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# The Particularity of the Capitalist Universal

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## The Monadology

The capitalist epoch is the first in human history that permits subjects to view themselves as isolated entities with no inherent connection to their fellow beings. In the capitalist universe, there is no divinity binding everyone together nor a leader that has the fealty of the whole society. One would think that such a structure bespeaks capitalism's vulnerability to revolutionary change, its precariousness. A system that doesn't create explicit connections between its subjects seems destined to be short-lived. The irony is that the isolation of subjects does not threaten the capitalist system but ensures its perpetuation.

Capitalism depends on subjects immersing themselves entirely in their own particular concerns because when they do so they unconsciously betray their investment in the capitalist universal. Under capitalism, subjects adhere to the universal by retreating into the particular. This paradoxical structure gives capitalism its uniqueness as a socioeconomic system. It perpetuates itself in a way no other previous socioeconomic system could. But the blindness to the universal that capitalism produces also leads to its proclivity for provoking unprecedented historical catastrophes.

By thrusting subjects into an isolated particularity without explicit reference to universality, capitalism leaves subjects without any relatively consistent sense of identity. Every capitalist subject is an empty particular bent on accumulating. But

many subjects are not satisfied with this emptiness and the blandishments of the commodity that promise to assuage it. They seek an identity to give their subjectivity some content, and they often find it in religious, ethnic, or nationalist projects. Even though versions of these projects all predate capitalist modernity, their contemporary form is a product of the capitalist universe and thus a phenomenon as new as capitalist modernity itself. The Christian zealot of the first century is radically different from the contemporary Christian fundamentalist because the latter adopts this identity in response to the empty particularity of capitalism rather than the oppressive universal of the Roman Empire (as in the case of the former). In prior epochs, subjects have an identity directly available to them through the ruling universal, though they can also opt for alternatives when it fails to satisfy.

In modernity, the turn to identity attempts to compensate for what capitalist subjectivity lacks, but it produces movements like Nazism, the National Front, America First, and Islamic fundamentalism. These movements are so virulent because they are trying to establish an identity that capitalism constantly undermines. Even when they are not explicitly anti-capitalist, fundamentalist movements engage in an unending struggle to create what the global system itself renders impossible, which is why fundamentalism cannot finally triumph. If they do win and defeat capitalist modernity, they would find themselves without the background that undergirds the identity that they provide. The impossibility of identity projects in the capitalist epoch gives them their intransigence and often leads to carnage.

Identity politics is the reactionary compensation for the empty isolation that capitalism imposes on the subject. Rather than challenging the dictates of capitalism, this form of politics keeps capitalist subjectivity going. A sense of identity enables one to endure the prison of one's isolated particularity without calling this particularity itself into question. As long as one has a sense of identity, one need not challenge the capitalist universal. In this situation, the universal continues to impose itself without disruption. Identity forces us to remain on the turf of the particular when the universal forges the determinants of our situation.

Marx's fundamental discovery in *Capital* is not surplus value, not the tendency of profit to fall, and not even the contradictions that beset the capitalist mode of production. Instead, the great breakthrough that occurs when Marx writes the first volume of *Capital* is the insight that capitalist subjects cannot know what they are doing. Capitalism deceives subjects not with false beliefs – ideology is not reducible to a set of (erroneous) beliefs – but on the basic level of who they are. In order to act

as a capitalist subject, one must consciously pursue one's own particular aim while actually doing the behest of the capitalist universal.

The capitalist universal is the demand for the incessant accumulation of capital. Although only individuals or corporations do the accumulating, when they do so they are heeding this social demand. Nothing must get in the way of unlimited accumulation, which is why capitalism destroys all traditional limits on production and consumption. A telling example of capitalism's ability to blow through traditional limits on the accumulation of capital is the elimination of restrictions on when stores could be open in the United States. Religious tradition, often formalized in so-called blue laws, led to stores being closed on Sunday throughout the history of American retailing. This began to change in the 1970s, as business owners began to see an opportunity for acquiring capital from customers eager to spend money on both days of the weekend, not just one. Consequently, retail shop after retail shop began to open on Sunday. Today, almost every retailer has Sunday hours. Sometimes there remains a slight nod to tradition when a store opens an hour later on Sunday than on weekdays, but often the store hours on Sunday are exactly the same as the hours for every other day. The artificial limit to capital posed by the religious idea of the Sabbath as a day of rest falls victim to the imperative of accumulation. Even if this notion of the Sabbath and its enforced rest was already part of the structure of capitalism, its destruction nonetheless testifies to the expansion of the capitalist universal. Capital runs roughshod over tradition with its universal drive to accumulate.

This universal reaches everywhere. But no one within capitalist society works on behalf of the society itself or on behalf of accumulation in general. There are no explicit champions of the capitalist universal that cede their own particular interests to those of capitalist society. Even those serving in the military of capitalist states believe that they defend the nation and not the capitalist economy. Unlike the Christian martyr or the soldier of the French Revolution, I don't have to die so that the capitalist universal can live. Instead, capitalist subjects think that they use capital for their own satisfaction while capital uses them to satisfy its own drive."<sup>1</sup> This is the basic capitalist deception.

Marx lays out different versions of this necessary deception at key points in his analysis of capitalism. When he discusses commodity fetishism, for instance, he indicates the discrepancy between how subjects treat the commodity and how it appears to them. Later, he claims that those within the capitalist system must see labor time not as labor time but as money. Then, when he examines the self-

valorization of capital, he recognizes how the actions of the capitalist are not individual actions but those of capital itself.<sup>2</sup> These individual errors are not just contingent illusions that deceive capitalist subjects but necessary ones. They speak to the basic way that capitalism mystifies how it works to those most involved in it. Self-deception about the universal is the sine qua non for the functioning of capitalism. In the capitalist epoch, not knowing what one does becomes, for the first time in human history, essential (rather than just beneficial) to the reproduction of the ruling socioeconomic system.<sup>3</sup>

The great transformation that the emergence of capitalism enacts is the change in how the universal reproduces itself. In traditional society, representatives of the universal—the society's figures of authority—demand that subjects submit their particularity to the dictates of the universal. Even though the universal can involve deceptions like aligning the ruler with divinity or promising an eternal reward for obedience, subjects can obey straightforwardly and without self-deception. Even though choosing not to obey might entail exile or death, one nonetheless confronts the universal as a universal rather than in the guise of one's own particularity. This is the basic difference. In an imperial society, the emperor's dictates indicate the universality to which subjects must conform. In a theocratic society, the commands of the priest serve the same function. The content of this universality can be deceiving – it can convince subjects that their lives have worth only in being sacrificed for the empire or for God – but its universal form is not a deception. This enables subjects of traditional society consciously to confront the universal governing their existence.

Once capitalism becomes the ruling socioeconomic system, this structure undergoes a revolution. In the capitalist epoch, a bizarre inversion occurs: the universal does not perpetuate itself in opposition to particularity but by ceding its perpetuation wholly to the particular.<sup>4</sup> One obeys not by submitting to the domination of a universal command but by following one's own self-interest. This has radical effects on the experience of the subject.

Capitalism does not eliminate the universal, though it does eliminate the experience of submission to the universal. Subjects continue to participate in a universal structure that guides their existence, but they cease to view it as a universal. With capitalism, the universal becomes unconscious.<sup>5</sup> It no longer requires particulars to accede to it consciously. This does not lessen the power of the capitalist universal relative to the universal in prior epochs. In fact, the unconscious status of the universal within capitalism increases its power. Even at

the moments one believes oneself to be breaking from it, one finds oneself doing its inexorable bidding.

The more that one pursues one's private self-interest with no regard for any universal considerations, the more one acts as the puppet of the capitalist universal. This is why it is so difficult to break subjects of their attachment to capitalism. The attachment doesn't feel like an attachment at all. It feels like I am doing just what I want to do. My insistence on my own private interest has already been taken into account by the functioning of capitalism.

This is clearest in the case of stock market traders. These subjects are the engines of the capitalist system, deciding which companies to fund and which to devalue. Though they seem parasitical on the production process – they often receive moral condemnation for their parasitical status relative to those who make useful things – they represent the pure form of capitalist subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> Unlike other subjects who permit an admixture of other concerns to dilute the capitalist universal, their only aim is to use capital to generate additional capital. They do this without concerning themselves with producing anything. They operate solely at the level of exchange value and ignore entirely that of use value. Their only aim is the process of accumulating capital, which is the aim of the capitalist system as well. Stock market traders are the most loyal servants of the capitalist universal.

No one starts to work on the stock market in order to serve capital. This separates it distinctly from other occupations, in which the idea of serving can contribute to the choice of occupation. One can become a doctor to help the sick. One can become a teacher to educate the young. One can become a garbage collector to allow people to live in relative cleanliness. One can even become a lawyer to assist those in trouble. Of course, we can imagine those who pursue these occupations just for the money and not to serve anyone. The aspect of service may even be an ideological illusion designed to suck unsuspecting labor into these areas of the economy. But it is at least possible to consider the alternative of helping others as a motivating factor. If it weren't a factor in any way, it is difficult to explain why the teacher, for instance, didn't choose a more lucrative occupation. In the case of the stock trader, there can only be one aim – the accumulation of capital – because stock traders are indifferent to the type of companies they invest in or divest from. From the perspective of the trader, a munitions manufacturer is the same as a children's hospital. The company is nothing but a formal entity. The content of what it does is not a factor in its ability to generate capital.

Of all the forms of capitalist subjectivity, stock traders are the most open in pursuit of their own self-interest. These subjects don't allow other considerations like social welfare or political implications to interfere with the straightforward accumulation of capital.<sup>7</sup> But these pure capitalist subjects don't know what they are doing. To do what they do, they must believe that they are using capital to serve their own interests, otherwise they would find another racket. Stock traders experience their occupation as a way of finding satisfaction through making money. But what really happens in their trading is something else altogether. Capital uses traders to develop itself while leaving them with a lingering dissatisfaction that they never have enough. Their accumulation doesn't serve their own interests but those of capital.

Stock traders give a significant portion of their lives to serve capital. They serve the capitalist universal even though they have no conscious investment in such service. In the history of humanity, no one has ever signed up to sacrifice her or his life for the sake of capitalism, which distinguishes it from the Catholic Church or the British empire. Traders are the foot soldiers of the capitalist universal, but unlike the foot soldiers of the Catholic Church or the British empire, they do not conceive of themselves as soldiers of the universal at all. Instead, they have a thoroughgoing conviction that they are acting solely on behalf of their own particular interest. They think that they are pulling one over on universality itself by becoming rich simply by trading stocks. They pity the poor slob who laboring in the companies that they buy and sell throughout the day. The fact that stock traders don't know what they are doing makes them even more effective soldiers of the universal. Unlike conscious soldiers of the universal, they never hesitate between their particular interest and that of the universal since they are entirely aligned. In the capitalist epoch, pursuit of particular interest becomes the way that the universal advances itself.

As a result, insistence on particularity against the claims of the universal – the privileging of private interest – becomes the new mode of conformism. Marx states this directly in the first volume of *Capital*, when he claims that in capitalist society “the social power becomes the private power of private persons.”<sup>8</sup> We don't confront social power as an external force that imposes universality on us. The universal now perpetuates itself through the private activity of particulars, not through a public authority. In this way, the functioning of the universal becomes mystified for the subjects of capitalist society.

## Invisible Hands Groping Us

With the emergence of capitalist society, one's participation in the universal comes to depend on one's inability to recognize this participation while one is participating. Once we take the universal into account, once we consider the society as a whole rather than our own particularity, we cannot act on behalf of the capitalist universal because this universal requires an immersion in particularity. To act in terms of the universal is necessarily to abandon the capitalist universal in favor of another one – one that permits subjects to recognize it openly. Open universality in the capitalist universe is necessarily anti-capitalist. In this sense, what Adam Smith calls the capitalist “invisible hand” is not just contingently invisible. It must remain invisible. Capitalism's destruction of the public world and the commons is integral to its survival. By eliminating reminders of the universality that binds subjects to each other, capitalism sustains their investment in the capitalist universal.

In order to be an effective capitalist subject, one must disavow knowledge of the universal capitalist project and not allow it to factor into one's decisions. This is what Adam Smith is getting at in *The Wealth of Nations* when he analyzes the relationship between individual pursuit of self-interest and the social good. Smith states, “Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. It is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of society, which he has in view. But the study of his own advantage naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to society.”<sup>9</sup> Within capitalism, thinking in terms of one's own particularity doesn't hinder the working of the universal. It is instead absolutely necessary for capitalism.

Smith's analysis points us in the right direction for understanding the relationship between the particular and the universal within capitalism. But the problem with his view lies in the slippage that the notion of advantage undergoes from the first sentence of the quoted passage to the second. According to Smith, subjects seek out the most “advantageous employment” for their capital. What is advantageous for one's capital, however, is not necessarily to one's “own advantage,” as Smith puts it in the second sentence. Smith never attempts to prove that the accumulation of capital works for the advantage of subjects. He even goes so far as to confess the contrary.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (which he published 17 years before *The Wealth of Nations*) Smith explains how the belief that accumulation is advantageous

is a necessary deception that keeps the capitalist engine running. He claims that the “real satisfaction” that the pleasure of wealth provides is actually “in the highest degree contemptible and trifling.”<sup>10</sup> Smith has no illusions about the benefits that accumulation provides for the subject doing the accumulating. Accumulation, according to Smith, is the path to ensuring one’s perpetual sense of dissatisfaction. However, he does recognize the necessary role that this deception plays in the perpetuation of capitalism. Smith adds that this false belief that accumulation brings real satisfaction is the driving force for “the industry of mankind.”<sup>11</sup> Capitalism relies on the deceptive equation of the subject’s own advantage with the advantage of capital itself. If subjects really pursued their own satisfaction, they would not be proper capitalist subjects but would refuse to invest themselves in endless accumulation.

The great trick of the capitalist economy is that subjects enthusiastically embrace the sense of dissatisfaction that its fundamental axiom of endless accumulation demands. Accumulation takes a toll on subjects’ ability to recognize their satisfaction. It leaves them constantly believing that there is more satisfaction to be had in the accumulation of additional commodities. But the more that one accumulates the less one is able to see that one will never have enough. In the attempt to accumulate more and more satisfaction for oneself, one actually increases one’s sense of dissatisfaction. Capitalism nourishes itself on the inability of the subject to ever have enough. The subject’s private endeavors to have more are always inadvertent tributes to the capitalist universal. Thinking that it is doing what it wants, the capitalist subject sacrifices itself for the capitalist universal.<sup>12</sup>

Capitalist subjects must immerse themselves in their particularity while aligning this particularity with the exigencies of the capitalist universal. They must link their particular interest with the accumulation of capital, even though this accumulation acts as a barrier to the recognition of their own individual satisfaction. Accumulation acts as a duty to the universal that passes for a path to the subject’s own particular enjoyment. Even though it never seems like a social duty at all, the path of accumulation is one of perpetual dissatisfaction, which is what betrays its status as a duty.

In a startling passage from *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx details the choice that confronts the subject within the capitalist system. One can either invest oneself in the project of accumulation, or one can recognize that no additional number of commodities can deliver an ultimate satisfaction. Satisfaction is never total, despite what capital promises. Marx writes, “The less you



eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theater, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* – the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour – your *capital*.”<sup>13</sup> One who tries to find a surplus satisfaction through the accumulation of capital misses out on the real satisfaction that comes from the travails of subjectivity itself – eating, reading books, going to the cinema, loving. Of course, all of these activities require some money to engage in them, but they don't require the incessant accumulation of capital. If one constantly strives for more, one cannot see that satisfaction requires less. We give up the possibility of recognizing our satisfaction in order to satisfy the capitalist universal.

Subjects that spend their time accumulating continue to do so because they accept the dictate of the capitalist universal that they never have enough. This is why we see the strange phenomenon of incredibly wealthy people like Bill Gates or George Soros doing whatever they can to earn more. Once one accepts that accumulation is the path to satisfaction, one accedes to an unending dissatisfaction that ensues when one does one's duty for the sake of the capitalist universal.

## A Disdainful Structure

The necessary blindness to the universal that occurs in the capitalist epoch has deleterious consequences for those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. While every epoch disdains those that the ruling system leaves behind, under capitalism this disdain becomes even more pronounced because one's failure is now a result of one's own desire, not the dictates of the universal social apparatus. Since, in the capitalist universe, there are only particulars, the cause of my failure must reside in my particularity. If I don't have a job, it is my fault, not the fault of a system that declares me an outcast. The obscurity of the capitalist universal leads us to blame those excluded from the work force for their own fate, as the case of unemployment nicely illustrates.

When we conceive ourselves as an aggregate of particular subjects rather than as participants within a universal system, unemployment can only be the result of a lack of industriousness. Those who don't have a job are the ones who don't try hard enough. They have done something – or not done something – that leaves them in this position. A strict system of merit governs employment, enabling us to feel morally justified in our condemnation of the idleness of the permanently

unemployed. But we can adopt this attitude only because we don't see the structural necessity of their unemployment.

Even if one doesn't go as far as Marx and assert the economic necessity of a reserve army of the unemployed, it is nonetheless clear that the proper working of the economic system depends on a certain level of unemployment.<sup>14</sup> Capitalist economists themselves accept that eliminating unemployment altogether would portend skyrocketing inflation and economic disaster. Thus, economists search for a level of unemployment that they label "full employment." Full employment, despite the name, is not the elimination of all unemployment but rather the minimum percentage of unemployed that the economy can endure without triggering runaway inflation.

Debate rages about where we draw the line and whether or not the line is always the same in every form of capitalist economy. But almost all economists accept that there exists what is called the "non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment" (or NAIRU). If unemployment passes beneath this threshold, a crisis will ensue. The health of capitalism as a system derives from a certain percentage of workers filling the role of the necessarily unemployed.

Capitalism's dependence on this level of unemployment removes joblessness from the failures of the particular and places it on the terrain of the universal. Though the capitalist economy doesn't determine which subjects don't have jobs, it does require that at least some subjects are in this position. In this sense, even if the unemployed are lazy and unambitious, they are nonetheless fulfilling the role that capitalism demands of someone.

In the academic labor market where the reserve army of labor is massive, this dynamic plays itself out even among those who should know better. In the humanities, each open permanent position typically attracts hundreds of applicants. Those who attain a doctorate in the humanities thus have dismal chances of finding a decent position at a four-year university. But there are those who attend prestigious schools, publish numerous works, and have recommendations from famous professors. In this way, they establish themselves as top job candidates. These few end up with appealing positions, while their fellow graduates in the humanities toil away as contingent laborers in obscure institutions.

Everyone within the system of academic cutthroat capitalism knows the rules of the game. Those who don't have permanent positions are structurally condemned not to have them. If they had permanent positions, they would simply dislodge others who would take their place among the marginalized. And if they

worked harder and were more meritorious, they would do nothing but force those who succeed to work even harder themselves. One would have to have published three books to get a university position instead of just two, for instance. There is no way of escaping the necessity of these unemployed and underemployed as long as the market demands it.

And yet, those working within the humanities in the academy by and large accept the notion that merit will be rewarded. Even when one knows full well that the unemployment is structural, one tells one's graduate students that they can work hard enough to beat the system, that there is a way to triumph in the system if one is really industrious.<sup>15</sup> It is almost impossible to stop believing in the promise of merit no matter how much one knows about structural unemployment.

The problem is that capitalist subjects, ensconced in their own particularity, cannot view the unemployed from the perspective of the universal. When one approaches the problem of unemployment as a capitalist subject, it necessarily appears as a particular failure rather than as the result of a universal necessity. Examining the activities of particular unemployed subjects will always turn up moments where they didn't do all that they could to find a job. They didn't get perfect grades in college, didn't have the proper experience, or had a typo on their résumé. This is because it is impossible to spend every second maximizing one's job prospects. All time that the unemployed have spent eating, sleeping, and amusing themselves could provide proof that they deserve their unemployment. Because there is no perfect capitalist subject, there is no way to escape the notion that the unemployed have some culpability for their position when one analyzes them from within the capitalist system.

From the perspective of the particular, this analysis is correct. Often, those who don't have jobs have at some point done less than others who do, even if capitalism doesn't justly reward effort. But this failure is structurally necessary. If those who are currently unemployed didn't fall through the cracks, others would have – and they would also seem culpable for their failure to find a job from the perspective of the particular. Because capitalism confines subjects to this perspective, it renders everyone incapable of seeing the unemployed as fulfilling a necessary role within the functioning of a capitalist economy. Rather than blaming them for their miserable condition, one should thank them for occupying the position within the economy that no one would want to occupy.

Our collective inability to recognize the necessity of the unemployed is the result of the form that capitalist subjectivity takes. As capitalist subjects, we have no

direct access to the capitalist universal. This is why Marx claims that “the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him.”<sup>16</sup> The enforced particularity of capitalist subjectivity establishes universality as foreign. The capitalist subject cannot adopt the perspective of the capitalist universal – with its requisite amount of unemployment – while remaining a capitalist subject. One perpetuates the capitalist system only when one doesn't occupy oneself with its perpetuation. The contempt for the requisite unemployed is just one more indication of this inherent blindness.<sup>17</sup>

## The Empty Subject

Though capitalism leaves subjects isolated in the experience of their own particularity, this particularity is always empty. The abstract universality of capitalism suffuses subjectivity and leaves subjectivity without any content. Capitalism provides commodities for the subject, but it doesn't offer any type of identity. Instead, it remains completely neutral on the question of what identity one has as a particular in the capitalist universe. As a capitalist subject, one has no experience of the universal and no identity to fill one's particularity. One experiences oneself as a particular, but this particularity bears the imprint of capitalist universality, which is why it is empty.

The emptiness of capitalist subjectivity derives from the role that the general equivalent (or money) plays in capitalism. Capitalism does not invent the general equivalent, but it undergoes a radical transformation with the emergence of capitalism. In fact, one could define capitalism as much by its privileging of the general equivalent as by its imperative to endlessly accumulate. The general equivalent is a mortal threat to traditional society and the lifeblood of capitalist society. Marx describes this difference in *Capital*. He notes,

Just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too for its part, as a radical leveler, it extinguishes all distinctions.... Ancient society therefore denounced it as tending to destroy the economic and moral order. Modern society, which already in its infancy had pulled Pluto by the hairs of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of its innermost principle of life.<sup>18</sup>

Traditional society rightly fears the leveling power of the general equivalent, but modern capitalist society uses this power to transfer the universal to the care of the

particular, a feat unimaginable in traditional society. Money is the vehicle through which particulars perpetuate the capitalist universal.

As a result of the central role that the general equivalent has in capitalist society, the identity that subjects have in traditional society loses its intrinsic status. Capitalism's indifference to particular identity strips identity of its apparent givenness.<sup>19</sup> Identity doesn't disappear altogether but becomes a figure that the individual puts on or adopts. The subject no longer is its identity. Instead, one's identity becomes alien, even when one embodies it.

The complete isolation of the empty subject that existentialist philosophy discovers becomes clearly visible only in the capitalist epoch, which is why there are no 15th century existentialists. Though thinkers like Saint Augustine anticipate the isolated loneliness that modern existentialists emphasize, they remain exceptions in the precapitalist universe. And even Augustine finds Christian faith as a panacea for this aloneness. By stripping the subject of the bonds of identity, capitalism lays bare the subject's existential situation for the first time. One is alone with the emptiness of one's own subjectivity.

Jean-Paul Sartre provides a compelling account of the subject's radical existential isolation, though he does not credit this discovery to the revelations of capitalism. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes,

I emerge alone and in anxiety facing the unique and first project that constitutes my being, all the barriers, all safeguards collapse, ... nothing can assure me against myself; cut off from the world and from my essence by the nothingness that I *am*; I have to realize the sense of the world and of my essence: I decide on it, alone, unjustifiable, and without excuse.<sup>20</sup>

The subject has nothing but its own isolation. It relates to its own essence – its own content – as alien.

Sartre describes a subject whose identity or what he calls the subject in-itself is necessarily distinct from the subject as a for-itself. No matter what the for-itself does, it can never become fully identical with the in-itself. For existentialism, I never am any identity that I take up or that others attribute to me. My identity is always what I am not, and to believe that I really am my identity is to fall into bad faith. In the act of identifying as a particular content, a distance remains between my subjectivity and this identity that I take up. This distance becomes apparent only when capitalism transforms subjectivity.

The revolution that capitalism enacts manifests itself in the language of contemporary gender politics. Rather than accepting gender or sexual identity as constitutively given, subjects choose how they will identify themselves. Instead of saying, "I am a gay man," I say, "I identify as a gay man." Though not everyone uses this phrasing, its mere existence testifies to the relationship with identity that has emerged today. This shift reflects an awareness that gender and sexual identity are not inherent to my subjectivity. I confront gender and sexuality as possibilities that I can adopt or not. The same goes for religious or even ethnic identity, though we don't use the same language in these cases.

Capitalism's annihilation of mythic natural identity frees subjects to seek their own identity. In this sense, this annihilation is part of the emancipatory role that capitalism plays in human history. But it also renders all my choices of identity contingent and even false. Identity doesn't give me a sense of unique belonging to a group, nor does it attest to my singularity as a subject. It becomes almost as insignificant as a commodity that I acquire. Identifying as a gender and sexuality has as much singularity to it as buying a widescreen television. It is another effect of the general equivalent.

The general equivalent doesn't just enable us to equate all commodities with each other but goes even further. It reduces every subject to an interchangeable market actor without an identity that distinguishes it from other subjects. No matter how I identify myself, I'm really just an interchangeable part in the capitalist universe. Marx describes this in a key passage from the *Grundrisse*. He says,

In the money relation, in the developed system of exchange (and this semblance seduces the democrats), the ties of personal dependence, the distinctions of blood, education, etc. are in fact exploded, ripped up.<sup>21</sup>

In the wake of the general equivalent's dominance, distinctions of identity cease to matter. Who I am becomes insignificant, despite the fact that capitalist ideology insists that all I have is my own particular interests. Capitalism gives me individuality while simultaneously making it worthless.

This becomes apparent when we look at how the market operates. The particular identity of those interacting on the market has no bearing at all on their actions. For instance, one sells one's labor the same way whether one is male or female, Muslim or Christian, young or old, Russian or Chinese, and so on. The teenage Indonesian girl has a far greater disadvantage relative to the capitalist

employer than the middle aged white man in Chicago, but this discrepancy does not affect the transaction itself. Further, these different identities don't affect how one buys commodities, even if they might impact which commodities one buys. In the exchange itself, one is always just an empty subject, even if the content of one's subjectivity locates how the exchange takes place. The logic of capitalism doesn't change because of differences of identity but rather openly accommodates these differences. If they follow its logic, the organs of capitalism want to hire those who will work for the least, and they want to sell to those who will pay the most. In neither case does identity enter into the calculation.<sup>22</sup>

It is true that prejudice injects itself into capitalist exchanges all the time. A company may not want to make wedding cakes for gay couples, for instance. This is a clear moment in which the logic of capitalism does not hold sway in the heart of capitalist society. It is even possible that prejudice could be so widespread that no company would attempt to fill the void in the market. Gay couples might find no one willing to make them wedding cakes. But in this case, the prejudice is external to the demands of capitalism, which call for subjects to take advantage of the possibility for accumulation regardless of the identities involved. One can disobey capitalism's demands, but its demands never take identity into account.<sup>23</sup>

The market demands that subjects act according to its dictates, and subjects comport themselves appropriately, regardless of their particular identity. If they fail to do so, other subjects will act in their place. In this way, capitalism simultaneously absolves subjects of personal culpability for their misdeeds – someone would always be doing the exploiting if the subject didn't do it – while rewarding them for acting ruthlessly. Capitalist subjects who refuse to ruthlessly exploit every opportunity will inevitably fall to those who have no such compunctions.

The case of Wal-Mart aptly illustrates this logic. Wal-Mart destroys local retailers by underselling them. They can do this because they put pressure on suppliers to lower costs, which has the effect of ensuring horrible working conditions for those manufacturing the products they sell. The damage done by Wal-Mart to local businesses and workers around the world is catastrophic. This is why many consumers refuse to shop at Wal-Mart and contribute to this destruction. But within the capitalist system, one cannot blame the executives at Wal-Mart for this predatory practice. In this sense, boycotting the store is akin to blaming an executioner for the system of capital punishment. If the executives at Wal-Mart didn't exploit the possibility of underselling local retailers, other executives would. They act as universal subjects. Their particular motivations are unimportant.

The same logic applies to those at the other end of the spectrum. Workers who have jobs at Wal-Mart participate in the decimation of local retailers and the immiseration of those producing the goods that Wal-Mart sells. But when they work at Wal-Mart, they do so as universal capitalist subjects. They seek the best wages that they can find or even the only job available. The competition for jobs forces someone to work at Wal-Mart (even though it is possible to imagine someone working there willingly). The workers there are universal capitalist subjects acting in the way that the capitalist system demands. Capitalism ensconces subjects – both capitalists and workers – in a universal logic that prescribes their activity while granting them a subjective experience of freedom. Every capitalist subject is a universal capitalist subject.

Within the logic of capitalism, subjects attempt to give their particular identity a content, but these attempts have the effect of exposing capitalism's inability to provide a satisfactory identity. One can define one's particular identity only in the most vapid ways – through consumer choices or prefabricated hobbies. I drive a Toyota while you drive a Mercedes. I play tennis in my spare time while you play golf. I root for the Cincinnati Bengals while you root for the New England Patriots. I like to travel while you prefer to stay home. And so on. These inanities bespeak capitalism's elimination of any content in the subject's experience of its isolated particularity. Capitalist subjects are condemned to their particularity, but this particularity has nothing to it.

## The Missing Revolution

Marx's wager in *Capital* and elsewhere is that the capitalism's destruction of identity would create subjects with no attachment to their particularity. Capitalists fill the emptiness of their particularity with money and other commodities. Capitalists have their particular accumulation. Even if this accumulation offers them nothing but dissatisfaction after dissatisfaction, they can at least hope that some future level of accumulation will provide what they've been missing. This hope is what keeps them invested in the capitalist system, despite its broken promises. Workers don't have that option. In Marx's account, they are pure form without content and thus the model for revolutionary subjectivity.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx identifies the limitation that confronts workers who attempt to follow the path of the capitalists toward accumulation. Such a position is impossible for workers to take up in large numbers. As Marx puts it,



An individual worker can be *industrious* above the average, more than he has to be in order to live as a worker, only because another lies below the average, is lazier; he can save only because and if another wastes.<sup>24</sup>

The worker who accumulates like the capitalist can only do so as an exception. If every worker took this path, they would decrease the value of their commodity—labor power—so that it would earn them less. Too much collective industriousness and accumulation simply results in less income for workers to use for the project of accumulation. The path of the capitalist is not open to the worker as such, only to the worker as exception.

This absence of any path for workers to provide a content for their particular subjectivity is the basis for Marx's supposition that the working class functions incipiently as a revolutionary class. Without the possibility of the accumulation that gives the capitalist a content, the working class lacks the identity that the capitalist class has. Because its particularity is empty, it can assume the mantle of universality without sacrificing anything. The working class has everything to gain and nothing to lose with the turn toward revolution.

Most autopsies of Marxism's fate in the 20th century focus on capitalism's ability to adjust and accommodate the interests of the working class. This is the conclusion that Herbert Marcuse reaches in *One-Dimensional Man*. He argues that "the more the rulers are capable of delivering the goods of consumption, the more firmly will the underlying population be tied to various ruling bureaucracies."<sup>25</sup> Marcuse's belief that the availability of consumer goods on a mass scale diluted the revolutionary impetus of the working class is not an isolated view. Most Marxists accept it because it seems almost self-evident. If workers can accumulate some goods (though they still cannot accumulate capital), they find enough satisfaction within the capitalist system that they no longer have nothing to lose. 20th century capitalism discovered a solution to the problem of the emptiness of working class subjectivity, a solution that kept this subjectivity from turning to the universal.

As tempting as it is to follow Marcuse in the direction of consumption, we should nevertheless reject this possible answer. Clearly, it does not go completely astray. The availability of consumer goods for the working class played an important role in the investment of this class in the capitalist system. But not the decisive role. If consumption were the source of the workers' attachment to capitalism, they would undoubtedly express more of an objection to the inequalities of consumption that the capitalist system produces. Consumption alone cannot explain capitulation.

The answer lies in the reactions that capitalism's emptying out of identity has aroused. Throughout the 20th century, projects of identity politics arise in order to provide what capitalist subjectivity lacks. These projects have either a nationalist, religious, or ethnic hue – and some, like Nazism, manage to combine all three. In these projects, particular identity acquires a specific content. Because these projects are concerned only with particular identity, they do not threaten the capitalist universal. They actually assist capitalism by providing a missing identity for workers struggling with the emptiness of their particularity within the capitalist system. Without identity politics, capitalism would not be able to keep the working class at bay. Even though projects of identity sometimes present themselves in opposition to capitalism, it continues to function in concert with these projects, even in their most extreme form.

No project of identity politics in the 20th century goes further than Nazism. Nazism values German national identity and Aryan ethnicity above the dictates of capitalism, which it often identifies as a conspiracy of "International Jewry." Hitler himself makes this plain in *Mein Kampf* when he claims that in the assertion of German national identity, "the hardest battle would have to be fought, not against hostile nations, but against international capital."<sup>26</sup> But despite this outsized role that Nazism gives identity relative to capitalism, the project of capitalist accumulation runs apace during the Nazi Holocaust.

Nazism was bad for Jews, but it was not bad for business. The most celebrated example of capitalist accumulation working in concert with the Nazi assertion of Aryan identity is the behavior of the company I. G. Farben at Auschwitz. I. G. Farben, a chemical and pharmaceutical company, did not just employ a few Jews at Auschwitz as cheap labor. The company went so far as to build a factory at the camp in order to make use of the site itself and the massive potential for labor power that Auschwitz provided. I. G. Farben made itself into an integral part of the functioning of Auschwitz. If Auschwitz stands today as a synecdoche for the horrors of the Nazi project of identity, its compatibility with capitalism is impossible to doubt.

Identity politics is not necessary for capitalist enterprises. Outside of I. G. Farben and a few others, they do just fine without it. However, identity politics is an absolute necessity for capitalism as such. Without some project of identity to give their isolated subjectivity a content, workers would simply not accept the inequality of the capitalist system. Identity enables them to embrace the capitalist system in spite of their position within it.

When he was first campaigning for president in the spring of 2008, Barack

Obama analyzed the role that identity politics plays in the acceptance of the capitalist status quo by the working class. Talking about this class, Obama said,

They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.<sup>27</sup>

While Obama's analysis undoubtedly hits the mark – too well, which generated lasting trouble for him – the problem with it is that he calls into question all the reasons members of the working class have for remaining invested in capitalism. Since Obama wasn't running as an anti-capitalist candidate, this comment stripped away the only identity available for people and left them nothing in its stead – specifically, no alternative universal to the capitalist one.

The subjects of capitalism for whom unbridled accumulation is not an option do cling to their religion, their ethnic identity, and their nation – and they often take up enthusiastically the prejudices that secure these identities. The turn to identity gives capitalist subjects something when they otherwise have nothing but an empty form. This is why political projects based on the assertion of identity have had such an appeal throughout the capitalist epoch. And as capitalism develops, the clamor of identity politics will inevitably become louder and louder.

When leftists wonder about the missing revolutionary class and lament the investment that would-be revolutionary subjects have in reactionary projects of identity politics, they should consider what these projects offer that subjects cannot find anywhere else. Islamic fundamentalists, nationalists like Donald Trump, and purveyors of ethnic purity like the Nazis all supplement the denuded particularity of capitalist subjectivity with a missing content. By doing so, they make this subjectivity enduring. Projects of identity politics like these are thus essential for the flourishing of capitalism. Capitalist subjectivity is a bland particularity that has difficulty sustaining the enthusiasm of adherents among the working class. The appeal to identity is capitalist subjectivity's secret sauce.

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<sup>27</sup> In *Realizing Capital*, Anna Kornbluh notes how subjects become inevitably caught up in "the repetitive, immutable, immeasurable propulsion of Capital's drive. Drive in its blindness, in its

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immanence, in its absoluteness, in its infinity, bespeaks a force terrifyingly indifferent to the subjects it animates." Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p.127. Kornbluh's insightful analysis of the capitalist drive reveals that not only is this drive to accumulate indifferent to the subjects that it ensnares but that it is also indifferent to the object of increased accumulation. The drive to accumulate satisfies itself in accumulating, not in having accumulated. This is why there is never enough in the capitalist universe.

<sup>2</sup> Marx states clearly, "As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), p.342. In order to function as the personification of capital in this way, individual capitalists have to believe in their own individual agency.

<sup>3</sup> Whereas the dying Christ points out that the enemies of the universal who put him to death do not know what they do, under capitalism proponents of the capitalist universal are the ones who act unknowingly.

<sup>4</sup> Though he had no acquaintance with capitalism, Aristotle, if he had the chance, would undoubtedly label capitalist society a perversion. In the *Politics*, he condemns rule focused on the particular, which is what capitalist society requires, as perverse. He states, "governments which rule with a view to the private interest, whether of the one, or of the few, or of the many, are perversions." Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:3.7. What Aristotle can't imagine, because he has no experience of capitalism, is how a focus on private interest can become the vehicle for the perpetuation of the universal.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that the universal becomes unconscious in the capitalist epoch makes the discovery of psychoanalysis possible. In earlier epochs in which the universal was conscious, it would have been impossible for Freud to discover the effects of the unconscious. It is only with the bizarre world of capitalism that the existence of the unconscious would become evident for someone like Freud to recognize it. Which is not to say that psychoanalysis is just a capitalist endeavor. Given the structure of capitalism, paying attention to the unconscious is the only path to challenging this structure.

<sup>6</sup> The romantic image of true capitalists as those who produce things rather than just speculating on the stock market is a fantasy that helps to justify the capitalist system. The fantasmatic dimension of this image becomes evident in one of the most powerful fantasy films of the 1990s. In addition to its depiction of prostitution as the path to untold riches, the film *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1990) shows a ruthless stock trader, Edward (Richard Gere), converting at the end of the film to a capitalist who actually produces commodities rather than just speculating on them. The film presents this conversion as an ethical turn operating in parallel with Edward's realization of his love for the prostitute Vivian (Julia Roberts). But just like the romance of the prostitute with the millionaire, the image of the capitalist who really produces things disguises how capitalism works.

<sup>7</sup> Though there are traders who specialize in socially conscious trading – investing only in companies that don't destroy the environment, treat workers well, and so on – this specialty enables them to attract the capital of those who would might otherwise withdraw their capital from the market. They are thus aiding unbridled accumulation through their discriminating accumulation.

<sup>8</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p.230.

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- <sup>9</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Hamburg: Management Laboratory Press, 2008), pp.343-344.
- <sup>10</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p.214.
- <sup>11</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p.214.
- <sup>12</sup> For more on the subject's sacrifices for capitalism, see Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- <sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 150. Marx expresses this same idea in different terms in the first volume of *Capital*. There, he says, "there develops in the breast of the capitalist a Faustian conflict between the passion for accumulation and the desire for enjoyment." Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p.741.
- <sup>14</sup> Marx states, "Capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labour-power which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its unrestricted activity an industrial reserve army which is independent of these natural limits." Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, 788. This industrial reserve army depresses the wages that labor can earn and thus facilitates the accumulation of capital.
- <sup>15</sup> I have been guilty of reproducing exactly this line of argument with an outstanding graduate student, despite recognizing all along the structural of the unemployment he would confront.
- <sup>16</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p.381.
- <sup>17</sup> The contempt for those who necessarily fail in the capitalist system reveals its basic hostility to the project of Christianity. While capitalism traps subjects in their particularity, Christianity highlights their participation in the universal like no other religion. While capitalism scorns those left behind, Christianity sees in them the embodiment of its universality. The fact that capitalism emerged where Christianity dominated is one of the greatest perversities in human history.
- <sup>18</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp.229-230. In his *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel makes a related point. He notes, "Money has provided us with the sole possibility for uniting people while excluding everything personal and specific." Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 2nd ed., trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.345.
- <sup>19</sup> Kojin Karatani points out that the main appeal of money is its ability to allow us to transcend any identity. With money, identity becomes exchangeable. He writes, "People turn to money because it is the general equivalent form that offers direct exchangeability. This fetishism of money is expressed in our desire to avoid the selling position – that is, subordinating ourselves to the will of others – and, instead, to seek the position from which we can exchange directly at any time." Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, trans. Sabu Kosho (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp.169-170. In Karatani's terms, being in the selling position means precisely not being stuck in an identity.
- <sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p.63 (translation modified).
- <sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), pp.173-164.
- <sup>22</sup> Capitalism's destruction of identity leads Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to celebrate it as the paradigmatic revolutionary enterprise. The only problem with capitalism, as they see it, is that it doesn't go far enough. They write, "capitalism and its break are defined not solely by decoded flows, but by the generalized decoding of flows, the conjunction of deterritorialized flows. It is the singular nature of this conjunction that ensured the universality of capitalism." Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R.

Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.224. Identity is an arresting of flows, and when capitalism decodes flows, it frees us from the trap of identity.

<sup>23</sup> Those who refuse to bake cakes for gay couples experience their position as a radical one, but they don't recognize themselves as rebels against capitalism. They are rather convinced that they rebel against modern secularism. They can't see the universal that their rebellion targets because it is constitutively invisible.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p.286.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p.43.

<sup>26</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), p.213.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Ed Pilkington, "Obama Angers Midwest Voters with Guns and Religion Remark," *The Guardian* (14 April 2008):

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/14/barackobama.uselections2008>.