This article explores Samo Tomšič's analysis of the logical, epistemological, and political continuity of Marx's critique of political economy and Freud's theory of libidinal economy, meanwhile appraising the possible emancipatory potential of this project.

Keywords: Marx; Lacan; Freud; Capitalist Unconscious; Libidinal Economy; Indebted Subject; Capitalist Subjectivity

For anyone concerned with a possible meeting point between Marxism and psychoanalysis, *The Capitalist Unconscious* is a long-awaited work. The intricacy of the task of bringing together Marx and Lacan in a systematic way is indeed tackled in the beginning of the book. From biographical instances such as Lacan's dismissal of the May 1968 event (a gesture more reminiscent of liberal *nouveaux philosophes* than revolutionary thinkers) to general criticisms pitted against psychoanalysis as a watchdog of the mental health of the bourgeois class or advocate of the capitalist normalisation of desire, the text does not shy away from dissection of examples that testify against a possible happy union between Marxism and psychoanalysis. The question is inevitably posed: 'If psychoanalysis recurrently appears as a form of sophistry that relativises the scope of leftist political struggles and questions their resistance to capitalist forms of exploitation, then why argue for its continued political relevance?' (p. 2). Nonetheless, Tomšič's impressive theoretical toolbox enables him to brush aside

biographical and stereotypical contexts and delve into the philosophical potential of Lacan's entanglement with Marx's critique of political economy.

At stake in *The Capitalist Unconscious* is the production of capitalist subjectivity, namely, the kind of subjectivity involved in the autonomy of exchange value and domination of the commodity form. The point of departure for this approach is the parallelism between Marxism and psychoanalysis in their recognition of a 'structural negativity' (p. 5). Marx's critique of the fetishism of political economy entails a critique of a positive conception of value as a vital force (of capital, money, economy), since in his critique value is not perceived as some positive substance but in terms of logic. For Both Marx and Lacan the guide to political universality is a negative, non-narcissistic subjectivity, which counters the capitalist repudiation of negativity. The negativity disavowed by capitalism, however, always returns in the shape of the production of surplus populations globally. Marx's localisation of labour-power as a structural negativity, where the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production coalesce, unfolds a category of de-psychologised and de-individualised subject that is translatable to *the subject of the unconscious* in the Freudian–Lacanian parlance.

The book therefore traces the link between Marx and Freud to the Freudian theory of the unconscious, the formulation of which became possible after what Louis Althusser terms Marx's 'epistemological break' (p. 10). The heart of the matter is that Freud's theory of the unconscious accentuates 'the role of labour (*Arbeit*) in the satisfaction of the unconscious tendency (desire or drive) and that it constantly uncovers the productive dimension of the unconscious' (p. 11). As distinct from the Jungian notion of collective unconscious, Freud underscores a labour theory of the unconscious. Lacan's contribution consists in his incorporation of the Freudian concepts of libido (psychic energy) and the unconscious labour in the category of *jouissance* (enjoyment). The significance of the category of *jouissance* is that its production goes beyond the homeostatic model—it knows no right measure, in Freud's words (p. 64). To be more precise, the structural loss or negativity that Freud theorises in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) reveals the gaps of libidinal economy and embodies a critique of the homeostatic model, which more or less foregrounds economic liberalism. Likewise, Marx's refutation of 'the political–economic fantasies of social homeostasis and market providence' inspired Lacan, allowing him to formalise the contradictions of the linguistic idea of the autonomy of the signifier (p. 203).

In *The Capitalist Unconscious*, Lacan's infamous 'excommunication' from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1963 is regarded as a prelude to 'a second return to Freud', which came to fruition immediately after May 1968, and was reflected in his substitution of structural linguistics (with which he had been initially preoccupied) by Marxian critique of political economy. Implicit in this passage from Saussure's and Jakobson's theories of language to Marxian political economy after 1968 is a certain degree of politicisation, albeit that the sediment of political events manifested itself in Lacan's theory rather than political leaning. The conceptual incentive for this shift stemmed from the limitations of structural linguistics whose nuances are dextrously explored in the first chapter of the book.

While Lacan's most well-known axiom in his structuralist period was 'the unconscious is structured as a language', his motto during his second return to Freud could be encapsulated in the elusive statement 'the unconscious is politics' (p. 20). The second axiom, Tomšič notes, attempts to overcome the opposition of structure and politics. Rather than implying 'politics is unconscious' (which would suggest a reduction of politics to unconscious processes), the copula *is* functions in a non-reflexive way, indicating the formal inclusion of the subject of the unconscious in politics, which, in the footsteps of Marx, entails constitution of social link through alienation and negativity.

Structures March on the Streets

Lacan took issue with the way the supporters of May 1968 tended to *oppose* structure and the event/politics (as evident in the graffiti 'structures do not march on the streets'), failing to see the event as an eruption of the structural real. Abiding with the fantasy of a pure real outside structure, they overlooked 'the fact that the demanded liberalisation, for instance of education, initiated a more direct commodification of knowledge' (p. 21). For Lacan, structure does not involve static and necessary relations, but contingency and contradiction.¹ From an epistemological trajectory, revolution is deemed as a name for this 'structural articulation of contradiction' (p. 206). To bring this notion home, in the final chapter of the book Tomšič will discuss Lacan's theorisation of the implications of May 1968 apropos of de Gaulle's university reform, meant as a response to the demand of the students. Lacan saw the establishment of an experimental university in Vincennes (named University Paris VIII afterwards) by de Gaulle's Ministry of Education—where the credit-point system was introduced—as a new stage in the evolution of capitalism, hence his forewarning words to his students: 'The credit-point, the little piece of paper that they want to issue you, is precisely this. It is the sign of what knowledge will progressively become in this market that one calls the University' (p. 212). Lacan's gesture does not merely evoke the commodification of knowledge, but rather signals to the structural congeniality between capitalism and science that gives rise to the production of a capitalist subjectivity based on the grounding of capitalist power relations on the social application of modern *episteme*. Lacan's warning about the absorption of the education system into the reproduction of capitalism proves more realistic when we take into account the later privatisation

¹ Alain Badiou, however, develops a critique of the structural dialectic of Lacan, challenging the latter's conception of the real as 'the impasse of formalization'. Badiou reformulates the real as 'the forced passage of a new formalization'. In brief, Badiou inverts the Lacanian aphorism thus: 'The formalization is the place where the real passes in force'. The concept of 'forcing' is crucial to Badiou's theorisation of the subject. For more details, see Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, transl. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum, 2009). See also Zachary Luke Fraser, 'The Category of Formalization: From Epistemological Break to Truth-Procedure' in *The Concept of Model. An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, transl. Fraser and Tzuchein Tho (Melbourne: Re-Press, 2007), (fn) I, II.

of universities and the exponential rise of student loans (i.e. creation of indebted students/subjects).

In Lacan's second return to Freud, furthermore, the accent is displaced from representation (Saussure) to production (Marx) and the revolutionary nucleus of the Freudian theory—his labour theory of the unconscious—is stressed.² This theory is grounded on 'the satisfaction of the unconscious tendency by the consumption of psychic energy (labour-power) in the mental process' (p. 47). Since it is difficult to do justice to Tomšič's thoroughgoing account here, I turn to his delineation of the logical (rather than analogical), epistemological and political continuity of Marx's critique of political economy and Freud's theory of libidinal economy. According to the Lacanian thesis, the unconscious production of *jouissance* and the social production of value follow the same logic and exhibit the same structural contradictions and deadlocks. Instead of the repression of productive potentials of drives and desires, the insatiable demand for production, *production for the sake of production* (Marx), becomes the focal point.

Freud's category of the unconscious production contains the Marxian insight into the split character of labour, according to which labour is abstract matter or labour-power in one glimpse, and concrete form or labour-process in another. Unconscious labour is in this sense similar to abstract labour, because it cannot be linked to a concrete psychological agent (p. 101). The double character of commodities is mirrored in the dividedness of satisfaction, that is, its coupling of 'wish' and 'desire'. The separation of labour from labourer in capitalism achieves the transformation of the subject into labour-power. From a psychoanalytic trajectory, this objectification of alienation, its materialisation in commodity, turns the subject into an object that satisfies the demand of the Other for production or extraction of surplus-object. Commodification of labour hence imposes a *perverse* position on the subject, turning the subject into the object of the Other's *jouissance*. Implicit in this configuration of the subject is Lacan's conception of perversion.

The singularity of Tomšič's analysis arises from the fact that it shows how Marx's labour theory of value actually *reclaims the subject's position*, thus reformulating the position of the subject in the sphere of commodity and puncturing the fantasy that assumes capital as the true subject of the process of valorisation. The implications of this analysis for radical politics cannot be overestimated, since it challenges the view that bestows on capital the role of the subject, formerly occupied by the proletariat. From the trajectory of emancipatory politics, if we were to give in to the idea of capital as the subject, it would have been nearly impossible to defend any form of emancipatory project relying on the agency of the masses. Marx's labour theory of value takes into account all the fetishistic fantasies involved in the process, thinking the logic of value alongside a complex logic of fantasy that reveals the interdependence of exploitation and mystification of exploitation. For Marx, the individual affected by

² This movement from representation to production is also a shift from the logic of language to that of *jouissance*.

capitalism is the same as the one who constitutes the subject of value, a hypothesis that inverts the fetishistic hypothesis that attributes to capital the position of the subject of capitalism (p.105). In the context of the industrial revolution, the industrial labourer stood for the split in the subject of labour and the alienation implemented by the capitalist organisation of labour. Freud's hysteric subject is analogous to Marx's proletarian subject in a given historical moment. Freud did not merely theorise the hysteric subject as embodying the symptom, but as *being* the epistemological and social symptom.

In ontological terms, the minimal common ground between Marx and Freud is their similar displacement of the ontological quandary. Both thinkers resort to the scientific theory of entropy to account for the structural inconsistency in being. The asymmetry between increase and decrease in being is therefore conceived in terms of the second law of thermodynamics. From a Marxian trajectory, the capitalist social link has an entropic quality. The accumulation of capital is coupled with the accumulation of misery, and the revolution of the means of production is inseparable from the production of a surplus population (p. 70). For both thinkers, the autonomy of symbolic networks (their independence from consciousness) is indicative of two implications: 'a subject, whose being comes down to non-identity and loss, and a surplus-object, whose being is marked by intensification or increase' (p. 200).

This basic imbalance between the lack-in-being and the surplus-in-being can be expressed in terms of a parallax of subjective loss and objective surplus. This is helpful in grasping the difference between lack and excess in Lacanian taxonomy, which at times could give rise to some confusion. Most important, this ontological point of departure allows us to detect a parallax in Marx's critique of political economy, which undertakes neither the subjective position (the humanist Marx of the theory of alienation) nor the objective position (the economist Marx of the theories of value), but occupies the split between the two (p. 204). Critique in this sense emerges as having a parallax structure, articulating the concomitance of the production-oriented labour theory of value and market fetishism.

'The Original Sin' of Primitive Accumulation

Revisiting Marx's theory of 'the so-called primitive accumulation of capital', the text confirms the *continuous* character of primitive accumulation expounded in the more recent reformulations of this category.³ This reading, however, emphasises the inextricability of *jouissance* and debt (pp. 141–148). The 'myth' of primitive accumulation, as maintained by classical political economy, associates enjoyment with the proto-proletarian and renunciation with the proto-capitalist. Historically, it so

³ Various recent reformulation of the category of primitive accumulation stress the continuous character of primitive accumulation. In a word, this category does not merely address a historical, 'originary' accumulation. See Massimo De Angelis, 'Separating the Doing and the Deed: Capital and the Continuous Character of the Enclosures', *Historical Materialism*, 12:2 (2004), pp. 57–87; Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

appears that the capitalist accumulated the first wealth through saving, whereas the proletariat enjoyed excessively until all he was left with was his labour-power. While abstinence and renunciation are supposed to accumulate surplus-value, labour-power (which originates from excess) only generates debt. This resonates with the logic of austerity in our time, which is inflicted with the same political-economic myth: the global South appears as the land of enjoying lazy subjects who become increasingly indebted, while the global North (particularly Germany) stands for the land of saving and regeneration of wealth. So assumed, accumulation of wealth presupposes renunciation of *jouissance*.

Marx's correction of this tale, however, discloses that the complicity between renunciation and the production of *jouissance* is achieved through *generalised indebteding* or the invention of national debt. In other words, the imperative of abstinence is at heart the imperative of debting (via public or national credit, which creates profit out of indebteding). This association of debt and *jouissance* originates from religion, which is why Marx speaks of 'the original sin' of primitive accumulation. Marx's focus on national debt affirms the emergence of labour-power as a capitalist form of subjectivity that corresponds to the system of abstract debt and the modern credit system. The citizen as debtor is a quantifiable and exploitable subjectivity that is always already indebted and produced *per se*. Whereas a 'bad' capitalist keeps his profit for himself in a miserly fashion, a 'good' capitalist grasps the logic of profit through indebteding (p. 217). To put it differently, a clumsy capitalist has a pre-Freudian conception of *jouissance* as the ordinary pleasure of consuming and spending, while a shrewd capitalist knows that *jouissance* goes beyond the pleasure principle and reaches its peak in indebteding, risk management and speculation. Hence, Marx's refutation of the fantastic projection of some hypothetical subject of *jouissance* prior to the subject of abstract debt.

Tomšič, however, does not dwell on the predicament of periodisation in relation to capitalism. How does the passage from feudalism to capitalism take place? Had this so-called transition been as defiant and bloody as thinkers like Silvia Federici show (the thesis of capitalism as the counter-revolution that destroyed the possibilities that had emerged from anti-feudal struggle),⁴ the process of appropriating the body and disciplining labour at the rise of capitalism would have deeply affected the subsequent constitution of capitalist subjectivity. What were the implications of sexual division of labour (such as the instrumentalisation of women for reproductive work or re-articulation of the patriarchal order) for the libidinal economy at the rise of capitalism? Reflection on this moment of so-called 'transition', on the impact of the social transformation that came with the rise of capitalism, is missing in *The Capitalist Unconscious*.

It would be equally pertinent to stress the political dimension of primitive accumulation as the meeting point of the two pillars of domination: capital and state. Contra

⁴ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body And Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

accumulation, which is essentially grounded on the economic relations that enable the domination of the capitalist over worker, the separation implemented by primitive accumulation is primarily enforced by ‘the direct extra-economic force’ of the state or certain sections of social classes (in most cases, this means the force of the state and the law to dispossess).⁵ This point of convergence between the two logics of domination (capital and state) is the site where dissent and struggle take shape. As such, social and political struggles pose a limit to accumulation, or in de Angelis’s words, primitive accumulation ‘acquires meaning through patterns of resistance and struggle’. In the context of *The Capitalist Unconscious*, it would be productive to explore the contribution of the state in the production of the indebted subject alongside capital.

The Cult of Debt and Beyond

This correlation between *jouissance* and debt is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s delineation of capitalism as a cult of indebteding in the fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’.⁶ Rather than describing capitalism as an outcome or effect of religion (Max Weber), Benjamin regards the two as analogous and providing a response to the same ‘cares, torments and troubles’.⁷ Accordingly, capitalism is a cult-religion that does not expiate but *produce* guilt/debt (*Schuld*): ‘This cult is ... culpabilizing. Capitalism is presumably the first case of a religion that does not atone but produces guilt.’⁸ Tomšič’s investigation actually supports Benjamin’s conception of capitalism as religion, because the passage to capitalism is described in terms of the dissolution of the master’s discourse and its evacuation and abstraction (p. 145). Suggestive in this movement is the weakening of economic–metaphysical roots of subjection to the feudal lord or monarch as divine representatives (the master-signifier in Lacan’s parlance). Even so, this new discursive production (termed as ‘the university discourse’) did not overthrow the old structures of inequality and domination, but merely replaced the serf with abstract labour-power and the old master with the new one, i.e. the capitalist. The difference is to be sought in the de-fetishisation of the master/capitalist, in the way the new master loses its concrete personification under capitalism.

We could conclude that mastery becomes ubiquitous abstraction, in the same way that law *becomes* life in the absence of the ‘mediation’ of the Church (in the passage from Catholicism to Protestantism) in Benjamin’s terms.⁹ Like Protestantism, capitalism embodies its own meaning without any reference to an external source and in this sense stands for a peculiar kind of cult. The abstraction of economic categories under

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 879, 899–900. See also Massimo De Angelis, ‘Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital’s “Enclosures”’, *The Commoner*, 2 (September 2001), pp. 9, 16.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Capitalism as Religion’ in Michael W. Jennings (ed.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913–1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 288.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

capitalism is reproduced in the abstraction and ‘immediacy’ of political discourse, and revolutionary movements fade into democratic and identitarian politics.

In ‘Capitalism as Religion’, Benjamin points out the continuity between Freudian psychoanalysis and ‘the priestly domination’ of the cult of capitalism. The link between capitalism as cult-religion and psychoanalysis is established through the notion of guilt/debt (*Schuld*) at work in both. ‘The repressed’ is deemed comparable to capital, since it ‘pays interest on the hell of the unconscious’.¹⁰ Capital and the repressed both seem to cultivate and accumulate debt/guilt. We may ask whether the same criticism could be levelled against Lacan. If we listen to clinical psychoanalysts, the Lacanian teaching seems to come full circle to the discourse of the analyst at the end.¹¹ Everyone becomes a proletarian and the distinction between the capitalist and the worker vanishes.¹² No horizon is to be hoped for beyond the couch. Benjamin’s objection to Freud comes to haunt Lacan as well, for debt/guilt cannot be eluded unless it is wholly overthrown. It cannot be negotiated through accumulation of analyses and rectifications. Let us imagine Germany and Greece playing the part of the analyst and the analysand respectively. Negotiation of debt could only lead to accumulation of more debt and more guilt. The only possibility for overcoming debt is its removal. Tomšič’s Marxist reformulation of psychoanalytic theory draws Freud and Lacan closer to this liberatory, Benjaminian insight. In his approach, we catch a glimpse of a materialist theory of the subject beyond the narcissistic, individualist, confessional mode, a figure of subjectivity that renews our hope for a political universalism beyond the commodity form.

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Baraneh Emadian
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¹⁰ Ibid., p. 289.

¹¹ Lacan defined the analyst’s discourse as the *envers* of the master’s discourse, because it is meant to be the only discourse that ultimately produces the total inversion of the relations of domination. Yet, there is a tendency (particularly in clinical practice) to interpret this primacy of the analytic discourse as confined to traversing the fundamental fantasy on the level of the individual, i.e. patient. The sociopolitical scope of the analyst’s discourse (where the entire culture is placed on the couch) is thus overlooked. It is noteworthy that Lacan’s notion of discourse, which was initially synonymous to ‘speech’, came to signify Marx’s ‘mode of production’ in his later thought (p. 203).

¹² This suggests that the subject is no longer exploited by the capitalist, but by the objects of libidinal enjoyment. See Frédéric Declercq, ‘Lacan on the Capitalist Discourse: Its Consequences for Libidinal Enjoyment and Social Bonds’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 11 (2006), pp. 74–83.