

# Negative Community. Marx and Žižek on Capitalist Totality

Clara R. San Miguel

**Abstract:** In Marx's critique of political economy, modern capitalist society occupies an enigmatic position. In a crucial passage from the *Urtext*, this position appears to be defined in negative terms: *neither* a substantial ethical community *nor* an association of free, self-conscious individuals, or communism. Drawing on Žižek's insights, this intervention seeks to clarify the peculiar negative status of capitalist totality.

**Keywords:** Žižek; Marx; negation; double negation; modern society; community; Hegel; critique of political economy; inversion.

It is scarcely surprising that economists have overlooked the form-content of the relative value-expression, subjected as they are to the influence of material interests, if professional logicians before Hegel even overlooked the content of form in the paradigms of judgments and conclusions.

Marx, MEGA II.5, n. 20, p. 32.

### 1. The “Neither...Nor” of Modern Capitalist Society

In the *Urtext* to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx offers one of the most conceptually precise and incisive portraits of capitalist society in his entire body of work. The passage is dense and demanding, but it deserves to be quoted in full:

The individuals confront each other only as proprietors of exchange values, as such individuals who have given themselves reified being [*gegenständliches Dasein*] for each other through their product, the commodity. Without this objective mediation, they have no relation to each other from the standpoint of the social metabolism under way in circulation. They exist for each other only as things, something that is merely further developed in the money relation, in which their community [*Gemeinwesen*] itself appears as an external and hence a casual thing with respect to all. That the social connection resulting from the collision of independent individuals appears with respect to them simultaneously both as objective necessity and as external bond *in effect* expresses *their independence*; for *which social being, though a necessity, is no more than a means, and therefore appears to the individuals themselves as something external, and in money, even as a tangible thing*. They produce in and for the society as social individuals, but at the same time this appears merely as a means for objectifying their individuality. Since they are, on the one hand, neither subsumed under any naturally evolved community [*naturwüchsiges Gemeinwesen*] nor, on the other, consciously communal individuals

[*bewußt Gemeinschaftliche*] subsuming the community under themselves, this community must also exist as an independent, external, casual thing [*ein ... Sachliches*] with respect to them as independent subjects. This is precisely the condition for them to stand as independent private individuals while at the same time as part of a social connection.<sup>1</sup>

This convoluted passage, rich in Hegelian terminology and dialectical turns, and, to my knowledge, rarely discussed in the literature, contains much to discuss. Before delving into its content, we should first attend to its syntax. If we focus on the last part, the text seems to attribute a peculiar *negative* status to modern capitalist society: “neither...nor”. In capitalist society, Marx says, the individuals are *neither* subsumed under a “naturally evolved community” *nor* subsume “the community under themselves” as consciously communal individuals. The status of modern society is then a negative one: “neither...nor”, *neither* communal *nor* communal.

Why this double impossibility of community? Does Marx mean that modern society is neither communal *anymore* as it used to be, nor communal *yet* as it will, could or should be? He seems to imply indeed that the specific status of modern society is that of neither communal as in pre-capitalist, organic communities nor communal as in post-capitalist, communist societies. A first question then arises: is Marx making a historical claim in this fragment? It could seem so, if we recall his observations in the section “Forms which Precede Capitalist Production” in the *Grundrisse*. On the other hand, everyone knows that “communism” is the name which Marx consistently gives the future, post-capitalist society. However, as we shall see, things are not that simple. We will come back to this later.

Secondly. What seems clear is that this status of modern society is defined by a form of negativity: the absence of community. But Marx goes further. This absence of a directly social bond does not imply the absence of a social bond whatsoever. Marx wants to understand the specific modern form of social bond which is not a directly personal, communal bond. What kind of social totality emerges in the absence of community? Marx’s interest is understanding the specific capitalist modality of a “social metabolism” which must always occur. What we find at work here as the specific capitalist form of social metabolism is, in Marx’s terms, the “objective mediation”. In this specific modality, the individuals do not confront each other by establishing a direct personal social relationship, but only as commodity owners and exchangers. They do not display a direct “social being”, but a “reified being”, because their social bond is mediated objectively, by the object-commodity. They do not exist as people to each other but only as owners of things; they do not interact, they only exchange. Their bond is established by and through things. Their only social relation is the reified relation of exchange, which occurs solely

with the mediation of things, the exchanged commodities. The exchange relation is an “objective mediation”. Without this objective mediation, they bear no relation whatsoever to one another: they are isolated individuals, independent from one another. They see their social context only as a means for obtaining *things*, be it money or other commodities.

In modern society, social metabolism is organized through this “objective mediation”: the social does not appear as directly social because it is not directly social. It is social only through the mediation of things. Accordingly, the social retains a negative status. Modern society is what we called a “negative community”. As Marx notes, the community is only defined in terms of what it can offer to the individual: society is only “a means for objectifying their individuality”. That is why, on the one hand, their “community” appears as something external, non-qualitative and indifferent. We look at the community as the provider of means for developing our individuality, mainly in the forms of consumption of commodities or neoliberal development of self-valorizing micro-subjectivities. Our “community” is the abstract, quantitative realm of exchange value which receives a tangible body in the form of money. And this is why, on the other hand, the individuals are in a social connection precisely, only, and insofar as they are “independent private persons”. They take part in a social context, they are “social individuals”; but their being social consists in developing their apparently non-social individuality by commodity exchange and ownership.

Marx’ aim is to understand this specific modern form of the social: the capitalist negative community. With the help of Žižek, we will thus tackle several questions in this text. How can we understand this constitution of society in the absence of community, this social bond through the reified relationship, this bond through independence, this social being through private individuality? How should we understand this paradoxical, negative status of modern society? How is this “neither...nor” character related to its past and future –if we are even allowed to make use of these terms, which is perhaps already too bold a supposition from our side?

## 2. “The Power of Money”, or Value as Separation

In which sense is modern society the negation of a “naturally evolved community”? Backhaus and Reichelt understood a crucial point: Marx’ value and surplus value theory is not a theory of the quantities of labour, prices or exploitation, but an exposition of the specific modern-capitalist process of constituting a society [*Vergesellschaftung*] through a series of inversions and reifications and under the real abstraction as general form of social mediation.<sup>2</sup> Marx’s question is: how is a society constituted under capitalist conditions? Capitalist society is, precisely, following the classical distinction, a society [*Gesellschaft*] relying on separation and atomization, and not a community [*Gemeinschaft*]. Marx’s only aim

throughout his life, from his early readings of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* to his later anthropological reflections on Russia, India and Latin America, was to establish the *differentia specifica* of modern capitalist society as a peculiar form of social totality and to isolate its specific difference from other social formations.

What is modern society? It is first defined as the result of a process of dissolution. Marx affirmed in the *Communist Manifesto* the well-known sentence: all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. Modern society has brought an end to the colorful traditional, feudal, religious and patriarchal forms of community, their organic belonging, and their "natural" hierarchical relations. In the *Urtext*, Marx refers to a quotation from the conservative historian Thomas Carlyle: "In feudal time cash payment had not grown to be the sole nexus of man to man. Not as buyer and seller alone, but in many senses still as soldier and captain, as loyal subject and guiding king, etc. was the low related to the high. With the supreme triumph of cash, a changed time has entered."<sup>3</sup> In feudal times, the social bond signifies "the low related to the high" and it marks this relation as hierarchy, family name, qualitative difference and singularity. However, with "the supreme triumph of cash", a new era enters. In modern capitalist society, social metabolism takes place in a market in which money and commodities, including labour power, are exchanged. With money as general equivalent, every qualitative particularity in interpersonal relations dissolves. No longer does the captain confront the soldier, the lord the peasant, the king the loyal subject, the husband the wife, the father the son. Kings, husbands, fathers and lords are also subject to money. What remains are exchange relations: abstract individuals involved in the transaction who, for one another, represent nothing but the embodied form of exchange value. Thus, says Marx, "the idyllic aura that covered up the transaction in its previous form is dispelled." We are now in what Hegel called the "world of prose". Money as the general equivalent has a dissolving power: its abstraction dissolves the mystical content of previous forms of political domination. "Money has now become the sole *nexus rerum* [the link between things] between them, money *sans phrase*." This means: the exchange relations substitute personal relations of domination.<sup>4</sup>

Money wields a sort of ontologically determining power. In chapter III of *Capital*, in a poetic passage full of literary references, Marx writes about "the power of money".<sup>5</sup> Money is "the radical leveller" which makes everything saleable and buyable, erases every distinction and grants exchangeability as general form of everything that exists, even "the bones of the saints". This is the end of differences in kind and the reign of differences in degree: more or less, not this as distinct from the other; the end of untransferable characteristic and the reign of commensurability. A product, a work of art or a natural resource; everything, thing or person, appears as a mere quantity. The alchemy of money transmutes one thing

into its opposite; as Shakespeare put it, it knits and breaks religions and makes black, white; foul, fair; wrong, right; old, young. Buy a soul, break a promise, sell a king: capitalist Modernity is the reign of a nihilist evacuation of contents and at the same time the prospect of a previously unimaginable power. Money is indeed a commodity, an external object, and as such capable of becoming the private property of any individual: “Thus social power becomes the private power of private persons. The ancients therefore denounced money as subversive of the economic and moral order of things.”<sup>6</sup> Marx underlines a certain omnipotence in money which makes the human being turn its back on the very gods in a heretic, anti-divine frenzy: quoting Sophokles’ *Antigone*, Marx describes how money demolishes cities, twists minds, separates men from their homes and makes them, in Sophokles words, “adept at every kind of outrage, every godless crime”.

It is as if Shakespeare, but even Sophokles, had already foreseen the process of secularization and nihilism involved in the modern generalization of the commodity form; the power of money means the dethronement of gods, meaning, and moral values. What Sophokles and Shakespeare denounced as corrosive, disintegrating, dissolving, nihilist power of money has become the general form of social mediation in modern society: “Modern society, which, soon after its birth, pulled Plutus by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of the very principle of its own life.”<sup>7</sup>

It was Hegel who gave a conceptual, systematic expression to this nihilistic, negative character of commodity and money as social mediators in his *Philosophy of Right*, which served as Marx’s intellectual formation. It is with Hegel that Marx grasps the principle of modern civil society as one of division. Civil society rests on separation and division of the closed, substantial community, of which the family is a muster. For Hegel, civil society means the impossibility of constructing closed, substantial ethical communities. It is with Hegel that Marx conceives modern society as negation: the negation of community. As Hegel makes clear in the crucial §181 of his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which deals with the transition from the family to civil society, civil society belongs to the stage of “difference” and separation, or it is only a “state of Understanding”. Civil society appears as a plurality of atomized individuals; the universal is present but only in appearance. Civil society constitutes “the world of appearance [*Erscheinungswelt*] of the ethical”: “The ethical is lost in its extremes, and the immediate unity of the family has disintegrated into a plurality. Reality here is externality, [...]”<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. *Nexus rerum*, or Value as System

However, one should remember Marx's warning in the *Urtext*: circulation of commodities is a mediation between preposited extremes, but it does not "posit" those extremes. Seen as total process, exchange is itself mediation: "Its immediate being is thus pure shine [*Schein*]"<sup>9</sup>. Separation and individuality belong only to the immediate appearance of the social totality; they do not suffice for its conceptual reconstruction.<sup>10</sup> Here lies a core insight. Money as general equivalent does not only dissolve the "naturally evolved community": it also links. Its separation power is at the same time a linking power: it links insofar it separates, it constitutes insofar as it dissolves. Capitalist exchange, in other words, is a way of constructing a social totality at world-scale. Value is the *nexus rerum*, the bind of all things, and insofar a form of (reified) social relation. In Hegel's terms, multilateral dependence of the individuals constitutes a system, the "system of needs".

Even in the prevalence of the particular, the context and totality of relations which produce the individual persist. Reified relations are still a form of social mediation; even the society which produces the very form of "individual" is still prevalently a society and not a mere addition of individuals. In other words, the individual is always a product of a previous set of relations, not a starting point, even it is what appears first: "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another."<sup>11</sup> The individual and isolated producer and owner which serves as starting point for the political economy is an illusion, a "Robinsonade". As we saw in the *Urtext*, in modern bourgeois society the social nexus appears as an external framework and means towards the individual private needs:

But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is precisely the epoch of the hitherto most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations. Man is a ζῷον πολιτικόν in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society.<sup>12</sup>

Exchange is then a specific way of constituting the social totality in a non-directly social way. It is a negative *Vergesellschaftung*. This is why value is a social form: a social relation is established through the mediation of things. Marx became Marx when he was able to explain value as social form—as we argued elsewhere, the content of his "value theory" is thus the commodity fetish theory. As Isaak Rubin noted, value does not concern the relationship between labour and products, which is a non-specific relation; value concerns the crafting of a social relation between the totality of the productive forces of a society by the mediation of exchange, which is a historically specific form, the modern capitalist society.

Hence, we must understand that capitalist society is not constituted *either* by individuals *or* by relations: it encompasses both. In this vein, Žižek has argued that the mature Marx, as opposed to his younger texts, no longer deploys the rhetorical figure “instead of” to signal the inversion that would be present in the speculative, Hegelian conception as ideological inversion of the actual, “material” life. When Marx uses this figure in his mature texts, he also underscores that both states, the inverted and the “normal” one, belong to the complex effective reality of capitalist totality. The mystified space of the capitalist totality comprises both the “normal” and the inverted moment.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, Marx is not claiming that the individual is a “mere appearance”, but a manifestation of actual social relations which entail a moment of division, inversion and mystification. The young Marx blamed Hegel for developing speculative idealizations “instead of” an account of the actual material social relations. The mature Marx understands that Hegelian speculation and inversion dialectics *are* the actual material social relations of the capitalist totality, which appear as a second nature or “social objectivity”. As he claims in the quote from the first edition of *Capital* opening this text, both the logicians and the economists were not idealist enough, not Hegelian enough. The economists were not idealist enough to understand value-form, its inversions, and capital’s functioning as totality which retroactively posits its own presuppositions. In this sense, as Žižek has argued, a confrontation with Hegel is needed to develop a “materialist” position.

#### 4. Negative Community. Žižek on Double Negation

Modern society is thus essentially negative: what we named in the title of this text a “negative community”, or a place defined by the absence of community. Its form is that of division, particularity and reification. As we saw in the *Urtext* text quoted above, Marx underlines this negative character in modern society by the double negation “neither...nor”: apparently, we are in this “not communal anymore” but “not communal yet” moment. In modern society, the ethical life of the substantial organic community has been dissolved, but a new collective consciousness does not yet seem possible. This seems intuitive: what we encounter in modern society are isolated atoms confronted with a machine-like State—a foreign and external Leviathan. The mechanism of the 17th and 18th centuries, from Descartes to La Mettrie and Newton, constituted the true modern social contract. Modernity is that moment in which the old ethical life of the substantial community has died, while the immediate conditions for the emergence of a new post-capitalist or communist form of community have not yet come into being. But is it that simple? How should we understand this negative community?

As we have seen, for Marx, even the society which produces the very form of individuality is still a society and not a mere addition of

individuals. For Marx, the epoch which produces the standpoint of the isolated individual is precisely the epoch of the most highly developed general-social relations. The atomized individual is the product, not the origin; but the product of a social process and a structure which vanishes, leaving only the result. The isolated individual is, in a word, the most refined product of the most complex social relations. In the crucial Interlude 1: “Marx as a Reader of Hegel, Hegel as a Reader of Marx” in *Less than Nothing*, Žižek makes several decisive comments on the matter. Hegel’s crucial step to maturity, Žižek argues, occurs when he abandons his Romantic fascination with Ancient Greece as beautiful organic community and fully develops the “mediating role of civil society”. What does it mean that civil society is a “mediation”? Mediation to what? As we said, civil society occupies the systematic place of “negation” inside the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. The need thus arises for Hegel, Žižek recalls, to “pass” to the true “State of Reason”, or State as proper reconciliation of the individual and subjective dispositions with its universal social substance. But the crucial question is: how must we understand this *Übergang* or transit “to” the State? Žižek’s at first sight enigmatic thesis is that civil society is *in itself* already the reconciliation between the particular and the universal:

It is thus not simply that one has to “overcome” the mechanical or external interaction of civil society in a higher organic unity: civil society and its disintegration plays a crucial mediating role, so that the true reconciliation (which does not abolish modern subjective freedom) has to recognize how this disintegration is in itself already its opposite, a force of integration. Reconciliation is thus radically *immanent*: it implies a shift of perspective with regard to what first appeared as disintegration.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, for Žižek it is precisely *insofar* as civil society *is* the sphere of separation and alienation that it should function as the sphere of unity. It is precisely the forms of competition, isolation, conflict and reification which make the individuals completely interdependent in capitalist civil society which thus craft the ultimate social link. The “resources for reconciliation”, argues Žižek, must be found “in this very sphere”, not in the passage to a higher sphere. The State is no “higher” sphere, but the social energies of civil society considered *under* a different perspective. The State “already” exists “in” the civil society. Far from being simply a corrosive force, the market works as “mediating process” which already forms the basis of a true reconciliation between the universal and the singular<sup>15</sup>.

How should we understand this? In the *Capital* passage we quoted above, Marx said that modern society greets gold as “the glittering incarnation of the very principle of its own life”. Why does Marx say that money is the incarnation of the very principle of modern society’s life?

Because the exchange system as a whole entails the principle of life of modern society—only in a peculiar, by definition reified mode, as it is mediated by exchange of commodities. Marx’s clearest explanation of this point is found in his famous letter to Kugelmann:

Every child knows that any nation that stopped working, not for a year, but let us say, just for a few weeks, would perish. And every child knows, too, that the amounts of products corresponding to the differing amounts of needs demand differing and quantitatively determined amounts of society’s aggregate labour. It is SELF-EVIDENT that this *necessity* of the *distribution* of social labour in specific proportions is certainly not abolished by the *specific form* of social production; it can only change its *form of manifestation*. Natural laws cannot be abolished at all. The only thing that can change, under historically differing conditions, is the *form* in which those laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour asserts itself in a state of society in which the interconnection of social labour expresses itself as the *private exchange* of the individual products of labour, is precisely the *exchange value* of these products. Where science comes in is to show how the law of value asserts itself.<sup>16</sup>

The general exchange system and the subsumption of labour under capital is a particular form of organizing the distribution of social labour: a way in which the social character of labour *appears* only as property of the individual products of labour as their exchange value. But what concerns us now is the first point: that the market society or general exchange system, the Hegelian “system of needs”, is just a particular mode of appearance or manifestation of the distribution and organization of the total labour of society. The question is: how does this very principle of social life attain an adequate *form*? In this sense, as Žižek argued, the universal is “already” present in the civil society. But what is the logical-conceptual status of this “already”? We must reckon, Žižek says, disintegration as “in itself already its opposite, a force of integration”.

What is at stake here is of course how to understand the passage from the “in itself” to “for itself”, or the negation of negation. Žižek underscores Hegel’s negation as determinate negation: the result of negation is not a pure nothing but related to that which is negated. The double negation is for Žižek repetition in its purest form. His at first perhaps shocking reading of the role of civil society is completely coherent with his reading of the double negation in Hegel. To put it this way: if we understand in which sense the negation is “already” a negation of negation, we understand in which sense the atomized modern society is “already” a new form of community. In this sense, Chris Arthur has argued that the famous “negation of the negation” passage in chapter 24

of *Capital* should not be read from the standpoint of a “historic dialectic”, as sequence of historical stages, but as a form of “systematic dialectic” which addresses the structural relations and contradictions of a given system—in this case, capital totality<sup>17</sup>.

Discussing Dieter Henrich’s thesis that Hegelian dialectics must start with negation, Žižek claims that Hegel does not actually start with negation, but with an “apparent positivity” which upon closer inspection reveals to be incomplete, its own opposite or negation: “[...] the movement proper begins when the original form (which “is” its own negation) is negated or replaced by a higher form; and the “negation of negation” occurs when we realize that this higher form which negated the first effectively maintains (and even asserts more strongly) the starting point, [...]”<sup>18</sup> That is, every apparently immediate or positive form “is” already its own negation: is *in itself* negated, although it does not appear as negated insofar as it appears, by definition, as immediate. To realize this negation, that is, to make the first negation *for itself*, is to obtain a “higher form”, a “negation of negation”. This is why, he adds, Hegel tells us at the end of his *Science of Logic* that the moments of the dialectical process can be counted as three or as four.

Vincenzo Vitiello has brought to our attention this point in Hegel’s logic. The second moment, the dialectical or negative-rational moment, is double<sup>19</sup>. The negative moment is not negative because it negates the positive immediacy of the first moment, but because it negates the negative: it negates the implicit, *an sich* negation of the first moment. Consequently, the negative does not negate something positive and immediate, it negates something negative: it is the mediation of something already mediated. But then, the second moment is not the negative of a positive, but the negative of a negative: the second moment is negation of negation. Then, in rigor, we only have two moments: the negative in itself and the negative for itself. The positive is only the negative considered abstractly. The whole premise is of course that everything is mediated; the immediate or the positive is only the negative abstractly considered. In Hegel’s terms, the starting point is “being”, the apparent positivity as Žižek noted; but “from the vantage point of the speculative idea”, what appeared as immediate positivity appears now as “absolute negativity” which posits itself “as the negative of itself”.<sup>20</sup> What seemed positive appears now as negative: the positive is only the negative seen in an abstract way. But in the same way, the negative seen as negative is a double negative, or a negative for itself.

If we apply these reflections to our problem, we arrive at the following conclusion: what appears to us as a *positive*, immediate, organically substantial community is only seen as such “now”, from the standpoint of its loss or negation. The seemingly closed and unified community was already traversed by antagonism and always already in the process of dissolution, of losing itself<sup>21</sup>. Likewise, what may appear as a purely *negative* and atomized community in present modern society is

also already negated, as it encompasses, albeit a reified one, nonetheless still a social relation. In short: the *in itself* negative community is *for itself* the negation of the negative community. This is why in the text from Marx's letter to Kugelmann, Marx stressed that general exchange, its atomized form notwithstanding, "is" just a particular mode of appearance of the total labour of society. Seen from the standpoint of Marx, modern society is already *an sich* a fully socialized society. The "neither...nor" position of modern society points to the implicit double negation in its constitution. Modern society, claims Marx, is neither communal in the organic sense nor communal in the post-capitalist sense; it is precisely *insofar* as it is not communal that it appears as socialized. It is precisely *insofar* as it is negated that the negation can be negated. Of course, that modern society "is" a fully socialized society does not appear immediately, but only from the standpoint of critique.

### 5. Communism and Critique: The Work of the Negative

Seen from the standpoint of Marx, modern society is already *in itself* a fully socialized society. But this is the standpoint of critique. Should we understand the shift of position pertaining to the perspective of critique as a proper shift to negative community "for itself"? In fact, the definition of communism, which only rarely appears in *Capital*, underlines the "conscious" moment. The use of the Hegelian terms *selbstbewußt* and *bewußt* by Marx cannot be an accident here:

[...] a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is self-consciously [*selbstbewußt*] applied as the combined labour power of the community. [...] production by freely associated men, [...] consciously [*bewußt*] regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.<sup>22</sup>

In communism, human beings are free and self-conscious because they collectively decide how much labour to apply to which needs and how to distribute it. As opposed to capitalist socialization, the relationship between needs and production is not organized by the blind, eternal mechanism of market concurrence under the despotic command of self-valorizing capital, but in a collective and conscious way. The old ideal of Kantian rational autonomy here is applied to the process of material reproduction. We will only be free when we collectively and consciously self-determine not only, as in the modern tradition, our political sovereignty, but also our material reproduction. In this sense, Marx surpasses and completes the modern republican ideal of freedom.

So, how do critique and "negative community" stand? How do we critically assess the "neither communal nor communal" character

of modern society? Critique deals with the folded and complex reality of capitalist totality and its inverted and reified forms of “objective appearance”. Marx’ critique of political economy can be read as a critique of “objective appearance” in every level, from commodity fetish to the Trinitary Formula in Book III.<sup>23</sup> The vulgar economist, notes Marx in the letter quoted above, cannot separate the immediate appearance from its conditions or actual relations. He lacks the conceptual mediations which enable science to apprehend the real constitution of modern society:

The essence of bourgeois society consists precisely in this, that *a priori* there is no conscious social regulation of production. The rational and naturally necessary asserts itself only as a blindly working average. And then the vulgar economist thinks he has made a great discovery when, as against the revelation of the inner interconnection, he proudly claims that in appearance things look different. In fact, he boasts that he holds fast to appearance, and takes it for the ultimate. Why, then, have any science at all?<sup>24</sup>

The “inner interconnection” must remain hidden for the vulgar economist, a slave of reified appearance who apologetically justifies the particular organization of the total social labour under capitalist conditions. But then, what should a critique which is also “science” do? Insofar as it is science, it deciphers the “inner connection” or the systematic articulation of the phenomena. In that, it shows that the *lack* of conscious social regulation of production is the essence of modern society. By that, critique deciphers its negative character: modern society it is a *negative community* because the social life remains “lost in its extremes”, as Hegel said, in the exchange form, manifesting itself only as a blind average under the command of an external and despotic power, capital as automatic subject. But the crucial point is the following. From the standpoint of critique, we apprehend that “*a priori* there is no conscious social regulation of production”: from the standpoint of critique, we apprehend capitalist society as the negative, as absence of conscious social regulation of production. From the standpoint of critique, *the negative can appear as negative*; the negative can be negative “for itself”.

This should be the outcome of the critique of political economy: that the negative community that modern society appears as *negative for itself*. First, because the insight on the constitution of the totality enables us to see its contingency; critique deciphers reified appearance not as belonging to the nature of things but as specific, historical mode of appearance of social relations which constitute the capitalist social totality.<sup>25</sup> Second, because this totality appears as a lack: the essence of bourgeois society consists precisely in that *a priori* there is *no* conscious social regulation of production, in Marx’s words. The essence of bourgeois society consists in a “no”, in a purely negative determination, a “lack of”. This negativity

shows the capitalist totality under a new light. As we mentioned, Arthur gives a fruitful hint with his notion of “systematic dialectic”: “[...] I suggest that once again we should refer to the structural contradictions identified by Marx in the *present* system to ground the genesis of communism.”<sup>26</sup> Those contradictions or forms of negativity in capitalist totality concern, to name a few, the socialization of the productive forces, the development of technology, the relation to natural resources or the position of the individuals regarding their collective power. The “neither communal nor communal” of modern society should then be understood in this critical, systematic sense: as Žižek argued, the -conflicted- universal is “already” -logically- present in the capitalist civil society.

Perhaps that is all we have. Marx does not offer us a positive view of communism as a “return” to archaic forms—though his later ethnological and anthropological research certainly explored that direction.<sup>27</sup> Nor does he provide a positive, humanist definition of a new form of “human nature”, but only allusions to the “realm of freedom” as opposed to “the realm of necessity”. Marx also never claimed that communism could be comfortably achieved by simply “writing a book” —supposing writing books is a comfortable task. In a sense, we remain “tarrying with the negative”.

- 1 *Urtext* MECW 29, pp. 467-468. I slightly modified the translation following the German original in MEGA II.2, pp. 53-54. Marx's works are generally cited by the MECW edition. The purpose of this contribution is not only to show how Žižek reads Marx, but how Marx reads Žižek. Like every great thinker in the canon to which he already belongs, Žižek has entered the asynchronous time of the *logos* and rewritten his own philosophical past. We could even say he has rewritten us, his readers; we could even say that not only do we read Žižek, but he, like the classics, reads us. It is my honour to present this small tribute to his legacy.
- 2 See R. San Miguel 2025 (forthcoming).
- 3 *Urtext* MECW 29, p. 431.
- 4 *Urtext* MECW 29, p. 431. Of course, this does not imply that the exchange relations do not entail relations of domination. See Žižek on commodity fetishism, "relation between things" and "relation between men" in 1989, p. 19 ff., and on the link between the genesis of self-consciousness and modern money 2003, p. 28 ff.
- 5 *Capital* vol. I MECW 35, p. 142 ff. Capitalism is not an "ontic" or "social phenomenon" but also has a "transcendental-ontological status" (Žižek 2024, p. 16).
- 6 *Capital* vol. I MECW 35, p. 143.
- 7 *Capital* vol. I MECW 35, p. 143.
- 8 Hegel 1991, pp. 219-221.
- 9 *Urtext* MECW 29, p. 479. The vocabulary of Hegel's logic of essence is present in Marx's reconstruction of capitalist totality.
- 10 See Pulgar 2021, 74 ff.
- 11 *Grundrisse* MECW 28, p. 195.
- 12 Introduction 1857, MECW 28, p. 18.
- 13 "Marx's thesis is not only that this "inversion" characterizes capitalist social reality itself but above all that *both positions - the alienated inversion as well as the presupposed "normal" state of things - belong to the space of ideological mystification*. That is to say, the "normal" character of the state of things [...] is effectively the everyday form of appearance of the alienated society, the «normal» form of appearance of its speculative truth. The desire to fully actualize this «normal» state is therefore ideology at its purest and cannot but end in a catastrophe." Žižek 2023, p. 22.
- 14 Žižek 2012, p. 242.
- 15 Accordingly, Kervégan has argued that Hegel presents civil society in the double-sided vocabulary of the essence and the concept (2005). Žižek is in any case profoundly anti-Adornian here: Adorno reads Hegel's §243-245 on the emergence of the *Pöbel* and the "despite an excess of wealth, not wealthy enough to prevent an excess of poverty" dialectic as a sign of the insolvable conflict of capitalist civil society and the occasion for the emergence of the authoritarian fascist state.
- 16 "Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868" MECW 43, p. 68. See also Marx on his starting point, the commodity, as the simplest social form in which the labour product is presented in 1969, p. 369.
- 17 Arthur 2004, p. 111 ff. Marx is concerned with the explanation of a self-reproducing totality, and only from that standpoint is he able to tackle the historical genesis of that totality. See Žižek's reading of this passage by Marx in 1969, p. 72-73.
- 18 Žižek 2012, pp. 293-294.
- 19 See Vitiello 2018, "Del Giudizio e del Sillogismo", p. 77 ff.
- 20 "*Being*, which from the vantage point of the beginning as such appears as abstract affirmation, is thus instead the *negation, positedness*, being mediated in general and being *pre-supposed*", Hegel 2012, p. 300.
- 21 Which, of course, does not mean that community "disappears" in modern society. On the contrary, it returns as ghost.
- 22 *Capital* vol. I, MECW 35, pp. 89-90.
- 23 My proposal of reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy as an "inverted world" or "system of appearance" with three forms of fetish (commodity, money, capital) and three forms of mystification (wages, profit/interest, land rent) in R. San Miguel [2018] 2025 (forthcoming).
- 24 "Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868" MECW 43, p. 69.
- 25 Marx adds in his letter: "Once the interconnection is grasped, all theoretical belief in the permanent necessity of existing conditions collapses before their collapse in practice." Reification fixes the gaze in the crystallized social relations as if they belonged to the nature of things in themselves; critique allows the positive, apparent nature to appear as a mediated second nature.
- 26 Arthur 2004, p. 128.
- 27 See Kohan and Musto 2020.

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