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Thinking with Marx For a Feminist Postcapitalist Politics

I. Introduction

The current economic crisis has reignited substantial interest in Marxist theory. There has been a return to Marx in order to gain a critical understanding of how capitalism works and what its alternatives might be. We would like to use the space provided by this article to contribute to this timely debate by presenting a feminist perspective on what postcapitalist politics might entail. For us, what renders Marx's writings of interest today are not so much the levers for systemic change that one may presumably find in his texts, but the theoretical openings accorded by the recognition of economic difference and contingency in his works (as well as within the Marxist tradition at large).

In what follows, we exemplify several such openings and explore their potential contributions towards imagining and enacting a postcapitalist politics of economic transformation and experimentation. Section II introduces the concept of a diverse economy and explores what it means to theorize economic difference as class difference in the Marxist sense. Section III critically discusses why the theoretical contributions of Marxist-feminism on the reproductive economy continue to be indispensable for theorizing economic heterogeneity. In Section IV, we approach the process of economic reproduction from a different angle. Building on Marx's analysis of the circuit of capital, we examine the theoretical impact of introducing a radical lack of determinacy into the diverse economy framework. Section V concludes with a reflection of the feminist postcapitalist ethics underlying research and activist projects that utilize the diverse economy framework.

As the article elaborates, postcapitalist politics entails a shift at both the ontological and epistemological levels. At the ontological level, we understand postcapitalism to involve an encounter with the economy as a heterogeneous space that is not reducible to capitalist relations of produc-

tion. Epistemologically, postcapitalism means debunking the primacy accorded to capitalism as the determining economic force in favour of an anti-essentialist perspective. Crucially, it requires an appreciation that such an epistemological reorientation towards the social itself bears a performative effect (Butler 1990). Put differently, it calls for the recognition of the performativity of the postcapitalist model of the world on the very construction of the world that one imagines and enacts. In this article, we make the case that the diverse economies research program, pioneered by J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006), involves such a break with reflective and realist epistemologies.

II. Reading Marx for class difference

Marx begins volume I of *Capital* with a discussion on the circulation of goods via markets. He introduces the reader to the idea that commodities exchange according to the amount of socially necessary abstract labour time embodied in them, then goes on to examine one particular commodity in great detail, namely labour power and how it exchanges for a wage. In a third step, Marx elaborates at great length how the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus is organized under capitalism and in what sense he considers this economic relation to be exploitative. We would like to start our mapping the diverse economy with entries that depict this familiar Marxist scheme (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The representation of capitalism in the diverse economy

Next, we would like to explore with Marx whether the diverse economy model offers any scope for economic processes that are not characterized by the capitalist class process outlined above. Certainly, both towards the end of Volume I of *Capital* and in various other writings such as *Grundrisse*, Marx does juxtapose capitalist to pre-capitalist economic relations. Modernist readings of Marx, rather than dwelling on the unique characteristics of such noncapitalist class pro-

cesses, have tended to depict them as sequential elements of a trajectory of universal economic development that unfolds ever more advanced class relations over time. In this historicist representation non-capitalist relations are precursors of capitalism, not co-extant.

We would like to propose a different reading in which class is seen as the ‘concrete universal’ of the Marxian tradition (Zizek 1999: 101–102). In this reading, ‘class’ as an object of theory emerges out of Marx’s analyses of the class concept’s variegated concrete manifestations, i.e. as a consequence of his repeated attempts to make sense of the changing forms of the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labour. At the same time, class always fails to be given a final shape by any one of these forms (Özselçuk and Madra 2005). This reading upsets the historicist approach and articulates a technology for exploring the co-existence of multiple ways to organize the production of a surplus, to remunerate labour, and to exchange goods. From a diverse economies perspective then, what Marx has produced is foremost an inventory of class, which in his writings refers to the distinctive modes of capitalist, feudal, slave, primitive communist, and independent commodity producing class relations. Rather than defining an exhaustive or a transparent list however, this inventory serves as a guidepost to articulate class difference in any conjuncture (Gibson-Graham 2006).

ORGANIZATION OF SURPLUS
CAPITALIST
NON-CAPITALIST
Feudal
Slave
Primitive communist
Independent

Figure 2: Diverse class relations based on reading of Marx against historicism and for class difference

The non-historicist reading of class and the introduction of non-capitalist class processes into the diverse economy table (see Figure 2) challenges the modernist Marxist discourse, which considers the contemporary economy as synonymous with a capitalist totality. As Figure 2 above shows, the diverse economy approach opens up a theoretical space from which to inquire into and articulate economic diversity qua surplus, i.e. to recognize the co-existence of various constellations of surplus production, appropriation and distribution at any particular space and time. Going beyond a mere elaboration of struggles over the capitalist surplus, it thus provides the theoretical tools to deconstruct the notion of class difference and rethink the economy as a radically heterogeneous space characterized by a multiplicity of struggles over (capitalist and non-capitalist) constellations of surplus (Resnick and Wolff 1987; Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000).

III. Marxist-feminist readings of reproduction and class difference

A second angle from which to approach the theme of class difference is through Marxist-feminism. The domestic labour debate in particular constitutes a significant intervention that has allowed for the capitalist wage, i.e. the value of workers' labour power, to be set in relation to the amount of unpaid labour produced within the household (for an overview of the debate see Jefferson and King 2001). As the discussion below shows, the recognition of the non-market, intra-household flow of goods deriving from the unpaid work of homemakers re-signifies the meaning of economic difference within the framework of a diverse economy. Moreover, it also foregrounds the question of how the market and non-market spheres of the economy interact with each other.

Particularly among those scholars who took up Louis Althusser's concept of *reproduction*, we recognize an effort to open a (relatively autonomous) sphere for recognizing and theorizing the gender division of labour underlying unpaid economic practices. At the time, this effort coincided with an expansion of the realm of Marxian political economy and of socialist struggle from production to social reproduction as such. Nonetheless, Marxist-feminist efforts to theorize the household have been marked from the outset by the difficulty of negotiating a de-centering of capitalism (in relation to the "constitutive outside" of social reproduction) with the necessity of capitalist reproduction (Molyneux 1979, Gibson-Graham 1996). In this context, a tendency of

economic determinism can be detected in the way caring and household labour have been conceived as functional to the reproduction of the capitalist labor force. Drawing on our earlier critique of the historicist interpretation of Marx, our first point of critique would thus relate to the logic of determinacy that has been introduced to the interrelation between capitalism and household labor. We would argue that such determinacy leaves virtually no room for contingency with respect to the reproduction of capitalism and makes it inconceivable at the level of theory to imagine a social dynamic emanating from the household sphere, which might jeopardize the capital-labour relation in any significant way.

A second point of critique concerns the ‘capitalocentric’ imaginary in which the domestic labor debate by and large remained. As J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) shows, capitalocentrism is a form of structural ontology that views and hierarchically orders all economic and non-economic processes and subjectivities in a binary relation (as subservient, the same, or complementary etc.) to a capitalist identity conceived as a self-cohering whole. To the extent that reproductive labour was understood primarily as being reproductive of capitalism (rather than any other economic relation), women’s unpaid economic contributions were seen as either subservient or complementary to capital, i.e. as theoretically embedded in capitalism via a unifying logic.

Based on the Marxian conception of class difference presented in Figure 2 above, it could thus be argued that contributors to the household labour debate failed to consider how unpaid domestic/care work might be contributing to the reproduction of non-capitalist forms of surplus production in a diverse economy. From the perspective of a postcapitalist politics, the capitalocentric representation of the household economy does not simply point to a blindspot in research. To the extent that the representation of the economy as a hierarchical binary is performative of the very object it constructs, it also directs the institutionalizations of the economy in ways that limit the possibilities of economic transformation and experimentation. In that sense, capitalocentrism has profound implications in terms of the limits that Marxist-feminist thinking imposes on itself with respect to the imaginary of political transformation (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). We will return to this point in the concluding section of the article.

A third point of critique pertains to the intersectionality of gender and class within Marxist theory. A substantial body of Marxist-feminist work has questioned the theoretical and political primacy accorded to class, and hence the relegation of women’s oppression as secondary to and derivative of capitalist exploitation (Hartmann 1981). Building on this critique, feminist scholarship

has explored possibilities for conceptualizing economic difference through the prism of gender as a social construction (rather than through the lens of capitalist reproduction). Notable constructivist contributions include Christine Delphy's theory of the "domestic mode of production" (Delphy 1984) and Nancy Folbre's theory of the "patriarchal mode of production" (Folbre 1987), both of which share the premise that women's unpaid labour structures a unique class relation distinct from capitalism.

We concur with feminist critiques of class essentialism within Marxism, but are wary of theories which position gender as the dominant social relation instead. Rather, it is in the work of Fraad, Resnick and Wolff (1994) that we find the Marxist-feminist position taken to its radically anti-essentialist conclusion. Their theory of multiple household class structures follows the work of Delphy and Folbre in so far as they recognize the household to be a site constitutive of economic relations that are not reducible to an effect of capitalism. In line with our earlier depiction of class difference in the diverse economy (see Figure 2), Fraad, Resnick and Wolff identify a multiplicity of different (exploitative or non-exploitative) constellations pertaining to the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor within the household (including the exploitative slave and feudal modes as well as the non-exploitative independent (i.e. single) and communal modes). Their theory of the household is anti-essentialist in the sense that they theorize gender relations as just one among many – rather than the central – determinant of household class relations. Secondly, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff do not consider the reproduction of any particular household class structure to be conditional upon a given set of key conditions of existence. Rather, the sustainability of a specific household class structure is subject to a radical contingency vis-à-vis its conditions of existence (In this respect we are already anticipating the Marxist notion of indeterminacy outlined in Section IV below).

Figure 3 presents a revised version of the diverse economy model that incorporates Marxist-feminist insights into the household economy. It exemplifies possible class constellations pertaining to the home-based, unpaid production of surplus and renders visible some of the ways in which this surplus gets distributed through non-market mechanisms.

TRANSACTIONS	LABOUR	ORGANIZATION OF SURPLUS
MARKET	WAGE	CAPITALIST
NONMARKET	UNPAID	NON-CAPITALIST
Household sharing	Household labour	Feudal
Gifting	Child care	Slave
	Elder care	Communal
	Neighbourhood work	Independent

Figure 3: Economic diversity as re-signified through Marxist-feminist theories of reproduction

IV. Expanded accumulation and indeterminacy in Marx

In this section, we would like to discuss the notion of reproduction from a different angle, taking Marx's exposition of the circuit of capital in *Capital* as our starting point. The development of Marx's arguments from volume 1 to volumes 2 and 3 is often perceived as an elaboration of Marx's materialist method, in the sense that he conceptualizes the concrete real by way of introducing more and more conditions of existence for capitalism, and hence being able to theoretically account for more complex and contradictory social constellations. Following Norton (2001) and Özselçuk and Madra (2007), we offer to read this same process as the increasing elucidation of the contingency of the reproduction of the capitalist enterprise and a concomitant distancing from the drive for capital accumulation.

According to Özselçuk and Madra, the circuit of capital (M - C...P...C'-M') is Marx's attempt to identify the distinct moments that, in the process of value creation, define the movement of capital from one form to another. Put differently, the circuit of capital does not prescribe an invariant, unmediated, self-constituted logic, a "law of motion", but rather formalizes the metamorphoses of capital: first, capital is to transform from its money-form M (finance capital) to com-

modity-form C (when the industrial capitalist purchases the means of production and the labor power and puts them to work); then, once the new commodities C' are produced, capital is to transform back into money-form M', as the goods are sold in the market and the surplus value appropriated from workers is realized. For Marx, this creation of value is never a smooth and frictionless process. Each transformation of capital is contingent upon and continually maintained by the social technologies that animate and enable the various economic agencies that participate in the circuit. Throughout the three volumes of *Capital*, Marx exemplifies how industrial capitalists draw on merchant capitalists to market the commodities, on providers of storage and transportation services, on finance capital to raise funds, on factory supervisors and legislation to discipline the workers in the labor process. We could add social agencies and institutions of reproduction, such as the trade unions, the government, the family, and so on (Özselçuk and Madra 2007, 84). The 'accumulationist' narrative presupposes the contradictory unfolding of the expanded reproduction of capital M-M' as a built-in and automatic process. This automatist reading of Marx would, however, prevent us from seeing the moments *within* the circuit, namely, the moments of production, appropriation, exchange, and distribution as potential sites of subjection and subjectivation. Reading Marx in a different light allows us to recover these moments of contingency and to reconsider some distinctively Marxian concerns: Who appropriates the surplus value? How are the means of production secured? What are the particular social and technical relations of producing surplus value? What happens to the realized surplus value? What are the concrete struggles over its distribution? As these questions are being posed, the circuit of capital and its continued reproduction starts to appear more and more uncertain and susceptible to disruption by a host of social and economic antagonisms.

Once we re-read Marx with an eye to the dynamics of contingency, two points emerge vis-à-vis the diverse economies framework: The first point is that there is no essentialist logic inherent to capitalist reproduction, and, by extension, to non-capitalist economic reproduction either. In other words, a condition of contingency is inscribed in each economic process depicted in our representation of the diverse economy. Secondly, lifting the imperative of capitalist accumulation allows for a more variegated reading of the objectives and constraints of the capitalist firm. We can thus differentiate alternative capitalist enterprises whose mode of operation takes into account social, cultural or ecological concerns (Figure 4).

ORGANIZATION OF SURPLUS
CAPITALIST
ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST
socially responsible capitalist
green capitalist
non-profits
NON-CAPITALIST
Feudal
Slave
Primitive communist
Independent

Figure 4: Diverse forms of surplus distribution within alternative capitalist and non-capitalist enterprises, based on reading Marx’s economic circuit for contingency

Our point here is not whether socially responsible corporations (philanthropic capitalists), green entrepreneurship, or non-profit organisations etc. are good or bad, but simply to point out the possibility of a re-channeling of flows of surplus value to different ends, and the fissure it introduces to a determinist logic of the circuit of capital. Moreover, we would argue that this representation constitutes a step towards destabilizing the binary between capitalism and its constitutive outside, i.e. non-capitalism. In this sense, re-reading *Capital* from the perspective of the contingency of the circuit of capital (rather than the logic of economic determinism) not only makes for a theoretically richer depiction of the economic realm in its heterogeneous copiousness. It also re-focuses our vision towards the possibilities for transformative politics on the ground. It is to the enactment of such alternative visions of the economy as a space of ethical decision-making that we now turn in our concluding section.

IV. Performing a postcapitalist politics

Having laid out the diverse economies framework, we would like to proceed by pinpointing some

of the ways in which this framework has been related to a postcapitalist politics by researchers and activists associated with the Community Economies Research Collective.¹ A caveat is in place here. The diverse economies perspective broadens our conception of economic value and widens our policy choices. It is not meant as a way of arriving at a more ‘complete economy’ by “adding in” formerly invisible and marginalized economic practices. Nor does it claim that *all* economic practices and transactions should be valued indiscriminately, or that they might contribute to ‘alternative’ economic niches. Rather, the diverse economies framework embodies a shift from a moral position involving an “a priori judgment about whether a practice is valued as good or bad” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 98) to an ethics of conduct. This stance involves starting here and now, i.e. to regard each individual economic transaction and practice as a possible site of struggle and ethical decision-making, as the (problematic) starting place for a project of transformation or becoming. Through its refusal to posit an *a priori* judgment about the value of any transaction and practice, the diverse economies framework forces us to inquire into the specific conditions of any economic activity and subject it to a process of democratic decision-making about its potential merits and drawbacks.

Such conscious reflection constitutes the basis for a process of building and performing a new value, a being-in-common at the economic level. Postcapitalist politics leads us on towards an engagement with the economic field from a perspective of ethical decision making, bringing together the realms of community and economy by articulating a shared concern about economic and ecological interdependence. Key concerns of a community economy include how to produce and share a social surplus in order to meet our needs, how to generate and sustain commons, as well as how to invest in an ecologically and socially sustainable future (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013). Given the fact that all class formations feature institutionalized mechanisms that attempt to configure the necessary/surplus division and the social content of “needs”, the central impulse of postcapitalist politics is to foreground “the inherent sociality of decisions made in

¹ In keeping with the central theme of this edited volume, we have focused on theorizing the diverse economy through a re-reading of Marx. However, we would like to point out that scholars and activists working in the field of diverse economies – and specifically those who are associated with the community economies hybrid research collective – draw on a diverse range of radical intellectual traditions and social movements, such as the post-Fordist school that questions the stage model of historical industrialization (Piore and Sabel 1984); feminist economics that highlights the question of unpaid and caring labour in a broader sense; a queer politics that explores sexual difference in its complexity and its refusal of coherence; the solidarity economy movement that fosters worker-owned cooperatives; urban, rural, ecological and cyber movements that forefront the commons, and the economic anthropology of the gift economy. Not only is the process of mapping diverse economies continuously evolving, but it also categorically rejects the idea of compiling an exhaustive listing of all existing economic practices based on a uniform theoretical agenda (also see www.communityeconomies.org).

defining necessity, and the various forms of interdependence that are enacted when such decisions are made” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 90). In other words, prior to enacting a particular institutional configuration, postcapitalist politics aims to open up the tightly woven sutures of already existing discourses and institutions that determine what is necessary and what is surplus.

By way of a conclusion, let us reiterate that postcapitalist politics does not refer to a blueprint around which to organize diverse economic transactions. It does not prescribe a certain scale – whether it be local or global – for transformation. It is both a naming and a process; it is the nodal point of an investment that sets off a process of negotiating relations of interdependency among the different economic practices of diverse economies. While postcapitalist politics reveals a preference for “democratic negotiation”, its democratic deliberation and participatory politics is grounded in the premise of an affective surplus, i.e. that there is an irreducible antagonism in the social that refuses the ultimate reconciliation of community through communicative reasoning à la Habermas. The ethical dimension of postcapitalist politics thus refers to a shift of subjectivity that chooses not to cover over inherent antagonisms by positing ideals of economic harmony. In this sense, the ethics of postcapitalist politics refers to a commitment to a continual process of ‘becoming in common’ through refusing the homogenization of identities and harmonization of community.

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