The Ghost World of Alienated Desire

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I
When the regime of capital accumulation breaks down periodically, e.g. the current sub-prime mortgage and credit default swap fiascos, the depression of the 1930s, or the disintegration of the late Fordist system during the 1960s and 1970s, analysts tend to cast subsequent meta-responses in terms of negotiated concessions within a system of countervailing forces – capital, labor, and administrative mediation within the legal and regulative framework of the state (e.g. the various moments of the New Deal as a painful ensemble of concessions necessary for the long-term survival of capitalism). The problem with 'negotiation' is the underlying assumption of an equitable exchange resulting in systemic equilibrium when the resolution of the 'labor question' in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, was in actuality a coordinated, system-wide take-down and tranquilization of labor militancy. The state's role, in the most basic sense, was, is and forever will be, to regulate the consumption of human time/energy while simultaneously regenerating itself, legitimating, and protecting (by force if necessary) the institutions that guarantee the future production, extraction, transformation, circulation, and accumulation of surplus. Social control, political ritual, jurisprudence, tax collection, work-safety regulations, environmental protection, education policy, war, etc: each figure into the total system of exploitation. Every segment of capitalist society, as a totality, is subsumed either directly or indirectly under the unitary logic of exploited labor power and the production and accumulation of wealth. It is little wonder that Marx describes capitalism, not metaphorically but literally, as a system of vampirism: surplus value, the crystallized remains of abstract human life, siphoned from an emaciated host kept alive but just at, or below, subsistence levels. It is unsurprising that bourgeois economists and industrial relations personnel imagine workers as nothing more than 'human materials' or 'resources' to be managed. People are not, of course, simply 'material', but within the capitalist mode of production the line of demarcation between constant and variable capital is not the dignity of the individual over and against lifeless instruments but the difference between
exploitability based on natural limits (dead labor) and exploitability based on normative limits (living labor – or, perhaps the classical term should be modified: living dead labor). The fundamental questions that arose for critical theory from the ruins of post-WWI Europe and the failure of the Left were, and remain, the social psychology of voluntary servitude, subjective spirit’s contradictory relation to freedom, and labor’s own hand in its perpetual subjugation. As the Frankfurt School discovered in both its Weimar proletariat and labor antisemitism studies, workers were ambivalent, at best, and frequently hostile, toward democracy and ill-prepared to free themselves due to debilitating racism, authoritarianism, antisemitism, nationalism, etc. and, from the standpoint of the institutional setup of capitalist society, none of the remaining segments of subsumed society, based on their parasitic dependency on labor’s hyper-exploitation, had any real vested interest in the actual liberation of labor – including labor unions that were not by and for workers themselves, and we might as well include ‘radical’ political movements and organizations vitalized and relevant only so long as capital was running the show; institutionally contained ‘oppositions’ are components in the parasitic feedback circuit. The wartime refashioning of communism into a management wing of big business is sadly illustrative.

II

As Max Weber famously noted, once capital is ‘in the saddle’, the modern person has the choice between working like a virtual puritan or starvation on the street. Survival means, first and foremost, subordination to the fundamental logic of alienated labor power. Both ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ mean subsumption at some place or another within the total system of surplus value production; a lucky but statistically insignificant proportion of the population buys labor power whereas the remainder sells it for the best price they can command on the market. To be subsumed (absorption through negation) means, of course, a kind of ‘death’ to the person who submits to the work imperative (quantification, abstraction, depersonalization, irretrievable loss of time, permanent depletion of vitality, and so on), but falling under the wheels of alienated labor power also entails a kind of resurrection, transformation and rebirth of the individual: no longer just a biological instance but a recognized member of society – a worker. Of course, being a worker also means the always active and often violent suppression of surplus qualities irrelevant or unwanted in the labor process; obviously, no employer wants to purchase the ‘whole’ person. The fatal embrace of the wage, not merely coerced but also desired by workers, results in the production of a kind of ‘ghost world’ – a repressed dimension populated by the better, and often socially perverse, aspects of our selves and our desires dispossessed of corporeality except within the disjointed scraps of time we are not on the job, sleeping, or relegated to the routine maintenance of life. Our commitment to work integration means the permanent dislocation of the worker and his or her dimly articulated and undeveloped longings that depart from the narrow requirements of employment and that seldom appear outside this dimly perceived, twilight existence. Few are in a position to escape the logic of alienation and the consequential impoverishment and degradation of self. Those
not subordinated to direct commodity production assume secondary quasi-parasitic, quasi-producer positions within the system, simultaneously living off the backs of the hyper-exploited while also subordinating themselves to the imperative to center their horizon of moral significance around work, promotion, career honors, bonuses, etc.

III

The embrace of the worker status (and let us include ‘middle class professionals’ whether they like it or not) entails the construction of a kind of delaminated self and disintegration of desire such that to be a worker means the neglect or outright renunciation of other modes of multidimensional being. Over-identification with work, acute in the USA and other industrial and ‘post-industrial’ societies, can extend into demonization of others lacking the requisite marks of work commitment – here, the ‘ghost world’ of repressed desire and utopian ideals assumes nefarious characteristics; we struggle to repress these socially ridiculous desires and even come to hate ourselves for them – all the more as they are reduced to mere residues. Perhaps they appear as sublimated manifestations in the daylight but also deprived of any radical significance. Modes of conduct that deviate from the norm in either direction, too much or too little, are incorporated into complex, institutionalized subsystems of ritual debasement and punishment subjecting deviants to repression and rewarding obedience with a share of the moral fund. Insofar as workers identify with the jobs foisted upon them and desire an alien desire then liberation is simply impossible. Work, as a total and totalizing status, in both its positive and negative moments (‘real workers’ on one side and irresponsible welfare parasites on the other) must give way to other identifications for the capitalist deadlock to be broken. Once the charisma of work loses its grip on the imagination, once people realize that work is for slaves – and let us distinguish work from productivity – the boundary between the two worlds, alien desire on the one hand and alienated desire on the other, becomes fluid and capable of an ‘upward cancellation’. Until then, identification with ‘the workers’ and the demands of work solidarity will continue to derail spectacularly at precisely the point of over-identification with, and contradictory bonding to, the capitalist system as a whole – for more, see my Dialectic of Solidarity: Labor, Antisemitism, and the Frankfurt School published by Brill, 2008.

IV

Surplus symbolic value is distributed and returned along myriad transmission lines interpenetrating the capitalist institutional system and arrives at its (working-class) destination as a transfigured assortment of debased tokens. This ‘wealth’ (the system of objective rewards, anomic hyper-consumption masking the ethical impoverishment of the capitalist system, and unequal symbolic compensation) is worthless from a revolutionary democratic standpoint: white, loyal, American, male, Christian, heterosexual, middle class, average, credit-worthy,
paid, propertied, respected, Democrat, and so on – as well as negative subjective enjoyments: not a minority, not stigmatized, not gay, not unemployed, etc., harden the command of capital. Only the unsubsumed (unrecognized and ‘worthless’) surplus of the non-institutionalized ‘ghost world’ retains revolutionary value in its positive forms (spontaneity, uniqueness, love, solidarity, universalism, humanism, utopian longing). This disorganized ‘ghost world’ is the vault from which to draw the ‘funds’ for a world free of servitude. The issue is one of forgoing the ‘organization of work’ and struggling for the ‘organization of worthless desire’. Nietzsche once suggested that if the industrial working classes wished to endure degradation no further they should consider simply leaving (overmen, as you may or may not know, require little in the way of what we consider necessaries – just a mountain peak and perhaps a pet eagle). No doubt, abandonment is difficult to imagine but is no more ridiculous than Hegel’s model of the alienated slave creating a world behind the back of the master, rendering the latter a useless leftover. Nietzsche merely pointed in the opposite direction: create a counter-world (fantastical, ethical, heroic, sacred etc.) within the interstices and outlands of the core system of subsumption, exploitation, and self-conquering (‘will to power’) – the restoration of the meaning of subsumere (from below + take). The Hegelian labor-combat model pulls the rug out from under the master but the winner inherits the system whereas the Nietzschean model disavows the entire setup, leaving the master holding the bag.

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