

# **Surplus of Surplus: From Accounting Convention to Ethical Coordinates**

Ethan Miller

Conference paper for session “Rethinking Surplus: Diverse Economies Perspectives”

*Rethinking Marxism Gala*

University of Massachusetts Amherst

21 September 2013

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to explore what we might call the “diverse economies of surplus” and to think through some of the ways in which concepts related to surplus might be helpful in tracing the ethical and political dynamics of diverse livelihood practices. This project has been initiated by J.K. Gibson-Graham in her book *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006) and further pursued especially in Gibson-Graham's subsequent collaborations with Gerda Roelvink (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2009; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010) and in her more recent collaboration with Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities* (2013). Their work is my prompt and inspiration. I want to highlight, in particular, the move that Gibson-Graham and her collaborators make from an earlier articulation (with Resnick and Wolff) of *surplus as an accounting convention* to its more recent reformulation as an *ethical coordinate* or a *key concern* of a community economy. While certainly inspired by a more conventional Marxian theorization, the “coordinate” approach to surplus challenges us to investigate dimensions of surplus that are rarely made visible within Marxian accounting.

This paper will be a necessarily brief jog through just a bit of this terrain, and unlike the other papers in this session, more theoretical than applied. I want to catch at least a fleeting glimpse of what an elaborated and clarified notion of surplus as an ethical coordinate might look like—that is, a concept of

surplus more adequate than the conventional Marxian notion for engaging and strengthening diverse practices of livelihood.

### **Surplus from Ontology to Accounting Convention**

From its very origins as a core concept of the French Physiocrats, surplus has often been articulated as a kind of ontological claim. There is a quantity of labor, value or stuff that is necessary for the reproduction of those who produce, and an extra over and above this amount, a surplus. This surplus is *discovered* in the world rather than *produced in and through investigation*. It is that which *explains* social dynamics rather than that which must itself be explained. Even Bataille, for all his focus on the constitutive limits of knowing, formulated surplus as a phenomenon grounded in a pre-discursive biological reality, asserting material-energetic excess as a basic characteristic of all living systems.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental problem with this approach is that it obscures the politics of articulation itself—the performativity of discourse and its implications. It therefore risks “naturalizing” or universalizing particular frames and obscuring other possibilities for thought and action.

Another way to think about surplus—and one that purposely avoids such ontologizing—is as an accounting framework. Here, there is no necessary claim regarding the grounding of surplus in a pre-discursive “reality.” Here, the first moment of surplus is not its production, but its *articulation as such*. Harry Pearson stated this clearly in 1957: “Man, living in society, does not produce a surplus unless he names it as such, and then its effect is given by the manner in which its is institutionalized” (Pearson 1957, 326).<sup>2</sup> While Pearson may not have intended the statement to indicate toward a radical

---

1 “The living organism,” he writes in *The Accursed Share*, “ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., and organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit” (Bataille 1991, 21).

2 George Dalton shared and built on Pearson's conception: “It would be meaningful to say that despite the increase in output no surplus has arisen, because none is recognized” (Dalton 1960, 483).

performativity of discourse, we can read it as such now. This is very close in spirit to how Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff mobilize the concept some 40+ years later:

The necessary/surplus distinction cannot be grounded in the ostensible reality of the body's 'basic needs' for subsistence but must be seen as a particular way of fixing meaning. What is necessary and what is surplus is not predefined or given, in some humanist or cultural essentialist sense, but established relationally at the moment of appropriation itself. The boundary is an accounting device, inscribed on the body rather than emerging from within it... (2000, 7).

This accounting is always done in the context of a particular project. In the case of Marx and many of his successors, the project is one of generating a discourse of *exploitation* and thus helping to animate movements toward its overcoming and transformation. As Resnick and Wolff write, “Marx quite literally “classifies” society into those whose labor produces all wealth and those who receive the surplus portion of that wealth without giving anything in return. Receiving something for nothing warrants his term exploitation” (Resnick and Wolff 2005, 34). Surplus, as the quantity of labor and/or value over and above that which is necessary to sustain those who produce goods and services, becomes a discursive political project—a self-consciously performative tool for “classification,” class-making or class-articulation—and its mobilization in many forms by Marxist-inspired movements demonstrates the power of such accounting.

As an accounting convention, of course, this surplus discourse cannot be placed beyond contestation. It is always partial, always problematic. “Like all systems of accounting,” write Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff, “Marx's language of class highlights certain processes and obscures others, potentiates certain identities and suppresses others, and has the capacity to energize certain kinds of activities and actors while leaving others unmoved” (2001, 9). The notion of surplus as a “coordinate” enables us to explore both some of these limits and the possibilities that lie beyond them.

## Surplus as Ethical Coordinate

The notion of coordinates is a crucial dimension of Gibson-Graham's project of radical democracy and central to the concept of “community economy.” Rather than specifying a set of moral principles, proposing a detailed model, posing an ideal or even settling on one particular mode of accounting, she attempts to articulate a politics built around the exposure and negotiation of the very *questions* of ethics and politics that lie at the heart of our constitutive interdependencies. Coordinates are, then, points of negotiation and struggle that might help to articulate, animate and clarify particular forms of collective world-making (Gibson-Graham 2006, 81).

As such, ethical coordinates do not seek so much to discursively establish a phenomenon like exploitation (and thus its overcoming), but rather constitute a myriad of crucial openings in which exploitation and other relational dynamics are raised as questions. This is not a strategy that seeks to side-step struggle, but one that refuses to know “beforehand” what forms struggle might take and which sites of interdependence it might seek to intervene in. Since the social field is (to use Resnick and Wolff's appropriation of Althusser) “overdetermined” (Resnick and Wolff 1989), a privileged site for transformation cannot be presumed but must rather be established through concrete, historically-contingent *organizing*.

What, then, might “surplus” become, and what might it do, when conceived as a coordinate rather than either an ontological claim or an accounting frame? I want to propose that surplus be understood as an *articulation* that enables us to intervene in world-making in particular ways and for particular purposes. Among the many dimensions of ethical and political negotiation that it can help us trace include: the boundaries of community, questions of necessity and sufficiency, the dynamics of gift and theft, and our ethical relations with the other.

## Drawing Boundaries, Constituting Community

While Gibson-Graham distinguished *between* the coordinate of “necessity” and that of “surplus” in *A Postcapitalist Politics*, the more recent *Take Back the Economy* clearly acknowledges these two elements as an inseparable “nexus.” In any concept of surplus, everything hinges on *that which is needed* and that *which is not*. But the question of this necessity must begin with a more fundamental question: *Who* needs? What is the subject of necessity? As Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy write, “How the boundaries of the surplus/survival nexus are drawn is vitally important. Whose survival sets the line over which something can be seen as ‘extra’ or surplus?” (2013, 54). This is, in a crucial sense, the question of “community” (at least in one sense of the term). Who is included as part of the collectivity that we are committed to, bound to reproduce and that, in turn, renders our own being-in-the-world possible? In too much of Marxian accounting this unit of necessity is constituted as “the worker,” or perhaps “the worker and their family.” But who is to say beforehand where the boundaries of a subject of necessity are drawn?

In my own case, I live in an income-sharing collective of some five adults and four children, on land inhabited by other beings (nonhuman) to whom I am also connected and committed. In what sense could I account, in my wage work, for my own “necessity” in this context? Who does my wage reproduce? Do I share a surplus with my collective mates? Or do I share *necessity*? If my current form of life is not possible without my collective (and it is not), in what sense can they be separated from my definition of, in Marx's terms, “the means of subsistence required every day for the production of labor-power” (Marx 1992, 300)? How do we account for the diverse ways that we constitute (or might yet constitute) our communities of necessity?

Here's another another case: the concept of “social surplus” (DeMartino 2003), often used to refer to the aggregate production above that which is necessary to reproduce the producers, and that is used (or at least *could* be used) to provide core social infrastructure—public services, bridges, roads, etc.--and also to support those in society who do not (or are not able to) directly generate sufficient means of livelihood

for themselves. For DeMartino, the question of the appropriation and distribution of this social surplus is at the heart of movements for “class justice.” While wanting to affirm this important and useful notion of justice, I still wonder: what does it mean to account for this quantity as “surplus”? I recognize, of course, the origins of this usage in Maxian accounting and its important role in generating an account of exploitation, but we must also make an inquiry into the broader discursive effects of this naming. Does it imply (or could it suggest to others) that the quantity it refers to is entirely extra, and thus risk a framing of social redistribution in which workers who have their necessities met are distributing to those who themselves are not necessary? Indeed, I am not entirely comfortable with a category or accounting that places capitalists, elders, children and people with disabilities in the same group, as recipients of a surplus that they did not produce and—perhaps by implication, at least—are not wholly entitled to.

If “social surplus” in fact partly refers to a quantity that is actually *required* for us to maintain the conditions of possibility for our collectivity and to fulfill the responsibilities we have within a given community—to maintain relationships that make us who we are and want to be—then is it best accounted for as “surplus”? Might this not be effectively thought of, instead, a kind of social and ecological necessity, where it is the appropriation and distribution of this necessity that is *also* at stake in class justice? I am inclined here to think in terms of a three-part distinction: a *direct producer necessity*, a *social/ecological necessity*, and a *surplus*, and to locate crucial ethical and political interventions at (and between) the sites of the articulation and enactment of each.

Here is the crux of this broad query: recognizing that the first moment in the articulation of surplus is a drawing of the boundaries of necessity, might we open ourselves to questions about how the basic units of livelihood necessity are or should be discursively constituted? Might we thus imagine and explore the possibilities of a self-conscious move beyond our atomized identification as “workers” and “families” to something much larger?

And what is this “something larger”? Roelvink and Gibson-Graham suggest that it might include

the more-than-human world: “Decision-making about necessity must not only be relevant to the human body and its culturally conditioned needs but also must consider the needs of other entities that are part of the overdetermined process of production in a community economy” (2009, 150). Here, what Timothy Morton calls “the ecological thought” challenges us profoundly: where does the boundary-drawing stop? At what point can we, in a profoundly interconnected world, say this is definitively *the “we” who needs?* This is definitively what is needed? “The ecological thought imagines interconnectedness,” writes Morton, “Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself’” (2010, 15).

The coordinate of surplus thus opens the very question of identity, of the constitution of the self and other, the community and that which lies beyond it. This question, of course, includes space and time as well, for we are always confronted with the question of *where* on the earth our interdependencies lie and the question of a *future* to which we may (or may) not be beholden. *Take Back the Economy* engages these questions through some key visualization tools, for example, the “distant others dandelion” which maps global interdependencies and the “commons yardstick” which asks us questions about our connections to past practices of commoning and our relations and responsibilities to future commons and commoners.

### Sufficiency

Often somewhat hidden, I think, within the concept of surplus is the question of *sufficiency*. I say “hidden” because I want to argue that *necessity* and *sufficiency* are not the same, and that to reduce surplus only to the question of necessity and its remainder it to miss a crucial ethical and political dimension of this coordinate. Marx's articulation of exploitation is certainly animated in part by the question of sufficiency—of *enough*—when he writes of struggles over the wage rate and the working day.

Clearly, the quantity of “necessity” reflected in the wage is not necessarily “enough” to sustain healthy lives and communities. But we need a language to more clearly get at this difference, for the notion of “necessary labor” in Marxian accounting often conflates the two, as if the wage was *actually* enough to “produce the consumables customarily required by the producer to keep working” (Wolff and Resnick 1987, 115).

When I drove a truck for an hourly wage, this wage was far from enough to produce these consumables. Few wage workers I know in Maine have a situation in which their wage is equal to their necessity in terms of consumables. We survive, instead, from a mix of multiple wages, food stamps, subsistence provisioning (hunting, fishing, gardening), underground self-employment and communal sharing. We are thus continually confronted with the question of enough: what do we really need to create and sustain healthy lives? Are we getting this? If not, how might we? If there is a quantity “left over” to share, then this arises from either a genuine surplus over and above what we deem sufficient, or from our cutting-into our “sufficiency” in the name of a larger value: we feed our children before we feed ourselves, and this may or may not have anything to do with surplus.

In this context, we might think of “necessary” as indicating that which is *required* in order for someone to engage in a given kind of work in the first place; that which they “need” in order to be able to justify “showing up,” rather than doing something else instead. In a capitalist context, to the extent that we are severed from widespread access to the direct means of producing our livelihoods, the “necessary” is that which is *demand*ed by the situation: we need money to eat and to pay rent, the capitalists have that money, and they demand that we do X in exchange for it. That's *necessary*. And that's the recipe for exploitation, when what we must do to survive may not only be insufficient but also may line the pockets of another at our expense.

The ethical questions opened here are many: Given a particular construction of community, what is enough? What is sufficient, to use Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy's language, for “surviving well

together”? Or, as Gibson-Graham and Roelvink put it, “what do humans, other species and ecosystems need in order to survive with some kind of dignity?” In a wage regime, to what extent is the wage enabling of such sufficiency? To what extent must wages be supplemented with other forms of livelihood, and to what extent is this a desired choice—escaping more wage labor—or what extent is it an enforced communal work subsidy to capital? On the other side of the extreme, to what extent does the wage itself sometimes contain a kind of surplus over-and-above sufficiency? Is this surplus extracted from the labor of nohuman others or generated through the exploitation of distant people and communities in order to make a “high road” good-wages-with-benefits scenario possible?

### Surplus: Many Forms, Many Sites

What, then, might *surplus* itself become in this articulation of coordinates? It should be clear that we are no longer dealing with a simple question of the line between necessity and its remainder. It may be useful to speak instead of two pairs: *necessity/surplus*, and *sufficiency/surplus*, each of which marks a distinct terrain of accounting and struggle. Is surplus that which is over-and-above what we must do to survive under coercive conditions (necessity)? Is surplus that which is over-and-above what we need to “survive well together” (sufficiency)?

In either case, surplus may mark a *theft*, or it may mark a potential *gift*. Perhaps these are the two sides to surplus, and which reveal the core work that this concept often does: surplus marks a relation to, perhaps even a production of, an Other. It is, in one sense, the condition of possibility for the emergence of hierarchy, division, theft, the violence of *classing*, the flourishing of the parasite. In another sense (perhaps the same one, really), it is the condition of possibility for a relationship of solidarity with those beyond our communities of sufficiency-- in both time and space. It is the question of what we keep and what we give, to whom we give, why, in what form and under what conditions.

Surplus cannot thus be captured by either a notion of surplus value or of surplus labor, and nor can

it be located as originating only at the moment of production. As a *relation-to-the-other*, not a quantity, surplus can arise at multiple moments, in multiple forms. We can speak of aggregate surplus constituted in relations of production, and we can speak of *local surplus* constituted by unequal exchange, theft, gift accumulation, or other means. Surplus can take myriad forms of energy, matter and meaning. It can emerge and it can circulate among and between humans and nonhumans alike.

Indeed, Gibson-Graham and her collaborators take surplus where most Marxian theory dares not tread: into the domain in which surplus might itself be generated from the labor of nonhuman living beings, the domain in which the term exploitation may not just refer to human laborers from whom something is stolen. With Roelvink, she inquires as to “how surplus is appropriated from and distributed to humans and the more than human” (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010, 331). Here, *surplus is not necessarily labor, and labor is not necessarily human*. For a theoretical tradition founded on a sturdy distinction between human labor and animal work, this may constitute heresy. And a heresy, I would say, that calls for more robust development, since we can no longer escape a fundamental challenge to our notions that only humans create, enact and live in webs of meaning. And nor can we escape the question of the ethics and politics of a more-than-human community that our increasingly-apparent interdependencies beckon towards.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Ann Hill for insightful comments on an earlier draft of this conference paper, and for co-organizing the “Rethinking Surplus” session of which it was a part.

## References

- Bataille, Georges. 1991. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I: Consumption*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books.
- Dalton, G. 1960. "A Note of Clarification on Economic Surplus." *American Anthropologist* 62 (3): 483–490.
- DeMartino, George. 2003. "Realizing Class Justice." *Rethinking Marxism* 15 (1) (January): 1–31.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy. 2013. *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff. 2001. *Re/Presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., and Gerda Roelvink. 2010. "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene." *Antipode* 41: 320–346.
- Marx, Karl. 1992. *Capital, Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pearson, Harry W. 1957. "The Economy Has No Surplus: Critique of a Theory of Development." In *Trade and Market In Early Empires*, edited by Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg, and Harry W. Pearson. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Resnick, Stephen, and Richard Wolff. 1989. *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy*. University of Chicago Press.
- . 2005. "The Point and Purpose of Marx's Notion of Class." *Rethinking Marxism* 17 (1) (January): 33–37.
- Roelvink, Gerda, and J.K. Gibson-Graham. 2009. "A Postcapitalist Politics of Dwelling: Ecological Humanities and Community Economies in Conversation." *Australian Humanities Review* 46: 145–158.
- Wolff, Richard D, and Stephen A Resnick. 1987. *Economics: Marxian Versus Neoclassical*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.