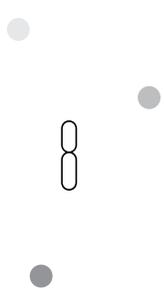




PART III

Love and Politics



Against Essentialist Conceptions of Love

Toward a Social-Material Theory

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But love!—yes, with Feuerbach, love is everywhere and at all times the wonder-working god who should help to surmount all difficulties of practical life—and at that in a society which is split into classes with diametrically opposite interests. At this point, the last relic of the revolutionary character disappears from his philosophy, leaving only the old cant: Love one another—fall into each other’s arms regardless of distinctions of sex or estate—a universal orgy of reconciliation!
—Friedrich Engels

Introduction

Engels is not the first one to complain about conceptions of love that are all abundant, mystical, universal, essentialist, and idealized, but he is unmatched in his ironic subtlety. Essentialist conceptions of love, Engels tells us, tend to overlook the material, historical, and social form that love takes on in real individuals, that is, as formed by different interests determined by class positions. From a social-materialist standpoint, essentialist visions of love need to be rejected, and at the end of this essay we will see that contemporary versions of love that have been developed within

recent left political philosophy, namely, by Hardt/Negri and Badiou, fall back on a similarly shaky basis and consequently turn into deeply ambivalent projects that lead to a mystification of love by giving it a metaphysical status. Against these contemporary reimaginings of love, I claim that we need to distance ourselves from these mystifications. Instead, I propose, we look again, ever more closely, at Marx's early philosophy and see how we can develop a social-material conception of love from his decisive break with essentialism that is at once immanent, critical, and historical. Marx proposes a conception of love that is tied to its social *form*, inasmuch as it is unable to transcend this form as its independent ontological, ethical, or anthropological principle and foundation, despite the fact that it might have a core that points toward a new society, given the contradictions in capitalism.

As such, love is not the ontological or ethical basis from which all other elements of society emerge, but one moment of a social form that depends on the categorial system of reproduction, which is the way in which love concretely exists. Love, taken here as the sensual form of being *social* (which in turn depends on social reproduction), remains, accordingly, distanced from religious, romantic, anthropological, or legal conceptions of love. Against such reductionisms we must maintain that love is a form of being social in which the sensual life is as complex as the social world, and not simply an abstraction from the latter. This is of especial importance for a *critical* theory of love. Love not only requires a different "distribution of the sensible"; rather, it *is* a different distribution of the sensible. The question, then, is how this distribution can be grasped as a social form. Let us see how this works in Marx, as he himself states in *The Holy Family*: love "cannot be construed a priori, because its development is a real one which takes place in the world of the senses and between real individuals." Instead, it is tied to real individuals and cannot be seen in an ahistorical fashion, even though it needs to be grasped in its *specific*, that is, categorial form.

I will first present reflections on love in pre-Marxian terms, as Marx's break with essentialist conceptions of love depends on his critique of Feuerbach; I will then reconstruct Marx's early philosophy of love as a philosophy of sensuality and expand this position by taking the "standpoint of reproduction" (Althusser) into account, before I finish with contrasting the social-material theory of love with what I conceive—despite my deep admiration for and commitment to Negri's philosophy—as a regressive position in recent political philosophy.

Feuerbach: Love as the Principle of Sensuality

In order to understand the Marxian viewpoint, we need to recall, briefly, Feuerbach's conception of sensuality and love. Though Feuerbach reverses Hegel's philosophy by turning Hegel's concept of spirit into a sensual concept, according to Marx and Engels he remains tied to an abstract anthropology and essentialism that does not understand humans as social beings or their sensuality as activity. As Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach states, "Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity" (*MEW* 3:5). Put differently, what Marx claims is that sensual objects need to be grasped as the result and being of social activity. What we can see, feel, hear is not sensual in an abstract sense; rather, it is the result of concrete historical forms of how we are related to one another, and of how the sensual world is itself reproduced through labor. For example, seeing a table depends on and is determined by the table *as* the result of a social formation.

It is in this context that Marx and Engels take on Feuerbach's philosophy of love, as it is closely related to his philosophy of sensuality. Feuerbach's conception of love, however, is not as simple as it seems, since love, for Feuerbach, is a form of self-consciousness and self-affectivity in which the sensual world is itself being felt. Love, in other words, cannot simply be an object of Marx's critique of Feuerbach in the first *Theses on Feuerbach*, given that for Feuerbach love is a "meta principle" within the sensuous sphere. We are *affected by sensuality* in love. In this sense, affection is prior to abstract thinking and defines us as real, existing individuals. For Feuerbach the "truth of feeling" (*Empfindung*, i.e., in the sense of self-affectation) is "the truth of love."² Accordingly, what we really *are* in our concrete existence depends on our ability to accept and embrace the sensual reality before we enter abstract thinking and reflection. The *thisness* of sense certainty that Hegel abstractly determines at the beginning of his *Phenomenology* is conceived in its full sensual extension by Feuerbach.

Love, in other words, enables us to enter into a unique and nonabstract relationship with the world within which each thing *remains* itself and is permitted to be what it is. We might say that love *individualizes* our relation to the reality, as it allows us to have a nonabstract relationship with it, which is therefore also not reducible to an intersubjective relation between two persons. As Feuerbach puts it, "Someone who does not love anything—whatever the object might be—remains indifferent toward whether something exists or does not exist" (*W* 3:300). Feuerbach thinks of love as

a relation toward the world and things (sensually and bodily determined) that leaves their identity and their being intact. As such, love acknowledges the *difference* between subject and object and does not assimilate or reduce the thing.

Similarly, Feuerbach argues that only love as the real existing sensual principle is a counterweight to abstract thought, as thought, following Hegel, is based on the principle of identity (*W* 3:300). Love, then, becomes a universal principle of all sensuality that establishes the relations between humans and reality as well as the relation between humans and humans as I-thought relationships. As love establishes the *independent* reality of the other (i.e., the otherness of the other as either person or thing), it becomes the principle of a flourishing existence. The more an individual differs from others, the more this individual *becomes* an individual. The scope of sensuality thereby determines the extent to which humans can realize themselves in the world, and the scope of the sensual world is determined by our feeling of it, that is, by our feeling of love. “The more one loves,” as Feuerbach puts it, “the richer one is, and the other way around” (*W* 3:302).

Again, the main point is that Feuerbach presents a material, that is, an anti-speculative and anti-psychologist version of love, and, as a consequence, sensuality receives a status that it did not have in German Idealism. Recognition of what is not me, we might say, is for Feuerbach a *sensual* and bodily relation: “The living body [*Leib*] belongs to my essence; even more, the living body is in its totality my ego, my essence as such” (*W* 3:302). For Feuerbach, a communist is someone who knows that her real existence is tied to a bodily and sensual foundation that we *share* with others, which is unified and made possible by love. As Reitemeyer has it, “Love as the primordial principle of human existence opens up the possibility of living-with-each-other in sensuality.”³ Though Marx is clearly fascinated with this return to sensibility as the real foundation of existence, he accuses Feuerbach not only of overlooking the social-material determination of the sensual reality, but also of ultimately mystifying sensuality and love, as Feuerbach’s universal conception of love makes it the core and essence of every human activity: “Feuerbach’s conception of the sensuous world is confined on the one hand to the mere intuition [*Anschauung*] of it, and on the other hand, to mere feeling [*Empfindung*]; he says ‘human being’ instead of ‘real historical human being’” (*MEW* 3:42). As Engels puts it rather mockingly, “But love!—yes, with Feuerbach, love is everywhere and at all times the wonder-working god who should help to surmount all difficulties of practical life—and at that in a society which is split into classes with

diametrically opposite interests” (MEW 21:289). Moreover, in *The German Ideology* Marx charges Feuerbach with abstractions:

Certainly Feuerbach has a great advantage over the “pure” materialists in that he realizes how human beings, too, are an “object of the senses.” But apart from the fact that he only conceives them as an “object of the senses, not as sensuous activity,” because he still remains in the realm of theory and conceives of men not in their given social connection, not under their existing conditions of life, which have made them what they are, he never arrives at the really existing active human beings, but stops at the abstraction “human being,” and gets no further than recognizing “the true, individual, corporeal human being,” emotionally, that is, he knows no other “human relationships” “of human being to human being” than love and friendship, and even then idealized. He gives no criticism of the present conditions of life. Thus he never manages to conceive the sensuous world as the total living sensuous *activity* of the individuals composing it. (MEW 3:44)

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Three aspects of this central passage are of importance: in essentialist conceptions of love, (1) love is abstracted from its real existing form and idealized; (2) it is not critical; and (3) it is contemplative and not practical, that is, it is not analyzed in relation to the historical development of production, productive forces, or relations of production, that is, to the real life activity of humans who *reproduce* themselves through and by these activities. As a consequence, the Feuerbachian sensuous world does not appear as one that is *changeable* and as one that is able to be subjected to revolutionary activity. As the sensuous world is not simply the result of activity, but *exists* only as and in activity, it is the true “motor” and movement of history itself. When, in a famous statement, Marx defines communism as the “real movement of history” (MEW 3:35) and not as the goal of history, he brings together both the sensuous world as “perceived perception” and the reproduction of this unity of perception and the perceived through labor. The unity of perception and the perceived can, thus, in a next step, be conceived as the relation between humans and nature through its reproduction, which Marx and Engels call “industry.” Accordingly, the sensuous world is identical with the stage of industry as the overall *form* of the sensuous world, now conceived in its social-material concreteness, and not through the lens of abstract epistemologies. As love is not conceived as an activity in Feuerbach,

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Marx consequently states, “So much is this activity, this unceasing sensuous labor and creation, this production, the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists, that, were it interrupted only for a year, Feuerbach would not only find an enormous change in the natural world, but would very soon find that the whole world of men and his own perceptive faculty, nay his own existence, were missing” (*MEW* 3:44).

Marx: Love as Social Relation

We have reached two conclusions in the foregoing section: (1) If sensuality and perception are, as Marx puts it, the result of the whole history of human-kind, then we can immediately see what is lacking in Feuerbach’s emphasis on sensuality, dialogue, and love, namely, the social and historical *form* of sensibility. This categorical constitution of social reality is for us today a reality constituted by the commodity form, that is, by money and capital. Love cannot be thought of independent from its mode of reproduction. (2) Feuerbach’s conception of love and dialogue remains in some sense *asocial*, insofar as he reduces love to an I-thou relationship. Conceiving love as a social concept, however, implies understanding it under the form that makes personal relationships possible. Love can therefore not be interpreted as intersubjective recognition, as any recognition must be mediated through the social distribution of the sensible. The last point is especially important, since the early Marx is often reduced to another version of Hegel’s philosophy of recognition. What we find, however, is the possibility of a *being together* that is mediated by its social form and not reducible to two. Consequently, it can also not be conceived in moral terms if by the latter we mean a-bodily relationships based on duty, commitment, principles, and so forth. Though most of those conceptions, such as Kant’s, acknowledge the “force” of sensuality, sensual love is ultimately elevated, ordered, framed, and organized by morality and morals (*Sittlichkeit*).

Marx and Engels criticize these conceptions, as they remain abstract, speculative, as well as imply a degradation of bodily sensuality and a socially mediated sensibility (*MEW* 2:68). Let us first look at a central passage from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Marx writes,

The positive transcendence of private property—that is, the *perceptible* appropriation for and by man of the human essence and of human life, of objective man, of human *achievements*—should not be conceived merely in the sense of *immediate*, one-sided

enjoyment, merely in the sense of *possessing*, of *having*. Man appropriates his total essence in a total manner, that is to say, as a whole human being. Each of his *human* relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving—in short, all the organs of his individual being, like those organs which are directly social in their form, are in their *objective* orientation, or in their *orientation to the object*, the appropriation of the object, the appropriation of *human* reality. (MEW 40:539)

The following aspect of what Marx has in mind is especially important: whereas the act of possession remains an abstraction from social reality, since it reduces the object to a subjective relation in which a person takes something away from the common and turns it into something personal, all other sensual activities are object-oriented, as these are mediated *through* sociality. For example, the richer and the more beautiful a work of art is, the more complex and refined the acts of seeing and participation need to be. Similarly, the richer and more complex a person I encounter is, the richer and more complex the act of personal love needs to be. Both sides are dialectically related. As Marx puts it in a telling example in the introduction to *Grundrisse*, “Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer” (MEW 42:27).

In a similar fashion, we might say that love is love, but love that exists through contract, property, money, and capital is different from love that exists through feudal social relations. Love is therefore not simply a subjective act, defined in psychological or mental terms; rather, *it is a form of sociality itself*, which is related to the mode of production and the social totality of which *the loved* is mediated and part. Again, this does not exclude that love can occur between two individuals, but the love of two individuals cannot be grasped independently from its social form, as the social form produces the social individuals who could possibly be loved. The love between two individuals is the *way society* exists *as* this relationship. Accordingly, only this position allows us to interpret “legalized” love as something born and belonging to bourgeois society.

Similarly, a position, such as Badiou’s, which claims that love is “Two” overlooks that such a position *projects* and depends on a conception of

society that exists in the “Two” relations. Love defined as an I-thou relationship is an idealization, as it overlooks that the conception of two-person love is a reflection of a social form and mode of (re)production that *needs* bourgeois love in order to reproduce itself. A specific sociality, accordingly, is already presupposed for the establishment of a person-person conception. The communism of the senses, however, describes more properly, we might say, the *whole* relation and the way sociality exists in its actuality. If we follow Marx and assume that sensual objects are necessarily social (and the product of social-historical reproduction), then sensual activities, including love, are necessarily social and historical, too. Accordingly, they are bound to specific modes of production and specific forms of reproducing these modes. It is therefore not so much the case, as some—most prominently Heidegger—have argued, that by reversing Fichte, Marx claims that sensuality is ultimately bound up in a metaphysics of subjectivity; rather, what we find in Marx is a rich concept of sensuality, sensual activity, and love that we need to describe, in opposition to Heidegger’s charge, as *participation*.

Love is thought of in Marx as a way of being-in-the-world, that is, as a *disclosure* of social reality. The claim that all senses have been framed in modernity with a sense of having, presupposes an understanding of sensual activity as *participation in* and *opening up* of the social world. Participation is juxtaposed with being *external* to the social whole. The opposite of having is not being but rather *sharing*. Possessing things means, for Marx (at least in these early works), that we remove things *from* the world, that is, we remove them from their network of social relations and, thereby, that we no longer see the things “I have” as things *we live with* being the result of social cooperation and the production of social reality through labor. Love, thought of as “Two,” is a form of having. Love is the way in which we encounter one another *socially*, not personally or psychologically, as the latter are derived from the former. Sociality, however, cannot be reduced to intersubjectivity; rather, it is the framework that makes concrete intersubjective relations possible. In this way, communism of the senses is in truth common-ism of the senses through which we share the world and participate in it. Whenever capital-mediated privatization of the world occurs, we no longer participate in the whole of social relations and instead encounter one another as abstract individuals who are held together by money, capital, and the legal forms belonging to it. Accordingly, it is not simply the case that we alienate ourselves from our being human; rather, as our self-realization only occurs in social production, creativity, talking to one another, eating, and so forth, the capitalist form of reproduction establishes these self-realizations as *abstract* relations, that is,

as no longer shared *in* the objects we see, move, touch, change, and create. As Marx has it, “Social activity and social enjoyment exist by no means *only* in the form of some *directly* communal activity and directly *communal* enjoyment, although *communal* activity and *communal* enjoyment—that is, activity and enjoyment which are manifested and affirmed in *actual direct association* with other men—will occur wherever such a *direct* expression of sociability stems from the true character of the activity’s content and is appropriate to the nature of the enjoyment” (MEW 40:528). Accordingly, love cannot be grasped in an essential sense as a property of human beings as such; instead, love as sensuality is a historical relationship, which can only be understood in its concrete social-material practice, that is, as a social relation determined by the form of reproduction under which these social relations are constituted. Love, then, is a form of social participation and not, as some contemporary Marxists claim, a property of life as such.

The Standpoint of Reproduction: Capitalist Love

As a consequence of how I have argued in the prior section of this essay, we need to claim that breaking down the essentialist position involves an analysis of love under the capitalist mode of production. As we know, the capitalist form of social reality is ruled by real abstractions such as money, commodity form, and capital. If love is to survive in capitalism, then it *must* have its form, that is, it must exist in a way that it can be subsumed by capital itself. Put simply, love under capitalism must be able to become part of the overall capital accumulation and its principle of generating more money out of money. Love can only exist as a general form of social relationship if it is productive in the favor of capital. Consequently, it must first take on the money form (which establishes its exchangeability in, for example, class-bound marriage, sex work, love markets, and labor-related effects between the genders) and then the capital form (the production of surplus value in relation to the money form of love). Put differently, it must exist in commodifiable ways in order to become a value-relevant category within societies that are determined by capital (i.e., love depends on a network of products, industries, consumption, etc.). The following three aspects of love under current capitalism are important: love must be bound to the existence of classes, it needs to fit the commodity form, and it increasingly takes on a rational character. In what follows, I briefly outline these aspects.

The difficulty in detecting the existence of classes in capitalist modes of love lies in its ideological character, which exists in the fetishism of the

commodity form. Social divisions, the relation between gender and labor/capital, as well as the real class structure of love, gets covered over by its own ideological structure, which projects a *universal* image of love as the intimate bond between two people that *seems* to transcend all class divisions. This image does not exist in the form of mental imaginations and representations, but primarily exists in the form of a wide-ranging system of industries that produce love and loving individuals through psychological and educational techniques, images, products, food, and travel. In addition, since it places women into a double exploitive position of being value-related through increasing integration into the labor market and of being excluded through non-value-related reproduction work (such as care, education, love, etc.), it can also be successfully projected and marketed as an ideal that seems to be achievable for *all* classes so that the individuals within the classes no longer experience this projection of love as one that capital *produces*, which is ultimately *exclusively* in the interest of capital. Ironically, the more we experience our modern forms of love as being “liberated,” “independent,” “enlightened,” and so forth, the more we actually become dependent on capital itself, as the liberating effects of modern forms of love are only possible through its increasing subjection to the commodity form. Through the commodity form love is produced as a specific need and as a desire within an ever-expanding system that has taken on affects, language, desires, self and body descriptions, as well as all general “noetic” activities of humans. Indeed, general human activities and abilities are now subjected to capital by and through noetic industries, such as electronics, chips, digitization, medicine, chemical industries, media, immaterial labor, as well as by control and communication as general principles of labor organization—as a consequence, human activities are increasingly becoming productive through these transformations.

Love is no exception. As the reproduction of the relations of productions produces the needs and desires, that is, the types of subjectivities that can function within and for the overall social reproduction, love does not exist in some mysterious mental, philosophical, religious, or “intersubjective” space; rather, it becomes a fine-grained system of productive activities, tasks, and relations that bring it about as something that fits the commodity form. Even religious ideas of love can nowadays only *exist* in a contemporary commodity-related way, mediated by technologies, capitalist spaces, book industries, transportation, and the “advertisement” of these ideas on religious broadcasting shows: capitalism “has made emotions into micro public spheres, that is, domains of action submitted to the public gaze.”⁴ *Ideology*

is always material. Advertisement industries, image production, therapeutic discourses, TV shows, travel industries, communication techniques in companies, and the beauty industries in general produce and create loving and desiring subjects that experience a “natural” desire to express “love” through the consumption of products that enable love to function in capitalism, that is, productively. This mode of consumption, as some have argued, is deeply related to the production of “therapeutic” selves that are increasingly, on the one hand, forced to objectify and rationalize themselves, and, on the other hand, forced to project ever more romantic and utopian ideas of love: “We are increasingly split between a hyper-rationality which has commodified and rationalized the self, and a private world increasingly dominated by self-generated fantasies.”⁵

The class aspect of all this can be seen in two respects: on the one hand, class is the effect of the division of capital and labor (now including all human activities), and, on the other hand, class is related to the global divisions implied in our system of commodity production. Using your beauty product that makes you smell good and ready for a romantic evening with sex and champagne is, in fact, through its current system of social relations, related to the proletarians who produce shampoo bottles in China, to designers who produce the sexy smell connected to your shampoo in Southeast Asia, to researchers all over the world who try to find the most animating smells by spending grants on psychological and neurological research, and to the chemical knowledge produced and patented in the United States at MIT. What we are *really* consuming, then, is not simply a product, that is, a means or an instrument to realize our love (“I have a romantic evening with my partner” or “I have a date”); rather, love is ultimately identical with the real existing network of all these relations implied in the way we love, such as online dating, yellow press journals, film, Dr. Phil, restaurants, Valentine’s Day specials, and sex toys. Love is becoming productive because it is framed by a distribution of loving subjects that, in turn, are created as consumers of love products and activities related to these products. In one word, it is ultimately standardized love though we as agents might not experience it that way. The distribution of the sensible is framed and produced through a capitalist schema that makes “love” possible.

All of the aforementioned aspects, each of which would deserve treatment on its own, lead to two consequences: on the one hand, love becomes a *task* to which we have to respond, continuously, as the systemic pressures to live love productively is experienced as a possible failure and results in psychological problems, emotional discussions, and further

communication (which, in turn, can then be subjected to capital again). On the other hand, problems we have through our labor-related activities are now in the same fashion love related, as love is in fact really subsumed by capital. What we experience as a “problematization” of love is in truth the adaptation of love to its socioeconomic frame. As Illouz has it, “This in turn suggests a somewhat paradoxical observation: the therapeutic persuasion offers a variety of techniques to enable awareness of one’s need and emotions, but it also makes emotions into objects external to the subject, to be observed and controlled.”⁶ Additionally, the task and labor character of love, despite its romantic and “irrational” images, leads to a general “intellectualization of intimate bonds,”⁷ that is, it is instrumentally controlled. Finally, the gender divisions and the division between productive and unproductive (reproductive) work, which is mainly done by women, gets buried under these processes of rationalization. Illouz underestimates this aspect, as she does not connect her analysis to a critique of political economy. For example, her thesis that love is tied to a contradiction between classless emotion and the “market based romantic utopia”⁸ underestimates that the romantic vision is itself *not* universal, but based on the standpoint of capital that produces the transcending and boundless idea of what love is. For lower-class and minority women in particular, love is *work* that needs to be done in addition to labor both at home *and* in the labor market.⁹

In sum, this brief description of the capitalist mode of love shows further evidence for the claim that essentialist and I-thought conceptions of love are ultimately meaningless, as they take the individuals involved as “abstract” entities that are as such not dependent on what made them, in fact, possible, such as their class position, their labor, as well as the dialectical relations between production, consumption, distribution, exchange, and subjectivity (i.e., need and desire).

Love in Recent Materialist Theories: A Critique

In recent work of radical philosophers, rather surprisingly, love has been the object of reflection, particularly in Negri/Hardt’s writings on empire and in Badiou’s essays and interviews on love. Both positions need to be rejected from a social-material position, however, as they either, in Negri’s case, turn love (again) into a metaphysical and speculative principle or, in Badiou’s case, take it to be an “event” that, being truth-related, reorganizes the reality for only *Two*. In this concluding section I shall offer brief critical

remarks about their conceptions that stand in opposition to the position developed in this essay.

Negri/Hardt

Negri and Hardt's reflections on love are related to their overall reflections on the multitude and its political potential, as well as to their concept of immaterial labor that, they claim, can no longer be grasped with Marx's theory of value. Negri/Hardt try to uncover a conception of love that can be used for political imagination. On the one hand, as they argue in *Commonwealth*, love is creative and disruptive. It is, as they put it, "an ontological event in that marks a rupture with existing being. . . . To say that love is ontologically constitutive, then, simply means that it produces the common."¹⁰ Although love is here conceived as both an ontological and social concept, Negri and Hardt's conception of love should be confronted with the argument that I presented in this essay, namely, that we need to think about love as having a *specific* social-historical form. Again, conceiving love as an ontological concept leads to the return of empty universal concepts, and Negri and Hardt's "descriptions" of love are, consequently, totally *emptied* of any specific content. As they argue, love should be understood as "the production of singularities and the composition of singularities in a common relationship."¹¹

Accordingly, both love as constitution and love as composition are put up against "identitarian" conceptions of love (family, nation, race, neighbor) as well as "unification" conceptions of love (romantic love, commodified love, religious love). Difference, in other words, is the key term for Negri/Hardt, and Negri in particular ties the concept to ontology and Spinoza, insofar as love is taken to be the desire of life not only to conserve its life, but also to develop it from within.¹² As a consequence, they reject conceptions of love that bring the multitude into a unified social form. Instead, they propose a poetic vision of love as "wasp-orchid love."¹³ Whatever this poetic image might contain, as long as it is not conceptualized in the context of concrete productive activities and, instead, is abstractly taken to be productive *as such*, love remains an empty abstraction and can stand in for everything. As long as it is not seen in the context of social organization, even if this organization is no longer capitalist and directed toward the "common," love is here somehow conceived as being beyond its social form—ahistorical. This ontological conception is in danger of falling back onto an empty essentialism that we had already rejected

above with Marx. What Negri imagines is a truly anarchic form of love, the pure *ability* to love, distributed before all social distribution, productive before any specific productive and social horizon. If, however, I argue, life reproduces itself through labor and expresses itself *in and through* its productive relations, then it cannot be conceived as pure productive immanence, as the body, nature, and desire (self) are the mediations and *forms* through which life becomes *productive* life.

Consequently, against the essentialism of Negri and Hardt, love from a Marxian point of view must be understood as a *social* form of sensual distribution and not as the cause, force, or ground for something other than itself. If love is production and composition, as Negri and Hardt try to argue, then the social (and even the political) is conceived as the *effect* of the being of life. So, even if we follow Negri and Hardt's reconceptualizations, love as a sensual praxis is at the same time a communal praxis or an activity *in* community. It is very difficult to see how this "communalization" of the senses would *not* be related to some form of unification. As such, it can of course exist in myriad relations, such as in eating, drinking, playing, and laboring, but even in a noncapitalist future love will be *object-mediated* and *therefore* socially related to the form under which this noncapitalist society is constituted. Only a different form of products and production can lead to a different form of love, but as "pure possibility" it has *no* form and, hence, no social-categorical determination. A non-categorical love is nothing at all and remains empty.

Negri/Hardt claim that "love is able . . . to generate new forms of conviviality, of living together, that affirm the autonomy and interaction of singularities in the common."¹⁴ This thoroughly non-dialectical position neglects the simple fact that love as such, pure and simple, cannot create *ex nihilo* its form, given that, according to their own position, it does not have a form. Accordingly, we need to critically ask, why should love produce "conviviality" and not, for example, war, destruction, and commodified love? Why, given its emptiness, would it *necessarily* lead to the positive results Negri and Hardt have in mind? I do not think that they give any argument for speculative assumptions implied in their analysis. The causal connection, in other words, that is implied in their claim that love *necessarily* brings out "conviviality" is nowhere explained and justified. Though I much appreciate their attempt to come up with a communist idea of love, the abstract way they deal with the social as something external to the productivity of life is precisely what Engels scoffs at in the quote with which this essay started out.¹⁵

Interestingly, Hardt/Negri not only return to Spinoza with their conception, as they claim, but also to some aspects of pre-Marxian utopian socialism à la Moses Hess, who in his *Communist Credo* says the following: “It is love itself, which creates everything and makes its regeneration possible.”¹⁶ As a consequence, then, this merging of God into life itself and the attempt to reach a point of immanence leaves out, as I claim, the standpoint of reproduction, which will not suddenly disappear in a future society based on the multitude.

Badiou

Badiou argues that love is an event within which a world is constructed that overcomes the “One.” Though he argues against romantic notions of love and, instead, brings love closer to truth “that derives from difference as such,”¹⁷ he nevertheless claims that the world that overcomes the “One” is only a world of “Two,” which is established by difference. Love, he says, “is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One, but from the perspective of Two,”¹⁸ the constitution of which comes about through “commitment” and “fidelity.” As Badiou rejects ethical interpretations of love, perhaps we should name his conception “militant love.” This militant love has, according to Badiou, three aspects: subjectivation, incorporation, as well as that it follows a procedure.

For the sake of brevity, I shall only discuss these aspects briefly. Once the event of love has taken place, the thus-far inexistent element of love takes on an “intensity” that “passes from the minimal or nil degree to the maximal one.”¹⁹ As Badiou argues, this intensity turns the body into a body of truth, which is in this case a body of love. As such, this body is, in Badiou’s terminology, a “subjectivizable” body, since through the incorporation of love the individual becomes a subject *of* love. The effects of the statement “I love you” lead to a quasi-Christian conversion (though Badiou avoids references to the Christian tradition) that decenters all narcissistic enjoyments into affects incorporated into the body of love.²⁰ The “intensity” of love depends on how faithfully the initial declaration is transformed into and becomes the body. As a consequence, as Badiou in his essay on the idea of communism similarly argues, this conception of love is modeled after a *revolutionary* moment in which an idea is incorporated into a “body of truth,” thereby establishing a procedure to follow. This procedure is imposed on a militant subject that *becomes* an idea by accepting its internal implications for future history.

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In light of what I have outlined in this essay, we should remain skeptical about Badiou's position, mainly for two reasons: first, the difference between the committed subject of love and the committed subject of politics remains unclear.²¹ Though both, according to Badiou, are based on the same procedure, one establishes the world for *Two*, whereas the other establishes the world for *everyone*, as Badiou assumes that politics is ultimately based on the idea of an egalitarian society. The consequences implied by the "becoming truth of the body" and the consequences implied by the "becoming love of the body" are opposed to each other, insofar as a political procedure requires a militant discipline, a rigorous form of organization, and so forth, but the love procedure requires fidelity alone. Unfortunately, Badiou does not offer any criteria to differentiate between love and other "events" that are declared and named in a similar fashion. For example, one could argue that the primordial statement "I hate you" initiates the same procedure that Badiou argues belongs, exclusively, to love. In order to differentiate these phenomena, however, Badiou would need to offer a *psychological* distinction between love and hate, which his ontological framework does not permit him to introduce. Hate is, then, for Badiou only something that appears in politics and requires an enemy.²² But this thesis is not very convincing, given that one can operate against a political enemy—even when both enemies are militant—without *hating* this enemy.

When both aspects are taken together, Badiou's quasi-existentialist version of militant love remains (similar to Negri's conception) dissatisfactory, inasmuch as the same mystification of love takes place in his account. Instead of determining love as a social relation, it is in some sense its opposite, namely, an *asocial* relation, for it *separates* the lovers from the whole of society. This fact is supported by Badiou's claim that love is not a relation; rather, it is a "situation."²³ Put differently, the "Two" introduces a new division, namely, the division between the "Two" and the "Third." Importantly, this division between the lovers and society cannot be covered over by Badiou's claim that certain social formations, such as communism, allow for a reinvention of love.²⁴ Consequently, turning love into the absolute separation of the lovers from the social, which is visible in the total commitment towards the other, mystifies it as an abstract notion and universal human possibility, within which the love between Mickey and Mallory Knox and the love between two New Guinea tribe members are the same as the love between Tristan and Isolde.²⁵ In this way, Badiou's notion of love is, in its essence, the ideological projection of a specific (modern) version of love into the realm of abstract considerations.

Conclusion

Instead of thinking about love in terms of a truth procedure (Badiou) or an ontological event (Negri), we should see its social character and thereby turn our attention to its particular social productivity. As Bertolt Brecht writes in “Me-Ti,” “The most excellent are able to bring their love in harmony with other productions; their kindness becomes then a universal kindness, and their creative manner becomes useful for many, and they support everything productive.”²⁶

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NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx Engels Werke*, 42 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1956–2014), 2:23. Hereafter parenthetically cited as *MEW*. All quotations are checked for their accuracy, as some older translations of Marx’s work are at times inadequate. The reader can easily check my English citations by searching for phrases in the Marx and Engels Internet Archive, at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/index.htm>, which contains the collected works by Marx/Engels in English.
2. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Erich Thies (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 3:301. Hereafter parenthetically cited as *W*.
3. Ursula Reitemeyer, *Philosophie der Leiblichkeit: Ludwig Feuerbach’s Entwurf einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 126.
4. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (London: Polity Press, 2007), 37.
5. *Ibid.*, 113.
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 34.
8. Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 111.
9. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminine Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 23–27.
10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 181.
11. *Ibid.*, 183.
12. See Antonio Negri, *The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2008), 166.
13. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 188.
14. *Ibid.*, 380.
15. Hardt implicitly contradicts this position in a different essay on the commons and communism, in which he says the following: “Instead the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous human production of subjectivity, the human production of humanity—a new seeing, a new hearing, a new thinking, a new loving.” “The Common in Communism,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas (London: Verso, 2010), 141. Using the formula “a new loving,” which presupposes different forms of love, implies that speaking of “love” as an undefined “potentiality” does not make much sense.
16. Moses Hess, *The Holy History of Mankind, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 127.
17. Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2012), 38.
18. *Ibid.*, 29.
19. Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (London: Polity Press, 2011), 83.
20. *Ibid.*, 88.
21. Badiou himself operates with analogies. For example, the “obscure” form of love, jealousy, is paralleled with fascism (*Second Manifesto*, 103). The analogy with “revolutionary politics” is drawn in

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Badiou, *In Praise*, 61. It is, then, consequent, though deeply disturbing, to see Badiou admiring the “intensity” of love for leaders such as Stalin (70).

22. Badiou, *In Praise*, 71.
23. Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2008), 182.
24. Badiou, *In Praise*, 73.
25. On the one hand, Badiou claims that the love between Tristan and Isolde is not a love based on “Two.” On the other hand,

he claims that there is something universal in all stories and literature about love (*In Praise*, 39). Accordingly, even the love between Tristan and Isolde must fall under his general notion of love.

26. Bertolt Brecht, “Me-ti: Buch der Wendungen,” in *Prosa 3: Sammlungen und Dialoge*, vol. 18, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlef Müller (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 176.