SAMO TOMŠIČ

No Such Thing as Society?
On Competition, Solidarity, and Social Bond

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

Prologue

In 1964, the Royaumont Abbey in Île-de-France hosted a colloquium on Nietzsche, where Michel Foucault delivered his famous talk "Nietzsche, Freud and Marx." Therein, he argued that the three names stand for a radical rupture in the history of interpretative techniques, that they expose the autonomy of symbolic order (moral value in Nietzsche, economic value in Marx, linguistic value in Freud) and its decentralizing impact on the human subject. Taken together, Nietzsche's genealogy, Marx's critique of political economy, and Freud's psychoanalysis bring about yet another insult to human self-love, comparable to scientific *Kränkungen*—which Freud associated with early modern physics (decentralization of physical reality; abolition of the geocentric cosmological model) and evolutionary biology (decentralization of life's evolution; abolition of the human exception in the hierarchy of beings).[1] With Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, understood by Foucault as the founders of the modern human sciences, an even more fundamental decentralization took place, subverting the relation between human being and symbolic order, the primary means for establishing and sustaining social bonds.

Volume 33, Numbers 2–3 DOI 10.1215/10407391-10124676
© 2022 by Brown University and d i f f e r e n c e s : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies

Foucault's focus was merely on the regime of interpretation, its openness and endlessness, which ultimately overlaps with the virtual infinity of language. However, Nietzsche's, Marx's, and Freud's thought is traversed by another shared problematic, equally linked with the autonomy of the symbolic order but that also concerns its material causality, and specifically the production of affective states. Put differently, a crucial topic of their inquiries is the anything-but-unproblematic link between the symbolic and the corporeal. They examine the symbolic order—along its three fundamental axes: moral, economic, and linguistic—in its problematic junction with the living body. Linking back to Foucault's preoccupation with the endlessness of interpretation, one could add that the main problem in Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud revolves around a "parasitism" of the infinite (the symbolic) on the finite (the body). In all three thought systems, the force expressing this problematic parasitism is named the *drive* (*Trieb*).[2]

Briefly, the drive stands for a force that is both symbolic and corporeal, the force of symbolic abstractions in the living body, and the expression of their organizing power. The symbolic order is never merely an abstract system but always already stands for an organization of materiality—in other words, an economy—be it moral, social, or libidinal. The common feature of these three obviously different and apparently independent economic orders is that they all stand for "affective economies" (Ahmed 117). As the term directly suggests, we are dealing with the question of the production and organization of affects precisely by means of discourse (social bond), and the minimal common denominator in Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx comes down to the conception of social bonds *qua* affective bonds. Their intellectual efforts evolve around the problematic of systemic affects, and more specifically, with affects that expose an ongoing tension between the constitution and the dissolution of social bonds.

For Nietzsche, the main systemic affect is *ressentiment*, an ongoing feeling of injury and injustice that has been detached from its cause and organized in an autonomous system of values, turned against the affirmation of life. This affect is thus deeply ambivalent: not only does it signal that an ongoing exploitation takes place, but it also provides a specific satisfaction to the suffering subject. For Freud, the defining "emotional state" of modern subjectivity and thus the main systemic affect is *Unbehagen* (discontent, malaise, unease). It is this affect that confronts the subject of capitalism, with its actual status in the social bond. Finally, although Marx's examination of systemic affects may appear the least evident, his notion of the fetish directly addresses not only the objective appearance of economic

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

abstractions (commodities, money, value, capital) but also the affective power this appearance exercises on the minds and bodies of economic subjects. Furthermore, Marx examines the transformation of avarice (greed) into the drive of capital understood as both material and symbolic force; this leads him to think surplus value as systemic enjoyment.

At the center of these endeavors stands one crucial problem: modern socioeconomic and moral order (and capitalism is ultimately both) as a system of organized aggressivity and violence. While Marx and Freud confront this issue directly in the capitalist organization of production and enjoyment, Nietzsche remains caught in its mystified expression. Instead of recognizing the link between the social proliferation of ressentiment and the expansion of relations of competition in all spheres of social and subjective existence, Nietzsche proposes a transhistorical genealogy in which a constitutively weak subjectivity ("slave") progressively imposes a system of values directed against life, and particularly against the possibility of a life without negativity, which Nietzsche theorizes in the self-affirmative figure of the master-aristocrat. The "rational kernel" of Nietzsche's critique of morality consists in understanding ressentiment as radicalized, absolute envy, which, by turning against life, implements an essentially antisocial morality. To put it with Lacan, at the core of Nietzsche's critique of ressentiment is the link between the renunciation of life and the production of surplus enjoyment, a link that can be directly associated with the problems addressed in Marx's critique of social economy and Freud's critique of libidinal economy.

The Withering Away of the Social

One could describe neoliberalism as a socioeconomic doctrine that fully unleashed the proliferation of antisocial affects. This was the immediate effect of its social, or rather antisocial, engineering, summarized in the notorious claim by Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such thing as society." The statement appears in the following context:

> *I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand "I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or "I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!" "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no*

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

> *government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.* (Thatcher, "Interview")

There is no such thing as society; there are only individual men and women and their families, who all look to themselves first—a behavior from which an elected government must not deviate. The condensation of Thatcher's statement was immediately perceived and adopted as the ultimate slogan of neoliberalism. The remark can also serve as a key entry point into neoliberal political ontology. The use of "there is no" suggests that we are dealing with a strong ontological claim, since a weak one would negate only the actuality but not the potentiality of society's existence. If society does not exist, this does not imply that it cannot come to exist. Such a weak ontological claim would anchor society among potentialities: society can then become a political project, an object of shared political work and political practice, a form of "being-together" or "being-with." The existence of society may thus not be guaranteed, but this does not mean that the notion of society does not mark a mode of organizing social bonds that could eventually be inscribed in the order of becoming.

Thatcher's strong ontological claim, in contrast, insists that something like society "is not"—in other words, it has no *place*, not even as an assumption, a hypothesis of possible organization of intersubjective interaction and political existence. There is no place—let us understand this in topological terms—where society could emerge or be brought into existence. Consequently, there is no such thing as social being. Where others assumed something like society, there is nothing—a void or a hole, which cannot be filled. Thatcher's ontological claim has further consequences. More than anything else, it formulates a prohibition: no such thing as society should become a project of politics and thus emerge in the order of being. The task of politics is not to force something that is not into being. Thatcher's axiom is, then, above all an ontological prohibition of the social: society should be expelled, not just from political programs but from the order of being. Neoliberalism is ultimately a political ontology, which performs a radical foreclosure of sociality on behalf of an alternative vision of "social" being organized around economic relations of competition and traditional family structures, hence around economic deregulation and patriarchal regulation.[3]

By denying society every positive ontological status, or every participation on the order of being, even a negative one, Thatcher demonstrates Lacan's insistence on the commanding nature of ontology. Understood as an exemplification of the master's discourse (or the discourse of domination),

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

ontology assumes the right to decide not simply what is and what is not but moreover what ought to be and what must not be (Lacan, *On Feminine* 31–32). Although it insists on the contrary, ontology never speaks of being in a neutral manner; by commanding, it discursively produces the effect of being. The same goes for (political) nonbeing: what the master-ontologist (here, Thatcher) says does not exist (or simply is not) in fact must not exist (must not be). The negative ontological statement is, in the last instance, a performative production of nonbeing with very real, material consequences, notably, the increase of social misery and of marginalized groups, the intensification of systemic violence, and so on.

Society must not come into being, since such ontological enforcement of sociality would, from the neoliberal point of view, mean not only institutionalizing wastefulness and laziness but also pursuing a form of social life and enjoyment that would no longer be organized around the economic imperatives of increasing value and the pursuit economic growth.[4] As the expression suggests, the "social welfare state" reinforces (neoliberals would likely say "forces" or "imposes") the existence of society and thus restricts, if not actively undermines, the unfolding of the creative potential of economic ("social") competition and market deregulation.[5] Thatcher therefore did not bother concealing or mystifying the fact that neoliberalism is fundamentally about building an antisocial state and reinforcing a system of organized antisociality (which capitalism in the last instance has always been). Any intrusion of capital into public and private spheres is supposed to ensure that life will not go to waste and will remain organized in such a way that the greatest possible amount of surplus value can be extracted from it. If we let life run its course, it is supposedly defined by excess, as "life beyond one's means"—or at least that is the suspicion that the advocates of capitalism repeatedly address to society.[6]

Society must be expelled from the order of being because it stands in contradiction to the market, which for neoliberalism most certainly exists. The market is what plays the role of the big Other, the symbolic space in which subjectivities and intersubjective bonds are produced. This is where the second part of Thatcher's remark comes in. Society may not exist, may not even be, but what is—or what neoliberalism recognizes to exist—are individuals and their families, in other words, bodies and reproductive units organized in accordance with "traditional" binary terms. This organization itself is integrated in a symbolic space determined by the relations of competition, so that the sociality of capitalism is ultimately best exemplified by competition and property relations. The story is more than familiar.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

For Aristotle, the human is a political animal, which means a relational animal. We cannot think human being without the bonds it establishes with other human beings. In other words, we cannot think human being outside social being, understood as relational being or simply as relation, and more specifically, a bond. Despite placing the accent on individuals (and their families), neoliberalism failed to completely disavow the constitutive relationality of human being. Rather, it specified this relationality through the restriction of sociality to economic exchange, which is for neoliberalism the minimal and still acceptable sociality. And to repeat, economic exchange is additionally specified through competition, which, on the one hand, defines the human being as a competitive animal, while at the same time acknowledging that sociality—at least this type of sociality—is inevitably underpinned by aggressivity, which can eventually obtain its affective expression in greed, ressentiment, and envy. Or as Thatcher phrased it, "individual men and women [. . .] look to themselves first."

But neoliberal political ontology, with its antisocial program—the abolition of every social bond that is not anchored in the economic relation of competition—merely stands for an advanced stage of the inherent antisociality of capitalism. Marx already pinpointed this antisociality in his examination of the capitalist organization of production around self-sufficient accumulation, which he described as production for the sake of production,[7] rather than for the sake of preservation and improvement of social and "individual" life. Surplus value and capital, understood by Marx as the drive of self-valorization, pinpoint the antisociality that was already at the core of economic liberalism and would undergo the next phase of deregulation in the decades of neoliberalism. The antisociality of capitalism obtains its full expression in the neoliberal tendency to dismantle social bonds, particularly the welfare state as a weak, social-democratic institutionalization of economic solidarity. Neoliberal antisocial engineering comes down to the following imperative, as Wendy Brown pointedly formulates it: "society must be dismantled" (*In the Ruins* 30).[8] This programmatic aspect is linked with an issue addressed by Marx, namely, the problem of surplus population. With this notion, Marx overtly addressed a structural tendency of capitalism, which accompanies the ongoing process of dismantling social bonds and of the "becoming-redundant of humanity," the progressive transformation of human being into an abject being.[9]

This disturbing systemic tendency is equally reflected in Freud's diagnosis of cultural malaise and his reflections on what he elsewhere calls the "pure culture of the death-drive" (Freud, *Ego* 53, trans. mod.). The

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

proliferation of cultural malaise, understood as a systemic affect, signals that capitalism must be seen as a system that works against humanity, and furthermore, a system that increasingly runs amok. The intensification of systemic violence (economic, sexual, racialized, environmental, and so on), the dismantling of both social and ecological conditions of life, is the main expression of this system amok. The Marxian analysis of surplus production (in its double aspect consisting of the production of surplus value, on the one hand, and the production of surplus population, on the other) and the Freudian analysis of cultural malaise (equally in its double aspect, consisting of violence directed outward in the guise of the drive of destruction and of violence directed inward in the guise of the death-drive or the cruelty of the superego) both revolve around the insight that humanity progressively becomes redundant in the eyes of the globalized capitalist system: humanity is progressively deprived of social bonds.

Friedrich Engels famously spoke of the withering away of the state in the passage from capitalism to communism. The German term is *absterben*, the organic connotation of which suggests a continuous process of decomposition. Communist sociality would then be organized in a post-statist form that would enable the full practice of the common good and thereby guarantee a livable life. It is more than ironic that neoliberal capitalism proposes its own version of the withering away of the state or has at best reduced it to the role of repressive apparatus whose task is to safeguard the total subversion of the political through the economic and the social through the antisocial. Neoliberal capitalism has thus enforced the capitalist program of the withering away of the social. This does not mean that the social was ever fully there, without inner deadlocks, contradictions, and antisocial components. But what we are left with today is the accumulation of damage from several centuries of the capitalist enforcement of antisocial tendencies in all spheres of human existence.

Solidarity and Affective Life

Thatcher's political-ontological axiom implies that the sum of individuals (and their families) in no way exceeds its parts, that there is no societal surplus over the organization of subjectivity (individuality) and kinship (family). To insist, on the contrary, that there is such a thing as society would imply that "being-with" or social being both exceeds and constitutes the individual, and consequently, that individuality does not imply indivisibility. Not only are there no individuals preceding the social, but they are

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

only constituted as individuals insofar as they are linked.[10] Being socially linked, they are necessarily embedded in a symbolic space that both exceeds them (is outside them) and traverses them (is inside them). This is where the psychoanalytic understanding of the social bond comes in:

> *The difference between the individual and the group [. . .]* falls within the individual. *That is, there is something of the group in every individual, but that something cannot be consciously known by the individual. This something in the individual more than itself is "the group" or "some One," something to which one belongs but in which one is not engulfed. For, though the group or the One is bigger than the individual, it figures as a* part of *the individual. This is a peculiar logic—the part is bigger than that which it is part of—but it is absolutely central to psychoanalysis, which places emphasis on the* relations *between individuals. A change in these relations alters the group as a whole; so, you see that the part, i.e., the relation, is on the same level as individuals, not* above *them. (Copjec, "Inheritance")*

One could also say that the social, understood as a bond between individuals, stands for the self-overcoming of the individual, which is inherent to the individual as its constitutive part. Or, the opposite movement is equally true: not only is the individual (part) larger than the social (totality); the social also stands for the process of externalization of a constitutive component of the individual, precisely in the guise of a bond. In this feature, psychoanalysis, on the one hand, goes against the liberal and neoliberal understanding of political subjectivity, while on the other hand, it also draws attention to the double bind implied in this process of externalization. Certainly, the individual is never a self-enclosed monad, which would precede relationality; it is an effect of relationality. At the same time, however, the process of externalization also explains the point that Marx addressed with his remark that individuals are but personifications of economic categories and social relations. This is most dramatically expressed in the guise of the drive to enrichment, which can, of course, be understood as an individual, quasi-psychological or character feature. But embedded in the social bond, hence externalized, it obtains the expression of the self-valorizing and value-extracting drive of capital.

At the same time, the imperative of analysis that Freud formulated in the famous sentence "Where it was, there I shall become" (*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*) could be contextualized in relation to this complex

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

interaction between individual and social, on the one hand, and the tension between the social and the antisocial, on the other. The becoming of the "I" is inseparable from the becoming of the social, which remains internally traversed by the tension between the tendency to form a bond and the tendency to disrupt it. The "it" (*Es*) in Freud's formula stands precisely for the ambivalent relation that constitutes the human as a divided social being, torn between the forces that bind the social and the forces that dissolve it. Hence, Freud's mature dualism of the drive, which nevertheless should be understood as an inner tension in what he calls *Triebleben,* the life of drives. The drive is neither social nor antisocial—it is ambivalent—and only the activity that Freud calls the "work of culture" decides its social or antisocial vicissitude: whether the drive contributes to the constitution of social bonds—in that case, Freud calls it "Eros"—or pushes for their dismantling, in which case it is called either the drive of aggression (*Aggressivitätstrieb*) or the death-drive (*Todestrieb*). The drive of aggression, the externalized version of the death-drive, always targets social bonds and works against the becoming of society, whereas the death-drive targets and works against the becoming of the subject (the "I" in Freud's sentence). Against the assumption of the organic unity of society, which would precisely exclude the dimension of becoming, Freud suggests that the social (or the register of culture) stands for a conflicted relation or dialectic between sociality and antisociality, and more specifically, for the predominance of the social bond (Eros) over the social unbond (drive of destruction). The point of Freud's mature critique of culture is precisely not to exclude antisociality or to assume the possibility of a social condition, which would be entirely purified of its inner deadlocks, contradictions, and tendencies to dissolution. Here, the drive of aggression and/or death-drive enters the scene, precisely marking the impossibility of having the social without "unrest" and without becoming.

Freud's pessimistic view of culture, his insistence that culture has failed us, is puzzling only if we preserve the conventional reading of his writings on culture, when in fact he quite explicitly criticizes war-and-crisis-ridden capitalist societies, as well as the foundation of capitalist economy on the universal imperative to renounce life. The fragility of social bonds was indeed a major concern in Freud's writings on culture. With the notion of *Unbehagen*, however, Freud determined an "existential feeling," or rather, a systemic and therefore shared affect, that confronts human beings with the necessity to form a bond that will no longer be grounded on the affect of relations of competition, ressentiment, and the aggressivity that accompanies it. As already mentioned, Freud determines in Eros the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

force that pushes human beings to form social bonds and even seems to stand for the very idea of social bond. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, this line is pursued in the reflection that "[h]uman life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals" (95).

Solidarity, rather than mutual love, is the fundamental stance in intersubjective relations and the condition of the social bond. The described "decisive step of civilization" allows us to recognize in solidarity more than a simple description of a social bond; solidarity stands for an affective state, indeed a shared social affect, and a social bond would be the economization of this affect. We know that from the Freudian point of view, there are no social bonds that are not also affective bonds, affect being, here, the manifestation of the social in the individual, the experience of the social bond in the subjectivized body. Being an affect, which sustains the formation of such bonds, solidarity exemplifies the affective fusion of the symbolic and the corporeal that Freud himself describes with the term *Eros*. Of course, in the background of the quoted Freudian reflection lies the myth of the primal horde, according to which community was only made possible when an alliance of sons turned against the primal father and interrupted the circle of violence by killing him—the fraternal bond turned against an exceptional individual, which was also an excessive individual, personifying precisely the violence that Freud otherwise analyzes in his contemporary cultural condition. The primal father, this Freudian myth, is less a figure of the past than it is a figure of the present; and it concerns less excessive individuality than systemic excess, aggressivity, and obscenity. The dead Ur-Father is here and now, present in the decentralized and deindividualized form of systemic violence and personified by a multitude of obscene "separate individuals," as Freud calls them.

At first Freud says nothing new when he associates the social bond with the bond of love or Eros. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he evokes Plato's *Symposium*, and particularly Aristophanes's myth about the origin of sexual diversity and desire. But while in Plato's dialogue love stands for a tendency toward union or fusion and is driven by a lack in being, Freud indicates another path, according to which love is a specific mode of managing alienation that marks the subject's being. Where Plato saw an all too simple scenario (the originary state of fusion, the division of bodies as an act of divine revenge, the tendency toward union), Freud recognized constitutive alienation (the assumption of primal violence, the formation

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

of the social bond against the perseverance of violence, the antagonism in the life of drives in the present, which ultimately allows Freud to assume the original state of division). To Aristophanes's myth, Freud contrasts his own mythology, as he occasionally calls his doctrine of drives (*Trieblehre*), according to which Eros is a force that preserves life or makes life consist in the first place. In this scenario, life is marked by a perseverance in being, but this perseverance is only possible because life contains an irreducible negativity, which fuels its perseverance. That is the function of the death-drive, understood as a force that is immanent to life but working against life, an antilife within the organization of life. Even though at the end of this process stands death (rather than fusion, like in Aristophanes), Freud targets more than the flat everyday wisdom according to which all life is ultimately a life-toward-death. The interesting part in the Freudian scenario is that the antagonism between Eros and the death-drive stands for something other than a metaphysical conflict, which would be expressed in the diversity of life-forms. As an inherent feature of the social bond, this conflict implies that subjects in their social existence remain continuously confronted with the imperative of sustaining a laborious process, which aligns them with one side of the conflict. Furthermore, the subject is not simply a passive effect of the conflict between Eros and the death-drive but acts on this conflict by working it through. Again, where "it" was, there "I" shall become, whereby this subjective becoming is inseparable from the becoming of the social. I can only become if I am in a shared process of social becoming.

Freud does not preach a naïve politics of love, but instead provides sufficient ground for recognizing in Eros the force of solidarity, whereas the death-drive or the drive of aggressivity stands for a force of competition and systemic self-love (which can obtain specific expression in but should not be restricted to individual self-love). The Freudian Eros is thus entirely different from, say, the Aristotelian politics of *philia*, where love, or more generally friendship, is constrained to the context of aristocracy and designates a restricted "solidarity" between aristocratic equals. There is no *philia*, no politics of friendship toward, say, the slave, who is recognized as a speaking being but not as a being of *logos*. There is equally no *philia*, no political love, toward women, since, in the Aristotelian political ontology, they are equally marked by a lack of *logos*. This is expressed in the assumption, among others, that women are not masters of their own bodies (a feature that unites them with slaves) and must therefore serve the masculine subject, who is, presumably, master of his own body (and therefore entitled to possess other bodies).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

Since Freud was an outspoken partisan of the Enlightenment, his politics of Eros, or rather, politics of solidarity, remains in continuity with the political universals of the French Revolution, "freedom, equality, fraternity." Of course, we can immediately remark that "fraternity" remains a problematic political universal, since it echoes the Aristotelian politics of friendship and on the level of signification describes masculine "solidarity." At the core of revolutionary politics stands the idea of solidarity between distinct emancipatory struggles, a nonexclusive solidarity, which presents us with a way of affirming difference in a manner diametrically opposed to the logic of competition.[11] While in competition difference is made toxic (precisely by means of the affect of ressentiment), in solidarity it becomes the foundation of a nonexploitative social bond. Further, in contrast to freedom and equality, solidarity stands for the affective element of revolutionary politics, which determines the social character of freedom and equality, while equality guarantees the unconstrained and unconditional character of solidarity. One could equally say that solidarity stands for the prevalence of the common good over private interest and allows reversing the relation between politics and economy, or more generally, undoing the capitalist privatization of the political. Furthermore, the link between solidarity and the common good sustains the formation of an open political mass, whereas the inmixing of the logic of competition only allows forming closed masses, which can sustain their consistency only on the grounds of determining and excluding ever new figures of "menacing otherness."

The revolutionary triplet "freedom, equality, solidarity" evidently stands in conflict with the political quadrivium of economic and political liberalism that Marx formulated as "freedom, equality, property and Bentham" (280), whereby, of course, Bentham appears here in his role of philosopher of private interest and as the peak of the classical political-economic tradition, which pushes for the prevalence of private interest over common good, antisocial over social. The commodity form and the institution of private property (equally appearing in Marx's quadrivium) pursue the line privileging competition over solidarity, thus inaugurating a regime in which the uninterrupted production of surplus value is conditioned by an ongoing dismantling of the bonds that hold society together. By imposing relations of competition as the paradigm of social bond, capitalism in fact performs a foreclosure of the social, thus allowing only a politics of animosity or ressentiment.

No surprise, then, that, together with the foreclosure of solidarity, equality was replaced by a quasi-naturalized vision of inequality

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

while freedom became associated first and foremost with the market, thus becoming the unbound, absolute freedom of economic abstractions. Within this framework, the other's freedom no longer functions as condition and constraint of my own freedom, but as a threat. Ultimately, no one is truly in possession of freedom, except the market. Needless to recall, the discourse on the free and deregulated market must be taken with all seriousness: as subjects of the capitalist mode of production, we are placed in a situation in which we must delegate our potential freedom to the market, which will be free for us. This is precisely the point of the already mentioned Marxian quadrivium, whose hardly concealed truth is servitude, inequality, expropriation, and the drive of capital. Freedom of the market negates the relational character of freedom, postulated in the revolutionary triad. If in the emancipatory triplet the signification of freedom and equality is determined by solidarity, in the capitalist quadrivium freedom and equality are perverted by "private" property (expropriation) and "private" interest (the self-valorizing tendency of capital). No wonder, then, that every attempt to enforce solidarity, and thus reverse the capitalist privatization of the political, is denounced as totalitarian. It is also hardly surprising that the enthroning of relations of competition as the paradigm of the social bond generates affective toxicity. Under these circumstances, every struggle for emancipation is met with the increase of antisocial affects rather than with an increase of solidarity, which, precisely for being an affective force, would orient diverse social groups toward forming a unified and global struggle against ongoing systemic violence.

Contemporary polemics around populism revolve around this issue. While one party of political theorists explains the rise of populism as a reflection of the neoliberal imposition of absolute freedom—again, freedom disentangled from equality and solidarity—another line argues that populism should be thought within the horizon of equality. This is where right and left populism are commonly differentiated: right populism is absolutely libertarian, and therefore necessarily neoliberal and right-wing, while left populism is absolutely egalitarian, and therefore striving for a socialist and communist politics. The polemic around the question, however, of whether populism could become a name for emancipatory politics seems to be struggling with one specific feature of populism: ambivalence, which suggests that we may be dealing here with a transitional politics, neither inherently left nor inherently right. Here, populism is susceptible to evolving into fascism (as in the case of Jair Bolsonaro) or socialism (as in the case of other Latin American populisms that Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia contrast

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

to the predominantly neofascist European populisms of the present [24–31]). The division of populism is itself a consequence of the logic of competition that structures the capitalist universe. Still, the ambivalence of populism clearly shows that there are two possible organizations of political subjectivity: either in terms of a closed set, a homogenized body of people that, on the one hand, affirms restricted equality, while on the other, performs a radical rejection of difference; or in terms of an open set, a mutating or metamorphic body of the collective, which therefore comprises difference and is consequently not constituted against a background of the continuous fabrication of ever new figures of menacing otherness. Only in this second dispositive is there a place for solidarity, again insofar as we recognize in the term the translation of Freudian Eros as a libidinal force that binds and contributes to the organization of sociality against antisociality.

Instead of Concluding

Lacan repeatedly argued that Marx invented the notion of the *symptom* and eventually specified that "[t]here is only one social symptom—each individual is really a proletarian, having no discourse from which to make a social bond" (Lacan, *La troisième* 21–22). One could immediately reproach Lacan for repeating Marx's privileging of the industrial worker, thus excluding other social symptoms, such as, precisely, the woman or the colonial subject. But perhaps these distinct figures point toward a "negative common," so to speak, a figure of subjectivity in the state of rejection from the social bond. Then, "Lacan's proletarian" would stand as a possible generic name for this foreclosed subjectivity. Marx himself exemplified this rejection in the social figure of the industrial worker and more generally insisted that capitalism imposes social bonds between things (commodities) rather than between subjectivities. In this respect, the capitalist economy performs a homologous foreclosure of the subject to the one brought about by modern science (see Lacan, *Écrits* 731, 742).

After making the remark on the proletarian, Lacan moves on to pinpoint the specificity of psychoanalysis in comparison to other discourses and/or social bonds:

> *Socially, psychoanalysis has a different consistency than other discourses. It is a link between two. In this respect, psychoanalysis finds itself in the place of lack of sexual relation. This by no means suffices to make of it a social symptom, since sexual relation lacks*

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

> *in all forms of societies. This is linked to the truth that makes structure of each discourse. For this reason, by the way, there is no true society grounded on the analytic discourse. There is a School, which is precisely not defined by being a Society. (*La troisième *22)*

Of course, the passage overtly evokes Lacan's opposition to the International Psychoanalytic Association and the French Psychoanalytic Society (from which he was excluded in 1963). At the same time, Lacan plays with the fact that *société* (just as its English equivalent: society) is a homonym, signifying both institutional association and social formation. One may get the impression that for Lacan, too, there is no such thing as society, or that the latter designates an imaginary institution at best. However, this is not the point of his skepticism toward society. Rather, both as practice of the cure and a specific social bond, psychoanalysis exists only because there is a lack (or rather, a hole) of sexual relation.[12] It is not unimportant that all forms of society are said to be organized around this inexistence of relation and therefore stand for attempts in "economizing" or "working-through" this radical absence. A homologous point can be made in relation to Marx's historical materialism. For Marx, too, the existence of society is organized around a radical absence or inexistence of social relation, and if *The Communist Manifesto* insists that all human history is a history of class struggles, this implies precisely that all social forms are organized around a nonrapport, which in most known societies obtains the expression of social inequality and eventually of class struggle (a struggle between the exploitative and the nonexploitative organization of social being). And just as psychoanalysis establishes a social bond where "there is no such thing as sexual relation," emancipatory politics, too, establishes a social bond where "there is no such thing as social relation."[13] In both cases, the social bond is above all a work bond: between two speaking bodies in the case of psychoanalysis and between a multiplicity of speaking bodies in the case of historical materialism and emancipatory politics. Finally, just as *transference* names the affective labor in analysis, *solidarity* could be mobilized as a possible name for affective labor in politics.

Psychoanalysis and emancipatory politics intersect at the point of the symptom, whereby it makes perfect sense that Lacan sees in psychoanalysis not a social symptom, but a method of organizing the symptom's social character. The proletarian, this shared symptom of psychoanalysis and critique of political economy, is defined as a subject lacking social bond,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

hence precisely what makes up for the inexistence of social or sexual relation. In other words, and perhaps more specifically, the proletarian designates the subjectivity resulting from the capitalist dismantling of society—a subjectivity that is only allowed to subjectivize under the law of economic value and exchange (commodification, valorization, competition).[14] But precisely because it is "lacking every discourse from which to make a social bond," Lacan's proletarian must be differentiated from Marx's industrial proletariat (understood as an empirical category rather than a structural one), for the latter *is* integrated in some kind of a social bond, even if this integration remains symptomatic. The industrial worker is, on the one hand, the personification of an economic abstraction (labor power), and therefore reduced to a commodity among others, even though he is simultaneously a commodity-producing commodity; and on the other hand, he is an exemplification of exploited subjectivity, albeit not the only one: the woman and the slave, too, are nothing but commodities and at the same time commodity-producing commodities, but what distinguishes them from the worker is that they are, indeed, foreclosed from the capitalist social bond.[15]

However, Marx did elaborate the concept of surplus population, which corresponds better to Lacan's understanding of the proletarian. If, in capitalism, participation in the sphere of production means as much as being included in the capitalist (anti)social bond, then surplus population describes every subjectivity rejected from production, a redundant population that lacks every social bond, which would allow this subjectivity to actively resist systemic exploitation and violence. Lacan's proletarian, then, points more to Marx's *Lumpenproletariat* or Fanon's wretched of the earth: not only the overwhelming masses, who have no place in social production and economic exchange, but also the multiplicity of subjectivized bodies, exposed to ongoing sexual, racial, economic, and environmental violence. Indeed, these multiple bodies and identities all point toward the real of capitalist subjectivity—and it should be added that when Lacan says that "every subject is really a proletarian," we must recognize in "really" a reference to the category of the real: the subject in its impossible position as the outcast of discourse, discursively produced trash. Surplus population is certainly a disorganized mass, but it is also and furthermore a figure of redundant life, redundant at least in the eyes of the capitalist system. This mass deserves to be labelled a social symptom precisely because it brings to expression—indeed to visibility—the process of universal lumpenproletarization of humanity, the fact that capitalism progressively makes most of humanity redundant.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

In view of this, the task of psychoanalysis, indeed, appears impossible: to provide a social bond to the subjectivity deprived of the conditions of sociality. Clearly, psychoanalysis can manage this task only in relation—in solidarity—with other impossible professions.[16] Its main task remains opening the space in which the symptom will begin to speak and thus affirm its social (discursive) character.[17] When Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.) in the early 1880s baptized the then still experimental technique developed by Freud's mentor Joseph Breuer the "talking cure," she brought to the fore the fundamental displacement, for which psychoanalysis became known years later: the mobilization of the material causality of language in the direction of the cure. To repeat, in this way the symptom could be recognized as a social formation (and not merely as a "particular symptom," detached from its social causes). The fact that the subject in analysis obtains a bond, an affective expression in the phenomenon of transference, reflects the interplay between the inexistence of sexual relation and the existence of social bond. Transference comes with the reminder that there is no social bond without affective work on the perseverance of this bond, and precisely for this reason, psychoanalysis requires the dimension of solidarity between the analyst and the analysand. In emancipatory politics, too, symptoms begin to speak.[18] In doing so, they equally demonstrate their social character and become embedded in the process of constructing a bond, accompanied by the social affect of solidarity. Homologically to analysis, emancipatory politics affirms the inexistence of social relation and the existence of social bond—and more specifically, the possibility of another sociality than the one imposed by the capitalist market, the antisocial relation of competition accompanied by the affect of ressentiment.

Psychoanalysis and emancipatory politics are impossible professions or practices because they come down to an open-ended work process in which they must handle the ambivalence of affects: transference sways between positive (love) and negative (hate); solidarity, too, can turn positive (inclusive) and negative (exclusive), and in the latter case it intertwines with ressentiment. And just as politics and pedagogy often fail—in the sense that they renew exploitative relations tied to the figure of authority—psychoanalytic practice remains exposed to the abuse of transference. In all three professions, though, solidarity plays an equally important role, insofar as it not only designates a nonexploitative affective bond between speaking bodies and, indeed, between symptoms; it equally signals an ongoing process of work on such social bonds and therefore also a work on solidarity. Solidarity always comes with an inner loop, which may indicate its placement on

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

the border between the subjective and the social, an affect sustaining the consistency of the subject (one could speak here of internalized solidarity) and of intersubjectivity (one could call it externalized solidarity). At the same time, solidarity might as well be the affect that allows us to liberate difference (between bodies, identities, and subjectivities) from the ongoing capitalist strategies of its toxification. Needless to recall, if difference remains toxically invested with ressentiment, the multiplicity of emancipatory struggles remains caught in the (non)relation of mutual competition, where political subjectivity is disorganized and the social potential of the symptom is dismantled.

SAMO TOMŠIČ is currently a visiting professor of philosophy at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg and a research associate at Humboldt University of Berlin. His research areas comprise modern and contemporary European philosophy, history and theory of psychoanalysis, political philosophy, and the legacy of structuralism. Recent publications include *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (Verso, 2015) and *The Labour of Enjoyment: Toward a Critique of Libidinal Economy* (August Verlag, 2019/2021).

Notes

1 Freud, of course, already added to this list his own psychoanalytic invention: decentralization of thinking; dethroning the primacy of consciousness and the ego in mental life. See *Introductory* 284–85.

2 One must immediately add that Nietzsche more regularly uses the term *Instinkt* (instinct), which reflects his problematic biologism. For a well-pointed critical discussion of Nietzsche's biologism, see Ure 599–613.

3 Neoliberalism was initially conceived also as a moral order, which continued assuming the inherent rationality and self-regulation of the markets. Hence, the centrality of the notion of freedom, which, however, quickly unfolded its antisocial potential since it has always already been understood as freedom from constraints. For a systematic account, see Brown, "Neoliberalism's." I will return to this antisocial and authoritarian aspect of the neoliberal notion of freedom, below.

4 We are dealing here with the inverted "constancy principle" of capitalism—inverted because, unlike the Freudian pleasure principle, which pursues a state of equilibrium (renewal of ideal homeostasis, or the state of absence of excitation), it pursues, rather, a state of perpetual disequilibrium. Surplus value in Marx and surplus enjoyment in Lacan (or what Freud calls *Lustgewinn*, pleasure profit) ultimately name the structural instability in the organization of social production, or "the unbalance of the entire structure of accumulation" (Bianchi 1331).

5 Again, competition is understood, here, as a social bond and as the fundamental logical determination of our social being or our "being-with-others" in the capitalist universe.

6 Marx mocked this economic prejudice at the very beginning of his critical reflections on so-called primitive accumulation (837).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

7 Marx ventriloquizes the imperative: “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets! ‘Industry furnishes the material which saving accumulates.’ Therefore save, save, i.e., reconvert the greatest possible portion of surplus value or surplus product into capital! Accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production: this was the formula in which classical economics expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie in the period of its domination” (742). Accumulation and production hence serve no purpose, and in this regard they are not only antisocial but radically asocial. The feature of “serving no purpose” unites accumulation and production with Lacan’s definition of enjoyment (Lacan, *On Feminine* 3).

8 The claims of Brown’s book can be read as a critique of Foucault’s account of liberalism and neoliberalism, which is more about the imperative “society must be defended.” Brown’s *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* is also less about the end of neoliberalism than about its authoritarian kernel: the ruins of neoliberalism are the ruins produced by neoliberalism, which are precisely the ruins of society and of sociality.

9 We find this claim also in the most recent discussion of the notion of *Lumpenproletariat* (Barrow 138).

10 The capitalist scenario is no exception. Here, too, individuality results from the economic relations of competition and from their affective expression in ressentiment.

11 To reiterate, solidarity stands for a link between alienation and emancipation, since it unbinds me from my parochialism and identity (see McGowan 8–9). In *Universality and Identity Politics*, Todd McGowan speaks explicitly of the universal as “shared absence” (one could also say: negative common). Rather than standing for an abstraction, which subsumes all particularities (and thus abolishes their difference), the universal must be understood as something that lacks all identities and/or subjectivities. Consequently, the subject of emancipatory politics, too, stands for something else than simple abstract collectivity and is organized around this shared absence.

12 “There is no sexual relation” is Lacan’s famous “abbreviation” of Freud’s theory of sexuality. By introducing an extended conception of sexuality, Freud insisted that human sexuality always stands distinct from anatomy and biology. Far from being its normative framings, biology and anatomy are constantly subverted by the sexual drive. Consequently, sexuality is never organized around a stable and univocal relation between two presumably “natural sexes.” For further discussion, see, notably, Zupančič (5–12), and regarding Freud’s disputed biological determinism, Moi (369–93).

13 Contrary to this, we can conclude from Thatcher’s remark that for neoliberalism there is only (and only one) social relation: the relation of competition; and only one sexual relation: the traditional family. Hence, not only is there no such thing as society, but also and furthermore, there is no such thing as sexuality either. To be more precise, there is no such thing as sexuality in the extended Freudian sense, whereas sexuality in the reproductive sense certainly is. From the Freudian point of view, sexuality in this restricted, pseudo-naturalistic sense is a violent and exploitative fantasy.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

14 One could perhaps say that in the abstract act of economic exchange—the ideal *quid pro quo*, from which all actual inequality is removed—political economy conceived a fantasmatic social relation, albeit without society. One can impose this fantasy of relation only under the condition of utter hostility against the existence of society.

15 For a critique of Marx's privileging of the industrial worker, see Federici 12–13, 75, 91; and Moten 7–12, 17–18.

16 For Freud, the three impossible professions were governing, educating, and analyzing, to which Lacan somewhat surprisingly added science. The point is that all four practices—political, pedagogical, therapeutic, and epistemic—must organize political subjectivity in a manner that will advance the ongoing processes of social emancipation. Needless to add, since all four processes unfold in a hostile environment marked by the antisociality of capitalism, they are uninterruptedly exposed to failure. It is this internal antagonism that Freud strived to accentuate with the label "impossible professions," which are not possible without inner tensions, with which they must learn to work.

17 Lacan repeatedly played with the equivocity of the term *discours*, which bears the double meaning of (articulated) speech and the structure of intersubjective relations (social bond), working within and in between the speaking bodies and organizing them both in a social group and as particular units.

18 Fred Moten exposes Marx's lack precisely by pointing out that the slave is *the* speaking commodity (17).

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22.2 (2004): 117–39.

Barrow, Clyde W. *The Dangerous Class: The Concept of Lumpenproletariat*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2020.

Bianchi, Pietro. "Filming Capital." *The Sage Handbook of Marxism*. Ed. Beverley Skeggs, Sara R. Farris, Alberto Toscano, and Svenja Bromberg. London: Sage, 2021. 1320–36.

Biglieri, Paula, and Luciana Cadahia. *Seven Essays on Populism: For a Renewed Theoretical Perspective*. Cambridge: Polity, 2021.

Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia UP, 2019.

———. "Neoliberalism's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century 'Democracies.'" *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*. Ed. Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2018. 7–43.

Copjec, Joan. "The Inheritance of Potentiality: An Interview with Joan Copjec." *e-Rea* 12.1 (2014). http://journals.openedition.org/erea/4102.

Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2014.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. 1930. T*he Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. Vol. 21. London: Hogarth, 1961. 64–145. 24 vols. 1953–74.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023

———. *The Ego and the Id*. 1923. *The Standard Edition*. Vol. 19. 1961. 3–59.

———. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)*. 1916–17. *The Standard Edition*. Vol. 16. 1963.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006.

———. *La troisième*. Paris: Navarin, 2021.

———. *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–73. Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 1999.

Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Vol. 1. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990.

McGowan, Todd. *Universality and Identity Politics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2020.

Moi, Toril. *What Is a Woman?* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.

Thatcher, Margaret. "Interview for *Woman's Own* ('no such thing as society')." 23 Sept. 1987. *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

Ure, Michael. "Resentment/*Ressentiment*." *Constellations* 22.4 (2015): 599–613.

Zupančič, Alenka. *What* Is *Sex*? Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2017.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/33/2-3/51/1795119/0330051.pdf by guest on 26 March 2023