

‘Possessive Individualism’ Reversed: From Locke to Derrida

Etienne Balibar

I cannot say if the expression “possessive individualism” was invented by MacPherson in his 1962 book, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, or if he took it from another source. What is sure, however, is that from that moment onwards it became an extraordinarily successful instrument of historical analysis and ethical judgment which largely escaped the original intentions of the author. I find it especially remarkable that the category could be invoked at the same time by writers coming from opposite ideologies: those who took it as an index of all the *negative* characteristics of modernity which should be criticized and rejected – namely an absolute domination of utilitarian values, the logic of profit and commodification, a suppression of all collective or communitarian dimensions of human life – and those who saw it as a positive definition of the anthropological prerequisites of social and political theory, a counterpart to the descriptive category of “methodological individualism” and the normative category of “rational behavior” from a liberal point of view.

Let us recall that the term “individualism” was invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It replaced such notions as *self-love* and *selfishness*, *amour-propre* and *égoïsme* in French, *Eigenliebe* or *Selbstsucht* in German, progressively shifting from a moral to an analytical discourse. Tocqueville’s celebrated book on *Democracy in America* has particularly remarkable formulations in this respect.¹ It then became an issue to decide whether every form of “individualism” derived from the logic of appropriation, and conversely if the development of private property was the determining factor in the isolation and the promotion of individuality. The question could be displaced into various directions. In the sociological tradition, it was never resolved whether possessive individualism represented a general structure of social organization which had triumphed under certain historical conditions, or whether it was typical only of a specific realm of human behavior, e.g., the economic realm, where the generalization of market institutions imposed the anthropological figure of *homo oeconomicus*.

MacPherson and Possessive Individualism

MacPherson’s theoretical starting point does not consist in these abstract alternatives. He chooses a corpus of theoretical discourses from the period of the English Revolutions in the seventeenth century, and makes it the object of his

investigation. He wants at the same time to formulate a common problematic of the individual-*qua*-owner underlying all these discourses – what we might call “the bourgeois worldview” – and to show that the most opposite projects of founding “political obligation” in the inaugural crisis of modernity were presupposing the same *epistèmè* (to put it in Foucauldian terms). The basic propositions of this *epistèmè* could therefore also serve to evaluate the degree of consistency of its advocates. Toward the end of his book, MacPherson is able to set out a system of seven axioms which he proposes as the classical foundations of “possessive individualism,” the basis of what he later called the “Western democratic ontology”²:

- (i) What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the will of others.
- (ii) Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations into which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
- (iii) The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society. . . .
- (iv) Although the individual cannot alienate the whole of his property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labor.
- (v) Human society consists of a series of market relations. . . .
- (vi) Since freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual’s freedom can rightfully be limited only by such obligations and rules as are necessary to secure the same freedom for others.
- (vii) Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual’s property in his person and goods, and (therefore) for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange between individuals regarded as proprietors of themselves.³

According to MacPherson, it is in Hobbes’s philosophy that we find the clearest formulation of these axioms. But the consequences would be completely developed only in Locke, particularly with regard to the suppression of the contradictions arising from the constitution of class differences in a market society which is based on the equation of liberty and self-ownership.

Locke and the Dialectics of Possessive Individualism

It is not difficult, however, to show that the way MacPherson systematizes the model of possessive individualism around some common axioms or prerequisites is rather forced. The origin of the difficulties generally lies in the suggestion that we should read as common to all authors propositions that in fact belong only to some of them. This is because MacPherson keeps privileging unity over diversity, subjecting the “points of heresy”⁴ to the establishment of a general *doxa*. The biggest difficulty probably concerns the relationship between Hobbes and Locke. Because MacPherson wants Hobbes to have immediately formulated the postulates of possessive individualism with a maximum of clarity and rigor, as a system which allows us to see the “body politick” as an association of individuals where

each only seeks his own interest, he also claims to find in Hobbes the idea or thesis of an "individual property in oneself," whence derives the capacity to alienate oneself. While this thesis makes it possible to consider possessive individualism as a coherent system, it would be extremely difficult to find it stated explicitly in Hobbes. In fact, there are essential reasons why Hobbes would *absolutely refuse* the notion of "self-ownership" as a *political* notion – since it would establish competing authorities and obligations⁵ – and therefore also as a philosophical or anthropological one.

This should not lead us, however, to conclude right from the beginning that the notion of possessive individualism is bound to failure because its central characteristic lacks generality, or was not "common." I prefer to consider that possessive individualism never existed if not in the form of a conflict, with an initial division at its core. To put it simply, let us say there was not *one* possessive individualism, but that there are at least two, pushing in opposite directions. These two are symmetrical because they oppose each other around a central divergence. Let us say that is a question of life and death, or more precisely equality in life and equality in death, which in turn leads us to divide the notion of competition into two different models: the model of *war*, competition as war waged "by other means," and competition as reciprocity and exchange culminating in the legal dispute, whose "natural" scene is not the battlefield but the tribunal. These are clearly two basic and opposite ways of introducing the play of metaphor into the representation of the market. But perhaps things would be even clearer if we put them in a negative form: one cannot be *expropriated from oneself* (or from *one's self*); therefore the "natural" limit of politics is a *resistance of the self* to any attempt at *excluding* it from its "properties." In Locke's case this limit is represented as natural *positivity*: it is the general horizon in which a notion of "human rights" will subsequently be inscribed – the natural rights to live, or live "a human life," which a republican constitution transforms into civic rights, mutually granted and limiting the power of the state. In contrast, in Hobbes the limit is represented *negatively*, as a potential *void*, perhaps an abyss, arising from the thesis that every individual has a natural capacity to *resist in death*, by putting her own life at stake among others – an idea that is frighteningly close to the idea that equality basically lies in the capacity of people to endanger each other's lives, and therefore to the idea that a violent "state of nature," albeit repressed through the civil institutions of the state and the law, always remains latent within or under their authority.

If this opposition makes sense, I suggest we can engage a proper *dialectics of the notion of possessive individualism*. A first moment would concern the relationship between three basic terms: *power*, *property*, and *proprietorship* (or *ownership* and *the owner*). There is no doubt to me that classical theories of "possessive individualism" always articulate a concept of *power* along with a concept of *property* and *appropriation*. But again they do so in opposite senses: either in the direction of recognizing *property as power*, or in the direction of

recognizing *the power of property*. If Hobbesian civil society mirrors the form of a generalized market, it is because the market itself ought to be considered as a *market in power*, where different ways of acquiring and appropriating power compete, “property” as the control of economic resources being only one of these forms. “Propriety” allows men to have control over other men. But there are other means of achieving this. This explains why Hobbes does not need very long to deduce the necessity of juridical constraint (or coercive rule) and omnipotent state regulation from the naturally equal liberty of individuals. Power, by definition, means a *surplus of power*, or a power to curb other individuals under my own will, all the “things” that I own (wealth, dignities, skills. . .) being so many means to achieve that result.

The Lockean model works in the opposite direction, and this is why it was always preferred by the theoreticians of *homo oeconomicus* – although ultimately it is just as “political.” In this case, property is not a constitutive part of power; rather, power derives from property. It is from the capacity of property to socialize men that the characteristics of power we have come to view as “liberal” derive. But this leads us to a question which is most interesting in Locke, and also, I think, decisive to understanding further moments in the dialectics of property and individuality. The question is: what is the essential “subject” of liberty in Locke, i.e., the agency that creates, distributes, and regulates the various forms of power? Is it property itself, in the abstract? Or is it, more concretely, the proprietor, the owner? It seems to me that we should adopt the *first* interpretation, admittedly the more metaphysical, less empiricist one. It is *property* that forms the essence of the owner, his internal capacity or power to act – what Locke calls *life* and also *labor*. Or perhaps we should say that on this point Locke oscillated between two different ways of understanding his own basic equation, a formula that is constantly repeated in the *Second Treatise on Government* and whose terms echoed a long political tradition of emancipatory struggles against absolutism: “*Liberty and Property*,” being both other names for *Life* (or elsewhere, in reverse order: “the mutual *Preservation* of their Lives, Liberties, and Estates, which I call by the general Name: *Property*”).⁶ You may understand that property is a precondition for liberty or freedom, and therefore that only the “proprietor” or owner is truly independent, free, and becomes a citizen. This leads to setting the successive extensions or restrictions of the property right, what I would call *constituted property*, as a juridical criterion for acquiring political rights or citizenship in a given *polity*. But you may also understand – and this a deeper way to read Locke in the general framework of natural right theories – that *property as such is the exercise of liberty*, so that a free man, including a man who is free in the city, a free citizen, must always be considered *somehow a proprietor, or an “owner” of something*. If you see things this way, then you have to rely on a concept of *constituent property*, an originary property that is not “measured” by preexisting institutions because it is individuality itself. From this angle, you can say that essentially it is “property” that is free, and not simply the owner, but you

have to show that the individual subject practically *identifies himself* with that property which forms his essence, that he recognizes his identity in the actual process of appropriation and acquisition.⁷

It is this metaphysical figure of constituent property that I ask you to keep in mind while I try to derive from it a basic characteristic of Lockean individualism. In Locke we know the individual is referred to no other authority or origin than "himself" – or, better, no other origin than the transcendental power of appropriation whose bearer and agent he is himself, that is, what Locke calls labor and its work. Let me try to indicate the paradoxes that derive from such an anthropological point of view, because I think that Locke has completely grasped their importance and made them the source of the dynamic or productivity of the notion of "self-ownership."⁸ One might say (as was indeed said, notably by Kant and Marx) that the difficulty arises from a confusion between the order of *persons* and the order of *things*. To speak of a "property in one's person" would be to mistake the person for a thing, since only "things" can be appropriated. But this is basically a juridical point of view, and it is not Locke's. I think that the crucial paradoxes come rather from the difficulty of articulating the alienable and inalienable character of "things" in general, including "persons." This difficulty affects the very meaning of liberty. It immediately confronts us with a paradoxical unity of opposites which is perhaps inherent in the foundation of modern subjectivity. From Locke's point of view, it is necessary to explain how an individual becomes fully engaged in his own actions, and thus "alienated" into their external reality and their practical consequences (because they are and will remain until the Last Judgment *his* actions, and no one else's, for which he alone is responsible), while remaining at the same time completely unaltered. My actions are me, and yet completely separable and separate from me. This is a disposition of the self that seems difficult to understand, unless we consider that it precisely forms the content of the normative propositions concerning the responsibility of the subject which Locke located in the very heart of his description of *labor* as productive activity and the "origin" of every property.

If we adopt this point of view, we may be led to a new reading of the canonical formula by which Locke says that "every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*."⁹ The typical list of the "things" that are owned by himself because they *are himself*, "Lives, Liberties, and Estates," is not a simple enumeration of objects; it is the development of the progress of legitimate appropriation – more than that, it is *the movement of life* that penetrates things and assimilates them.¹⁰ In this sense, to speak of a property in one's person or in oneself is not exactly to issue a contradictory proposition, pushing persons into the order of things; it rather tries to designate the ultimate point where *propriety* meets with *property*, where to "be" rejoins to "have,"¹¹ the point *from which* persons and things will start to diverge, to become opposite terms. Locke does not say, abstractly: persons in general own or possess themselves; instead, he says *every and each singular man* has a property in his own person, i.e., an exclusive disposition over it, just as he has an exclusive disposition of his Life, his Liberty, his Estates – and ultimately

this means the same. The subject has two faces, it can be found in the exterior as it can be found in the interior. If there is an enigma in the Lockean formula, this is because it succeeded in creating an absolute convertibility between a discourse on the *liberation of the individual* from every form of “subjection” or “slavery” and a discourse on the *power of appropriation* of this very same individual, so that he can identify himself consciously with the property which is his *raison d’être*.

But this is precisely where the difficulty of articulating the alienable and the inalienable begins. The difficulty lies in considering the same thing, or the same person, as simultaneously *alienable and inalienable*, separable and inseparable. We know that this was a huge problem for Marx when he tried to explain the internal logic, and therefore also the anthropological secret, of the capitalist mode of production. The notion of “selling and buying labor,” so he thought, was absurd. In the end he overcame the difficulty by applying the physical model of a source of energy which is consumed and periodically reconstituted to the use of the labor force for a given time. It seems to me that Locke had a somewhat different, less naturalistic model in mind: that of a capacity or force which could be considered to *reside entirely in its own actions*, inasmuch as they are appropriated to a productive goal. Labor in general is the process where the places of the subject, the *self* and the *own*, are continuously exchanged. Or, to put it in other terms, what is my own/my ownership can always become alienated if *I myself* remain my *own* self. Conversely, the self can remain an identical self if the own/owned/ownership steadily returns from its alienation. This probably means two things, which we find asserted elsewhere in Locke’s philosophy: (1) that all the actions of the laboring body are accompanied with a conscious representation, or a representation of their meaning and their ends in consciousness – the ultimate site of personal identity; and (2) that this body forms an indestructible whole, that it is not split or broken but expresses a proper life in the continuity and diversity of the actions of what Locke metonymously called “its hands.”¹²

We now better understand the architectonic function of the notion of “property in one’s person” in Locke. MacPherson was right on this point, and he was right to call it an “ontology” – whether “Western” and “democratic” or not. This notion indeed allows Locke to overcome the dilemma of “natural sociability” and “artificial community.” In the activity and effectivity of labor, the individual forms himself; but he also builds the conditions of “commerce” in the broad sense, i.e., a basic form of community where reciprocity can be established on a permanent basis and become a condition for individual life itself. In Hobbes we had a representation of the necessity of the state in terms of a permanent state of exception, a limit-experience rooted in the possibility of the reversal of civil peace into violence and civil war. In Locke we face a deconstruction and reconstruction of the community, with the (self-) property of the individual as its principle. Through his labor, the individual *draws from the common*, from the ordinary or the divine community, all the goods that are necessary to his conservation; but since exchange is the necessary development of labor, he also *puts in*

common his productions, thus building the worldly community. While he is privatizing nature and himself on the one hand, he is also socializing it and himself on the other.

The Reversals of Possessive Individualism

I now want to address the *reversals* of possessive individualism. To what extent do they radically transform its metaphysical problematic? To what extent do they remain indebted to its key concepts, as they were arranged principally by Locke?

The three examples I have chosen to illustrate the idea and the problems of "reversing possessive individualism" are Rousseau, Marx, and Derrida. There are strong oppositions and profound affinities among them. I think that the three are necessary to uncover what is at stake here, notably concerning the vacillations of the category of the subject. Basically, I do not take their heterogeneity as a consequence of historical time and changes in the *Zeitgeist*. Indeed, Marx would not have been possible without Rousseau, and Derrida would not be possible without Rousseau and even Marx. But basically I am going to take them in a synchronic, structural relationship. And in order to uncover it, I suggest we take advantage of the enigmatic affinities between the Marxian formula "the expropriation of the expropriators" and the oxymoron that was forged by Derrida: "ex-appropriation." It will be my suggestion that we cannot fully understand this enigmatic "deconstructive" repetition if we do not refer, first, to a notion of "de-proprietation" or "dis-possession" that is central in Rousseau.

Rousseau

It is a common opinion that the meaning of Rousseau's political philosophy is hard to determine, at least if you try to make it a coherent system. I do not claim to resolve the difficulty, but I want to suggest a clue. The status of the "particular property" established in the *Social Contract* is not a suppression or reversal of the *Second Discourse's* vehement critique of appropriation:

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine* and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out in kind: Beware of listening to this impostor; You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's and the Earth no one's. . .¹³

To the contrary, the *Social Contract* continues this appropriation and radicalizes it, so that the legal institution of property by the state, for the benefit of the citizens, in reality *is also a dispossession*: "What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and his unlimited right to everything that tempts him and he

can reach; what he gains is civil freedom and property in everything he possesses.”¹⁴ Given this, we should take literally the expression “total alienation,” borrowed from Hobbes, that Rousseau uses to name the mechanism of the formation of the General Will: in the formation of the state and the legal system, man or the human being becomes *forever* deprived of his possibility to own or possess himself, or to view his property as his own reality, the element of self-recognition. He will only exist as mandatory of that universal part of himself which is fused with all the others to form what Rousseau called (inventing the expression) *un moi commun*. Community thus becomes the transcendental mediation between any individual and himself (his own/his own self), but private property also becomes the concrete modality which is used by the sovereign people to coerce each particular individual into liberty (“each is forced to be free”).

From this derives the profound ambivalence of the Rousseauian conception, which becomes explicit in his posterity, with regard to individualism and holism or collectivism. Individualism always depends on an institutional fiction. And collectivism is a way to project the third term, the “us” or “We the people,” the nation if you like, from the symbolic into the real, to enforce the ideal condition of collective existence. You may oppose to this what Rousseau explains in the following chapter, where he seems to defend the idea that the individual and the state actually contract with one another, thus legitimizing an individual possession that the private individuals in reality had never abandoned:

Each member of the community gives himself to it at the moment of its formation, such as he then is, he himself with all his forces, of which the goods he possesses are a part. . . . What is remarkable about the alienation is that the community, far from despoiling individuals of their goods by accepting them, only secures to them their legitimate possession, changes usurpation into a genuine right, and use into property. Thereupon the possessors, since they are considered to be the trustees of the public good, since their rights are respected by all the members of the State and preserved by all of its forces against foreigners, have, by a surrender that is advantageous to the public and even more so to themselves, so to speak acquired everything they have given.¹⁵

But in fact these formulations establish dispossession at the very heart of property, in an irreversible manner – provided you draw all the consequences from the conception Rousseau always maintained concerning the relations between possession and enjoyment (or possessing and enjoying/disfruting). We might say that, since the original moment of the “appropriation” or *prise de possession*, man – not only the man who has been deprived of property, expropriated if you like, but above all the man who *appropriates* something as his “own,” who says “this is mine” or “I own this” – was running after a lure: that of actually *enjoying* what he *possesses*. In this sense, the political institution merely “says” to him: *Thou shalt never enjoy*; it prescribes legitimate “private” property as the renunciation

of real or intimate enjoyment. In a deep sense – as Lacanians might say – legitimate property not only *excludes others* from what is my own, it basically *excludes myself from something (some "Thing") that I can never "own."*

Rousseau's formulations echo those of Locke.¹⁶ Whereas in Locke labor makes the individual an owner of things and of himself, inasmuch as he continuously *draws or subtracts from the common* this share of natural objects with which he "mixes" himself, or which he assimilates to his own life, in Rousseau it is the community which, so to speak, continuously *subtracts from labor* its product in order to symbolically attribute or retribute it to the individual, who has become a citizen, an indivisible part of the sovereign. Indeed, Rousseau never ceased to believe, as the *Second Discourse* explained following the Bible (and Derrida, interestingly, will retrieve this reference), that "the Earth belongs to no one" (except God); therefore the gesture of exclusion, the enclosure of land, is the origin of all inequalities and violence which accompany the development of civilization. But Rousseau also declared that property was "the most sacred of all the rights of citizens, and more important in some respects than freedom itself, . . . the true foundation of civil society," and that "the foundation of the social pact is property, and its first condition that everyone be maintained in the peaceful enjoyment of what belongs to him."¹⁷ How are such discrepancies possible? We shall apply what Starobinsky aptly called the "salvation through Evil"¹⁸: Rousseau duplicates alienation, making it "total" in order to reach a symbolic negation of its effects. Appropriation or possession deprived individuals of enjoyment or *jouissance*; now the political institution of property deprives them *absolutely* and *irreversibly* of enjoying what they possess, and this deprivation becomes the *fictional* mark of their belonging to the commonwealth.

We have seen the emergence of categories which were apparently absent from the Lockean conception, or perhaps suppressed in it: they take us to the opposite edge of the conception of "self-ownership" as the pivotal element in the articulation of individual and community, but perhaps not completely out of it. Rather, they postpone self-ownership in the direction of an impossible unity with oneself.¹⁹ We can thus wonder if we are really out of the field of variations virtually enclosed in the axiomatics of possessive individualism. I should rather say: possessive individuality has stamped itself with negativity; it took the figure of a splitting whose symptoms are visible not only in the fundamental dissatisfaction of the individual *qua* citizen, but in the incompleteness of the "body politick" itself. And I would dare to add: in the incompleteness of the very theoretical writings in which they are exposed.

Marx

There is incompleteness in Marx's writing too, but the main text in which he tried to achieve systematic rigor, finishes – or, if I may say so, "unfinishes" –

with a celebrated formula so politically powerful, so rich in philosophical and also theological resonances,²⁰ that it has never ceased to produce interpretations and conflicts of interpretations:

[A]s soon as the capitalist mode of production stands on its own feet, the further socialization of labour and the further transformation of the soil and other means of production into socially exploited and therefore communal means of production takes on a new form. What is now to be expropriated is not the self-employed worker, but the capitalist who exploits a large number of workers.

. . . The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.

The capitalist mode of appropriation, which springs from the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of its proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not reestablish private property, but it does indeed establish individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era. . . .²¹

We might think that this is the most elaborated formulation for overcoming possessive individualism: it undertakes a demonstration of the fact that collectivization or communism arises from the self-destruction of private property, following its own logic. Roughly speaking, this is indeed a correct interpretation, and this is the meaning of the use of the category “negation of the negation.” From the expropriation of expropriators as a *process* in history will result an *appropriation*.

The final formula is both striking and enigmatic: “It does not reestablish private property [*Privateigentum*], but it does indeed establish individual property [*individuelle Eigentum*] on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era.” This could be understood as an index of the contradictory modality of Marx’s relationship to the tradition of possessive individualism, particularly in its Lockean form. Indeed, it is as if Marx had tried to reconstruct the idea of self-ownership, the “property in one’s person,” based on a reciprocal implication of the appropriation of things and the appropriation of self, or self-appropriation, but for the benefit of a new subject – the social subject whose historical figure is the proletarian engaged in a process of revolutionary transformation of the mode of production. Yes, but provided an essential postulate in Locke’s theory has been submitted to a radical critique, namely the postulate of a laboring activity that is strictly personal because it is referred simultaneously to self-consciousness, in terms of responsibility or “owning,” and to the integrity of the living body, in terms of agency. Labor in Locke is precisely what cannot be divided, immediately exchanged, in order to make a community based on exchanges possible.

We can read here a negative critique of Locke: he did not see that the capitalist organization of labor produces a splitting and an actual denaturation, a

dismembering of the integrity of the body – perhaps a withering away of consciousness. This is the negative side of the process, where a devouring socialization becomes equivalent to an annihilation of the individual's autonomy. When Marx gives his interpretation of this negativity, his terms directly echo Locke and his posterity:

[T]he laws of appropriation or of private property [*Gesetz der Aneignung oder Gesetz des Privateigentums*], laws based on the production and circulation of commodities, become changed into their direct opposite through their own internal and inexorable dialectic. . . . Originally the rights of property seemed to us to be grounded in a man's own labour [*Eigentumsrecht gegründet auf eigne Arbeit*]. Some such assumption was at least necessary, since only commodity-owners with equal rights confronted each other, and the sole means of appropriating the commodities of others was the alienation of a man's own commodities, commodities which, however, could only be produced by labour. Now, however, property turns out to be the rights, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labour of others or its product, and the impossibility, on the part of the worker, of appropriating his own product [*Unmöglichkeit sein eignes Produkt anzueignen*]. The separation of property from labour thus becomes the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity.²²

But his dialectical exposition immediately leads to uncovering the positivity of this negativity, which amounts to an absolutely anti-Lockean proposition concerning the *transindividual* character of productive activity, and hence the appropriation which results from it. If we want to understand the conclusions Marx is aiming at, we must give this proposition its maximum strength. Not only does labor become historically "socialized," a transindividual activity; essentially it always was one, inasmuch as there is no labor without cooperation, even in the most primitive forms.²³ Thus the "isolation" of the laborer or worker was always a mere appearance. "Personal labour," in the sense of the *exclusive* labor of the individual, therefore cannot be a source of "appropriation" of any part of "the common," and a right of property cannot be established on that basis except as an ideological fiction. But, conversely, when modern socialized production develops, it becomes more and more manifest that the "subject" of production is collective, consisting of the solidarity and complementarity of all activities, including those of the past, which are crystallized in the structure of machinery and elaborated knowledge. In this cooperation with the instruments which have been forged and used against it in order to increase his exploitation and make it "natural" or "irreversible," the collective subject thus finds the most effective form of "self-ownership" – a form that includes in its own cycle not only a totality of exchanges, but above all a process of transforming and humanizing nature which apparently has no pre-established end.

But is this exactly a "subject"? Ultimately this is the real question, which would call for something like a symptomatic reading. If the negation of the negation is performed in the privileged figure of recognition – or "conscious planning,"

conceived by Marx as *organization* (*bewusste planmäßige Kontrolle*) of the always already social character of labor, an organization which the Industrial Revolution paradoxically made possible by violently splitting and decomposing what appeared as “personal labor” – we can also give it a speculative formulation: the expropriation of the expropriators is an “appropriation” by society and the individuals in it of the very means and forms or conditions of appropriation – an “appropriation of appropriation.” In this sense it appears as eminent “self-ownership” or *subjective* property, where the *individualized individual* (i.e., the “desocialized individual”) gives way to the “socialized individuals.”²⁴ The true “society of individuals” can consist only in the actual socialization of individuals. Individuals are “proprietors of themselves” (or “their own Person”) only if they reappropriate their labor power and its complete use, and thus labor itself. But the only “subject” of this process is the collective social relationship. It is not only Locke who seems to be transformed here, but also Rousseau’s idea of the community as necessary mediation between the individual and himself. Except that once again the negation has been reversed into an affirmation, the dispossession into a new possession or appropriation.

We must remember, however, Marx’s radical critique of any representation of “society as a person” or a liable subject in *The Poverty of Philosophy*,²⁵ which he never abandoned. This is completely consistent with the idea that what *The German Ideology* calls “a totality of productive forces” should be considered an anonymous structure, a multiplicity (if not a “multitude”), unrepresentable by the simple and unified characteristics of the notion of a “subject.” But Marx was a perfect Hegelian, so he could easily find the solution for this kind of aporia. He just had to think of the subject not as a “self-consciousness,” or an individual of individuals, but as an immanent reflexivity which is given only in its process of self-realization, provided this process can be represented as oriented by a single teleology. This is the solution that Althusser would picture as *identifying the “subject” with the “process-without-a-subject itself.”* It constantly haunts Marx’s development. But it seems to conceal a secret aporia that concerns the capacity of individuals to identify *subjectively* with the teleology of socialized labor. Indeed, we are not very far from the question of pleasure and enjoyment in Rousseau, although Marx’s explicit references are to Fourier. This question surfaces in Marx’s writings, almost in the margins, for example in some passages of *Capital III* or the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, where it is a question of determining the articulation of laboring time and free time. Marx appears to be torn between opposite solutions. On the one hand, we have the idea that labor might become “the first human need,” passing from capitalist torture to the pleasure of work as creation; on the other hand, we have the idea that freedom and satisfaction can be found only in the free time, when labor has been relegated to the “realm of necessity.” It seems that, from Marx’s point of view, the dialectical argument can only lead to an impossible choice – at least if we admit that the meaning

and energy of the proletarians' class struggle, as a *subjective* or "conscious" process, depends on this alternative. In the end, I would suggest, we might find here an indication of the fact that, in a contradictory manner, collective appropriation *is and is not representable* as a "process of subjectivation" or subjective individualization. Or, perhaps even preferably, in the reverse form: subjectivation is and is not thinkable as appropriation.

Derrida

Might we say that, if there was in Rousseau an "anthropological" reversal and in Marx a "dialectical" reversal, we are confronted in Derrida with an "eschatological" reversal? We might as well, and perhaps better, suggest that Derrida's reversal, which he has agreed to call a deconstruction, reveals better than any other the eschatological element that was latent in the classical discourse of "possessive individualism," and uses this revelation to question the implications and functions of eschatology. We might also say that this new strategy of reversal succeeds in discovering within the concept of the "subject" associated with a constitutive concept of "property," the "own," and the "proper," or with possessive individuality, the same antinomic (hence violent) elements that are also constitutive of the concept of sovereignty. This is because possessive individualism is precisely a construction of the democratic sovereignty of the subject-*qua*-proprietor, owner of his/her own person, or simply "own": a construction of the domination of the *dominium*.

I must say that the expression "ex-appropriation" so frequently used by Derrida had long seemed to me very enigmatic, in spite (or perhaps because) of its affinities with certain analogous formulations, especially in the mystical tradition. It is particularly in *Spurs, Margins of Philosophy, Glas, The Postcard, Specters of Marx*, and *Given Time* that we find this oxymoronic expression where, following a persistent pattern in Derrida (the "not," the "X that is not X" or "without X" he borrows from Blanchot), we may understand the idea of a "property without property," or a process of appropriation that escapes or betrays itself indefinitely. There is indeed here a reference to the transcendental tradition, where the "proper" becomes reversed into a "universality" or "singularity" that *belongs to nobody*.²⁶ But there is also a basic reference to an idea of the *economy of the subject* which is explicitly identified with a process where *a return is anticipated* (in both senses: return to the origin, and profitable return). "Capital" in general, as a substantial process, appears to be the model of every subject-formation, and hence of the category "subject" itself. What is anticipated is an accumulation or capitalized unity of the "properties," and it is this logic that we see contradicted and deconstructed in the anti-logic of the unpredictable gift, which does not expect any "return" and therefore exceeds any subjective economy. Allow me to quote two passages from *Given Time*:

And this [good conscience or self-consciousness of the gift as generosity] is produced as soon as there is a subject, as soon as donor and donee are constituted as identical, identifiable subjects, capable of identifying themselves by keeping and naming themselves. It is even a matter, in this circle, of the movement of subjectivation, of the constitutive retention of the subject that identifies with itself. The becoming-subject then reckons with itself, it enters into the realm of the calculable as subject. . . . One would even be tempted to say that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift. It is constituted, on the contrary, in view of dominating, through calculation and exchange, the mastery of this *hubris* or of this impossibility that is announced in the promise of the gift.²⁷

But whereas only a problematic of the trace or dissemination can pose the question of the gift, and forgiveness, this does not imply that writing is *generous* or that the writing subject is a *giving subject*. As an identifiable, bordered, posed subject, the one who writes and his or her writing never give anything without calculating, consciously or unconsciously, its reappropriation, its exchange, or its circular return – and by definition this means reappropriation with surplus-value, a certain capitalization. We will even venture to say that this is the very definition of the *subject as such*. One cannot discern the subject of this operation of capital. But throughout and despite this circulation and this production of surplus-value, despite this labor of the subject, there where there is trace and dissemination, if only there is any, a gift can take place, along with the excessive forgetting . . . radically implicated in the gift. The death of the donor agency (and here we are calling death the fatality that destines a gift *not to return* to the donor agency) is not a natural accident external to the donor agency; it is only thinkable on the basis of, setting out from [*à partir du*] the gift.²⁸

We may nevertheless ask if we are not still, and more than ever, in the transcendental movement that seeks to disentangle the subject (or the non-subject, the subject-beyond-subjectivity) from its own empiricity, from its “ontological” appearance, but in order to retrieve it in a retreat, possibly with another, more “impersonal” name (*Dasein*, *Ereignis*, *différance*, *trace*, or *gift*) which would precisely exhibit the antinomic conditions of possibility of any subject.

But we also have another idea, which proves inseparable from the first; the very title *Given Time* indicates it, and the whole book displays its paradoxical consequences at length. If every “subject” is a “non-subject,” i.e., negatively constituted through relationships among men whenever their “commerce” exceeds every possibility of “commerce,” of “economic” anticipation and return – and therefore also involves a dimension of excess and violence, friendship and hospitality – isn’t this because “time” as such cannot become an instrument or a means for subjective purposes, or is the un-appropriable as such? This would be a sophisticated way of explaining that “men” or “subjects” in this sense are never their own contemporaries, are never building a totality or a whole *in the present*, least of all in an eschatological *future present*, but must indefinitely *wait for one another*, wait for the unpredictable event of “their” community, which in turn will acknowledge their non-identical singularity. The condition of possibility of a

“self-ownership” as appropriation, as a return and not a loss or dissemination, would be the transcendental appropriation of time: but this is precisely the impossible. And finally, since ethics and politics cannot but refer to the understanding of that “impossible” as the very risk and possibility of justice, which is certainly not the same thing as recognition, retribution, or distribution, this impossibility would also be the ethical and political figure of *the negative that one ought never to deny*.

I am not quite certain that such a simple way of connecting different crucial themes in Derrida is the right one – but I would like to suggest that it raises a question that we can try and clarify to some extent by returning to the signifying chain where the notions of appropriation, deappropriation, and expropriation have been coined, to which I tentatively gave the MacPhersonian name of “possessive individualism” in an enlarged and dialectical sense.

The first move we find in Derrida (which may have been suggested by the Heideggerian way of displaying the associations between the terms *Eigen*, *Eigentum*, *Eigenschaft*, and *Ereignis*, but also certainly by the doublet of *property* and *propriety* that plays such a crucial role in classical English philosophical discourse) amounts to going beyond affirmation and negation by retrieving a more fundamental notion which is neither appropriation nor ex-propiation, but simply “propriation.”²⁹ It is in the process of propriation that the constitution and self-recognition of the subject is at stake, positively or negatively. We find a beautiful presentation of this idea in *Spurs*, where Derrida takes his departure from the Heideggerian denegation of sexual difference in order to show that a process of “propriation” is prior to the process of subjection/subjectivation itself because it commands every ontology:

The conceptual significations and values which would seem to decide the stakes or means in Nietzsche's analysis of the sexual difference, of the 'eternal war between the sexes,' and 'mortal hatred of the sexes,' 'of love,' eroticism, etc., are all based on what might be called a process of *propriation* (appropriation, expropriation, taking, taking possession, gift and barter, mastery, servitude, etc.). Thus, in numerous analyses . . . the woman's appearance takes shape according to an already formalized law. Either, at times, woman is woman because she gives, *because she gives herself*, while the man for his part takes, possesses, indeed takes possession. Or else, at other times, she is woman because, in giving, she is in fact *giving herself for*, is simulating, and consequently assuring the possessive mastery for her own self. The *for* which appears in the 'to-give-oneself-for,' whatever its value, whether it deceives by giving only an appearance of, or whether it actually introduces some destination, finality or twisted calculation, some return, redemption or gain, into the loss of proper-ty (*propre*), this *for* nonetheless continues to withhold the gift of a reserve. Henceforth all the signs of a sexual opposition are changed. . . . Should the opposition of *give* and *take*, of *possess* and *possessed*, be nothing more than a transcendental snare which is produced by the hymen's graphic, it would then escape not only dialectics, but also any ontological decidability. . . . Not only is propriation a sexual operation, . . . because it is finally undecidable, propriation is more

powerful than the question *ti esti*, more powerful than the veil of truth or the meaning of being. Furthermore, . . . appropriation is all the more powerful since it is its process that organized both the totality of language's process and symbolic exchange in general. By implication, then, it also organized all ontological statements. The history (of) truth (is) a process of appropriation.³⁰

Here Derrida seems to be very reluctant about “*renversements*” or “reversals” – or should we avoid only “reversals” that are *simple*? In any case, we may understand that an “ex-appropriation” of necessity will appear as a critical, paradoxical figure of this very dissimulated “process.” The importance of this problematic is enhanced in *Margins of Philosophy*, where we find a critique of Hegelian dialectics (and probably dialectics in general) as an infinite process of expropriation resulting in (or aiming at) re-appropriation – which indeed is the very definition of teleology. From this moment we can understand that a “deconstruction” is always essentially, always already a de-construction of the “proper,” in the double sense of property and propriety. Therefore a deconstruction, whatever its starting point or its “object,” is always already the movement that will have to be called with the paradoxical name “ex-appropriation” which *repeats the dialectical move* while withholding it from the inside. What according to “The Ends of Man” is trembling today is precisely this “propriety” or “co-propriety” of man and being (and perhaps also nature) which lies at the core of the metaphysical tradition and finds its “absolute” expression in the idea of the dialectical process.

But this is where the theme of the “undeconstructible” begins to acquire its challenging connotations. If deconstruction is always a deconstruction of the “proper,” i.e., of the unity of property and propriety (that we cannot but recognize in the most explicit manner in the “Lockean” identification of property and identity under the single paradoxical notion of “property in one’s person”), would that mean that a possible *undeconstructible*, or the possibility of the undeconstructible (identified with the antinomic possibility of “justice”), comes very close again to the idea (which we found in Locke) that “self-ownership” must necessarily be at the same time a process of alienation and a manifestation of the inalienable, or an expenditure of the subject into the economy of properties, *and* a retreat of the subject into the inalienable? Except, again, that this inalienable-undeconstructible cannot be named “subject” or “agent” in the classical sense, but has to be indicated as the subject’s absence, the subject’s escape: something like a “property without property,” a “self without self,” or a “self that is not his/her/its own.”

It would certainly call for a long and delicate inquiry, a whole series of literal readings, to check the accuracy of such a hypothesis, particularly because the question of the subject’s self and the subject’s own, as our references to *Given Time* already indicated, prove inseparable from the question of the community. I tried to indicate that this was already the case in Locke, in spite of easy, simplificationary understandings of the notion of “individualism.” And it is certainly here that the messianic aspects of Derrida’s ethics (which always already involve their

own critical reflection) are unavoidable, because this is where the ex-appropriation of the subject needs to communicate, or become speculatively identified, with the idea of a community that has no "property" in itself, and therefore no "common good" (or *commonwealth*) to protect, appropriate, and identify with, but can be approached only in terms of its ever to-come requisite of justice, openness to the other – a reciprocity beyond reciprocity founded on the loss of property that is the core of the subject's resistance to identification.

But allow me simply to insist in the end on the enigmatic homology that we find between the way Derrida articulates justice or the undeconstructible as a limit and a condition of possibility of all deconstruction, and the way Locke and perhaps natural law theories more generally articulate the inalienable as a limit and condition of possibility of all alienation, or its internal principle. Or, better said, this is what I think allows us once again to speak of a "reversal," even in an extended meaning. In Locke it is indeed *identity* and the *identical* that becomes preserved as the *inalienable self*; it is found to be immanent in the process of alienation, and therefore makes it a "return" to itself or oneself, the "dialectical" form of the appropriation of the self. Whereas in Derrida it is rather deconstruction as such that constitutes the undeconstructible – and we know that a deconstruction excludes every form of the return to the origin, the proper, propriety, and the proprietor, and so also coincides with the infinite dissemination where any stable "identification" becomes lost. . . . So in a sense it is "alienation" radicalized – what I like to call an *abyssal alienation* – that has become the inalienable (something that is perhaps not so different from the way I tried to show that we could read Rousseau). But in these two figures, I would dare to suggest that a certain "form" has been preserved, an antinomic form that has to do with the alternative of gain and loss, and which, unsurprisingly perhaps, would inscribe our ethical discourse in the eschatological horizon of justice – either as a transcendental *telos*, or as a negation of positive forms of right and exchange.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference "On Property," Cerisy la Salle, 19 Aug. 1999, at UCLA, 8 March 2001, and at Columbia University, 13 March 2002. The present version was edited with the assistance of James Ingram.

1. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, pt. 2, ch. 2 ("Of Individualism in Democratic Countries") as well as *L'Ancien régime et la révolution*, 158, cited by Robert Castel, *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale: Une chronique du salariat* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 463.

2. C.B. MacPherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 24ff.

3. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 263-64.

4. I adopt this expression from Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where he suggests that every historical *epistèmè* becomes immediately divided into opposite doctrines that represent different "choices" (in Greek *airèsis*, whence comes the theological notion of "heresy") made possible by its initial assumptions.

5. Such a notion immediately means that an individual can establish himself or define his autonomy outside the stage where the war of the “two Gods” rages, who compete for his membership – the mortal and the immortal God, or in more materialistic terms, the State and the Church. If the individual “owns himself,” he would exist prior to that competition, and if he enjoys this autonomy, he is not forced to choose between the memberships and the corresponding obligations in an absolute manner. A plurality of memberships, allowing each individual a possibility of play, is exactly what Hobbes never ceased to fight against, because he saw it as the ultimate source of violence in history. Therefore the Hobbesian individual is “free” to enter the association or not, but the association itself must be unique.

6. Locke, *Second Discourse in Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), §123.

7. Only this “constituent” or transcendental concept of property, it seems to me, is consistent with the proposition that the product of the servant’s labor belongs to the master (*ibid.*, §28), or more precisely that the labor of the dependent person together with the labor of the independent person yield a product or a value that entirely belongs to the independent person, who is the “true” person. (Elsewhere I will have to discuss the relationship between this point and Locke’s theory of “personal identity” in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II, xxvii), particularly where he suggests that if Socrates and Plato had the same consciousness, or actually “thought the same thoughts,” they might be considered a single person. I thank Jeremy Waldron for a very useful hint on this point.)

8. I use this notion as a shorthand for the older “property in one’s person,” which was identified by Locke with self-consciousness, and not self-ownership. The latter notion appears only much later, it seems: first with Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974), and subsequently when it was taken up especially by Nozick’s Marxist and post-Marxist critics, esp. G.A. Cohen, *Self-ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

9. Locke, *Second Discourse*, §27.

10. A notion that ultimately derives from the Stoics, the ancient *oikeiôsis*.

11. We might almost take the risk of expressing it in Heideggerian terms, as *Jemeinigkeit*.

12. These plays, e.g., between the “self” and the “own,” are to be found in Locke. See my critical edition and commentary: John Locke, *Identité et différence: L’invention de la conscience* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

13. Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men,” in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 161.

14. Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract*, I, ch. 8, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 53–54.

15. *Ibid.*, I, ch. 9, 54, 56.

16. This comparison is all the more inevitable since, in the *Second Discourse* and *Emile*, Rousseau himself has retrieved – perhaps ironically – the Lockean definition of property as a natural result of personal labor.

17. Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy* (first version of the *Social Contract*), in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, 23, 29.

18. Jean Starobinsky, “Le remède dans le mal: la pensée de Rousseau,” in *Le remède dans le mal. Critique et légitimation de l’artifice à l’âge des lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); tr.: *Blessings in Disguise, or The Morality of Evil*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

19. Perhaps not quite impossible: Rousseau speaks in the *Reveries* of privileged moments in which “I was myself, completely myself, unmixed and unimpeded. . . .” *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, tr. Peter France (Hammondsworth & New York: Penguin, 1979), Tenth Walk, 154.

20. “For the Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob

... and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors." *Isaiah* 14:1–2; also 27:7–9.

21. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), I, 928–29.

22. *Ibid.*, 727–30.

23. In the terminology of the *1844 Manuscripts*, labor is the "generic" activity.

24. The former is referred to as "*der vereinzelt Einzelne*," in the 1867 *Introduction to Capital*, and as "*das einzelne Individuum*" in *Capital*, ch. 13 ("On Cooperation"); the latter as "freely socialized" (*frei vergesellschaftete Menschen*).

25. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, "The metaphysics of political economy," sixth observation.

26. The formulation explicitly refers to the Heideggerian speculative etymology where the "event," the *Ereignis*, an event that remains for ever to come, unpredictable and incalculable, is also characterized as an *Enteignung*, a depropriation or disappropriation of the subject, of what is "proper" to the subject (*Eigen*).

27. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 23–24.

28. *Ibid.*, 101–102.

29. This is almost a literal "translation" of the Greek (Stoic) *oikeiōsis* (see note 10 above).

30. Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, tr. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 109–11. Cf., "Still, it does not follow from this that one should, by a simple reversal, transform Being into a particular case or species of the genus *proprie*. . ." (121–23).