THE ETHICS OF VAGRANCY

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Abstract

Exploring the double-bind that structures the axiomatic movements of capital, I attempt to unearth the implicit symbolic engagements between the constantly re-striating structures of capital. Progress, as a notion, remains true in its content while impervious in its form; the dismantling of this reconciliation that has been understood as “progress” thereby becomes absolutely necessary. My essay demonstrates that the movements of political/social/economical striations are used in an ideological manner to characterize progressivity in the face of its insidious reconciliation. In this vein, the liberal understanding of universal equality contains the presupposition of progressive linearity that can only stem from an image of thought that misperceives the striated nature of capital. Through such a re-analysis, this essay attempts to reconceive the nature of an ethics that could resist the overdetermination of capitalistic axiomatizations. Furthermore, I attempt to delve into the analysis of the symbolic that subjugates molar subjects, along with the flows that constitutes the molecular, in order to fully understand the immanent movements that structure the libidinal and ideological economy.

The traditional foundation of an ethical discourse within the 21st century has always revolved around the intersection of three main components: the agents of interiority, agents of exteriority, and their inherent conjunction towards universality. However, this tri-partite constitution of ethical determinacy is dependent upon the presupposition of a universal subject that is transcribed within a universal field of existence, thereby espousing ethics to be the amalgamation of universalities. One could further posit that an ethical act is ultimately construed as an act through the totality of inclusion; therefore, a moral agent is one who demands the destruction of barriers, the decentralization of power in which universality can be finally accorded as such. It is therefore possible to claim that this particular notion of ethics is stemmed within the horizon of universality, and each constitution of an ethical act is deemed as another asymptotic brush toward total inclusivity. However, it is my claim that this is but an entirely reductive view of the ethical, for acts of fascism are simultaneously based on a vision of universality and a promise of total inclusion – the Reich claimed that the Jews were the very strains and obstacles to absolute universality. It is clear that any form of ethical discourse requires a new analysis, thereby re-understanding the notions of interiority, exteriority, universality and their very relationship in which an ethical life is to be founded upon. Shying away from traditional interpretations of ethics as morality within action, I will attempt to show how ethics needs to be rethought within the capitalistic framework as our determined epoch. Therefore, the first inquiry within the ethical requires the need to redefine ethics as such in order to account for its constituted epochal nature.

If we were to understand what it means to act ethically within our epoch, we would thereby have to first begin understanding the very zeitgeist itself. Through the late-capitalistic framework, the notion of universality has to be understood in the system of its very avowal – capitalism. Capital must as-of-yet be understood in its function, as that which construes a notion of universality, overdetermining through all spaces of political and even noneconomic spheres. One should note that this very overdetermination constantly posits an appearance of underdetermination; that is to say, the seeming demise of the influence of capital within cultural, noneconomic, and political reforms should instead be interpreted as its very insidious influence itself, and vice versa. Political theorist Fredric Jameson further elaborates that:

We must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm,
to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorized sense.\(^1\)

The permeation of culture within capital, the irresistible flux of capital within culture and the indistinguishability between the erotic and the political allows politics to subsist as eros and eros to subsist as politics, among all the other virtual multiplicities that are needed to characterize politics-as-such. How does one understand the ethical if ethics is no longer determined through a heterogenous field with a desire to maintain homogeneity? In other words, positing an ethics can thus no longer attempt to subsume opposition within difference, but rather the truly ethical question now lies in the path of how to deconstruct difference and uproot opposition. Accordingly, ethics should no longer be construed as the contemplation of reconciling disparate divergences within a linear account of universality. The moment one attempts at such a task, the ethical discourse becomes relegated to an implicitly capitalist nodal framework since what is construed as ethics is relinquished through the dissolution within culture/politics eros and everything else far and in between. Therefore what is required to begin acting ethically would be to first understand the discursive macro consequences based on the overdetermination of these heterogeneous fields. However, the dispute taken through an approach of understanding ethics on a macro field leaves the personal ethical code unguided. Yet, this could not be further from my claim. Instead, one has to first understand the discourses that engulf them before one can even posit a truly ethical act through an individualistic endeavor.

It is in this regard that an ethical system advocating the notion of a universal inclusion is one that has been posited by the very limits of the anterior. Capital’s dynamism recodes itself through variations of striations, that is to say, the dispersal of signifiers of progress lure multiplicities of separate discourses into a singular moment of advancement, thereby acknowledging the breakthrough against a supposed once-striated hegemonic discourse. A contemporary exemplar is seen through the immense resurgence of feminism within the past decade – a clear manifestation of progress within inclusivity into universality. However, if such progress within ethics is to be accorded, one must initially assume that any kind of hegemonic discourse is purely static and progress lies within a linear homogenous accord. Such notions of progress within ethical discourse are absolutely misconstrued.

The constantly depicted orgiastic procurement of ethical liberation of women via feminism, or of minorities via racial movements should remind us that if politics is eros and eros is politics amongst its other virtual multiplicities, then progress as such is thus constantly determined through differential discourses – discourses that are determined by and accorded through the masks of signification. In other words, through capital’s recoding of meaning, each deterritorialization and reterritorialization no longer needs to be based on material circumstance; instead capital reterritorializes meaning within a new given discourse that extracts surplus labour through the very positing of signifiers of progress. In this vein, one can equally read the notion of feminist liberation through the striations of capital and conclude that signifiers of freedom are dispersed by capitalistic overdetermination in order to recode meanings of labour power; the striations of capital are thereby overlooked and yet are instead that which posits those very variations of signifiers of progress within ethical discourse. In other words, ethics, liberation, feminism, equality and its synonyms should only be equated through the master signifier of capital hitherto; the failure to do so accords in the belief in signifiers of advancement when instead, it is but a recoding of meaning in expense of surplus labour power. To restate my point, ethics and the variations of its synonyms have become nothing but signifiers capitulated through the reterritorialization of capital. In this regard, there is an undeniable progressivity of a universalistic form of ethics that is denoted by the increase of subjects with-in the peripheries of the anterior – through economic or cultural/social determinations. This “progress” posits the significatory illusion of “linear” achievements within the drive

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of ethical inclusion as universality. This obscurity simultaneously and increasingly embodies the striations of capital; resulting in the hastening and furthering of capitalism itself. Capital segregates itself from any form of pure ethics as such, only because within capital, class antagonisms are inevitable and total inclusivity is impossible.

However, lest one posits all blame towards a transcendental entity such as capital, perhaps we should first understand capital on its own terms; and lay out the region which capital is thus expressed. Through such an understanding of the affects of capital, we might then be able to posit an ethical theory through and within the very region in which capital flows. Slovene philosopher Slavoj Zizek further explains how overdetermination through capital and class struggle works:

Class struggle is the structuring principle that allows us to account for the very “inconsistent” plurality of ways in which other antagonisms can be articulated into “chains of equivalences.” For example, the feminist struggle can be articulated into a chain with the progressive struggle for emancipation, or it can (as it certainly often does) function as an ideological tool with which the upper-middle classes assert their superiority over the “patriarchal and intolerant” lower classes. The point is not only that the feminist struggle can be articulated in different ways with the class antagonism, but that the class antagonism is, as it were, doubly inscribed here: it is the specific constellation of the class struggle itself that explains why the feminist struggle was appropriated by the upper classes.²

If capitalism exists within and accords to the very class struggle itself, capital thereby plays a twofold role in which it first distorts and structures each ethical struggle within the discourse of capitalism – that capital gives one the right to be revolutionaries as long as such signification allows for appropriated surplus labor. Secondly, ethical struggles are then subsumed within class struggles, distorting the view that it is not the higher capitalist class that dominates, but progressive morality and ethics is that which one is to be subjugated under in “natural” terms.

Furthermore, an ethical domain of universality is one conjured by an interiority from within. Such totality of universality is absolutely misconstrued, as the common interest of the interior for a total universality “can only be represented in the guise of the negation of their shared premise” through the excluded.³ Zizek again, using Napoleon III as an illustration of the included, elaborates:

The only common denominator of all classes is the excremental excess, the refuse/remainder of all classes. In other words, insofar as Napoleon III perceived himself as standing above class interests, for the reconciliation of all classes, his immediate class base can only be the excremental remainder of all classes, the rejected non-class of each class. So, in a properly Hegelian dialectical reversal, it is precisely the non-representable excess of society, the scum, the plebs, which is by definition left out in any organic system of social representation, which becomes the medium of universal representation.⁴

If ethics, thus far, has constantly projected its task as an amalgamation of absolute inclusivity, we are then able to argue that this task is impossible with the inherencies of class antagonisms. Not only that, ethics defined as such is blinding in its nature since the idea of universality itself is one that has to be steeped in political and economical structural differences. It seems that if one is to have an ethical creed, one is unable to avoid cultural/political/economical discourses.

Another determinative aspect of an ethical act stemming from the interior would be to recognize those subjects as agents itself. Through the equivalence of the subject of interiority, the sustenance of the social order is established through embodying the very singularity of the multiplicities. Within the various,

⁴ Ibid, Page 27.
extensive discursivities that foreclose upon the subject-positions, these multitudinous discourses manifest themselves only through a prime linearity. The subject of inclusion therefore embodies each specific singularity and recodes it in and through its very appropriation.

On the other hand, the agents of exteriority, the vagrants, the excluded, must be said to embody the very multiplicities of the singularity. Only through this, can the excluded deign its status of “constantly-becoming” in which such continual re-appropriation occurs through the subsuming of the interior-singularity. In this sense, the vagrants sustain their becomings through their appropriation to the multiplicities of the ways in which each discursive interior-singularity is able to manifest itself. Yet, the exteriority is not characterized as an interior-whole where universality is accorded towards an inner prime discourse, but must be construed as the embodiment of the very totality itself. To recapitulate, subjects of interiority incarnate each discursive singularity against its possibilities of multiplicities. In doing so, the included-subject posits universality within that very embodied singular discourse itself. On the other hand, the excluded ratifies the multiplicities against the singularity of, and in turn, becoming as in its part of the interiority.

The totality of the multiplicities is always a singularity in codifying the excluded through the exterior’s own continual becomings. This is how the paradoxical attacks on the poor can make absolute sense; the contradictory stance of their “laziness” is mediated with how “they don’t work hard enough.” Despite both terms seeming equivalent, the former is a critique of character, while the latter stems in the non-productivity of their intensely quantitative labor. The ability of understanding such a conflation stems from a positive lack attributed to the poor, instead of a negative essence of the poor. In other words, the poor strives at being poor. If somehow, this is the paradoxical “truth,” then the multiplicities of the excluded are characterized both against and for the singularities of the interiority. The excluded, therefore, categorizes and understands a universality of multiplicities that exists past them; their acting in accordance to that multiplicity through bypassing each singularity thus allows them to be constantly “becoming.”

If the notion of universality within ethics is one deigned through interiority, such ethics of inclusivity is continually mediated upon class struggles. Thereby, if one is able to establish a non-class struggle based ethical code, one has to simultaneously establish a movement in which ethics coincides with the very undermining of the systematic flows accorded through capital. If the becoming as multiplicities of the excluded is aggravated through the embodied yet malleable discursive singularities of the interiority, there would simultaneously be a positing and acknowledgement of an internal agent recreating another “symbolic order” within the exterior. This disclosed world, where the excluded dwells, as segregated from the included, establishes a representation of itself through its contradistinction to the interior. Such representational disclosures are detrimental to any form of rebellion in that it has already been reterritorialized in advance through capital; proceeding to subsume its subjects in accordance to its representation – rendering the disclosed community coded and impotent. What is thereby ethical must then be to continually decode and act not against the main discourse but adjacent to it; its symptoms should manifest itself against coded discursivity as such, rendering “static” interior codes astray. In this sense, ethics is construed as a pure form of affectivity in which what matters are no longer reactions to representations, but actions of pure intent that are adjacent to; to not directly be subsumed within the immediate and the foreclosed.

Yet, it should be clear that capital is manifestly striving toward the universality of absolute inclusion, easily seen within liberal ideology’s celebration of diversity and multiculturalism thereby where the imminent arousal of ethical progressivity seems to be on a course of parallelization. Yet, my claim is that a creeping totality of inclusion, especially with the vagrants, the excluded, leads to a regurgitation of the system in which the subjects within the outliers reproduce the interior discourse as a static notion; their embodied defense of their “becoming” is mediated within a distanced reverence of that very static system. I believe that this explains how the vagrants, the outliers have little clue and interest in the Occupy

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movement that had been gaining such momentum among the “middle-classed proletariats.” Following Zizek, the “proletariat” is not to be conflated with the excluded. The former stems from the revolutionary potential sustained by the negation of the interiority, while the latter is a constitutive part of interiority itself. Without an understanding of the interior “becomings,” the exterior construe all attempts at universality that emerges from within as pure being – static and imposing. The “multiplicities of singularities” of the exterior is thereby one construed as needing to uphold the very interior discourse from without because without an interiority, there could be no access to inclusivity.

However, if one is to search for a silver lining, one has to see through an explicit segregation of classes, inner cities have constantly reproduced its own systemic territories where armed outlaws preside in roles of authoritative “law-dealers,” where organic roles of the community are systemically sustained. In this sense, the organization of such spontaneous roles within an excluded spatial region circumvents most striations; the exteriorities were thus allowed to gather and become in relations to the undeveloped and unstriated space that they are left with. Through this organic management of a community within the excluded, a space emerges where it is possible to live as an exclusionary par excellence. Only through such exclusion can there be a possibility of positing a universality that determines both interiority through its exteriority. However, the very danger here is to depoliticize the structural issues and instead focus the exterior energy against included individuals. Once that happens, the possibility of crime occurs against the interior, yet such latching onto the interiority through focusing on personalization only reinforces the structural hegemony in that one construes the lack of alternatives to real, genuine change. This change must occur through the openness to alternate structural systems and if one disregards personal ethics in order to acquire crumbs from the system, one has already lost to the system by foreclosing a vision of genuine change, wherever the alternatives may lie. It is thus of utmost importance today, more than ever, to embody a personal ethics that maintains one’s dignity, that allows one to be excluded enough from the political system, and demand for universal change from without. Such an ethics of vagrancy, of exclusion, no longer possess the subject within an overdetermined discourse, and it is through this that possibilities are then allowed to proliferate. Only through the understanding of possible alternatives are we allowed to think, to act, to re-establish the kind of universality that no longer constrains and subsumes all subjects in relation to hegemonic discourses. In other words, to be ethical is to embody the freedom for revolution.

To conclude, any form of ethicality understood today has to be one deigned through the formulations of capitalist discourse, thereby losing its status and notion of an ethical act at all. An overcoming of capital requires an external engagement from a personal ethic that allows one to disengage with main discourses. Through this deliberate and thorough disengagement one has to be ethical in order not to latch back onto the system by depoliticizing the issue either through crime from the spirit of revenge, or furthering the interiority in order continue sustaining capitalism.

5 While being semi-homeless in June 2013, I surveyed the poorer communities within the local state and found out that most homeless people were unaware of and were disinterestedly taken aback by the notion of an Occupy movement.