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Capitalism and the plastic brain: Catherine Malabou's language of economy*

Jakub DADLEZ**

ABSTRACT

The article attempts to show how philosophy can critically and subversively engage with the language of economy to encourage subjectivities unconstrained by the conditions of capitalism. This task has become urgent in the face of problems engendered by the current socio-economic system. Catherine Malabou's philosophy is discussed in this context as an example of how the concept of economy can be intercepted to oppose the dominant discourse of capitalism. The analysis first focuses on Malabou's use of the word "economy" and of related notions such as "exchange", "circulation", "donation" or "value". Secondly, Malabou's direct references to economic discourse are addressed. The article outlines Malabou's development of Heidegger's philosophy in terms of "ontological capitalism" as well as her criticism of contemporary capitalism — especially the idea of flexibility, conducted from the perspective of neuroplasticity and the consciousness of the brain. As a result, the discussion suggests an original approach to her later, directly political writings.

KEYWORDS

Catherine Malabou, language of the economy, ontological capitalism, plastic brain, plasticity

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** Ph.D., assistant professor, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin. E-mail: jakub.dadlez@mail.umcs.pl.

1. CAPITALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

One of the main features of the contemporary world is an unjust distribution of wealth and power. Recently, the COVID pandemic, increased military activity and the acceleration of climate and biodiversity crises have deepened inequalities both within societies and between nation-states. These tendencies are driven by one evident factor: global *capitalism* in its current form (Piketty, 2014). However, this term is highly ambiguous: it can be understood narrowly, as an economic system premised on 3% growth and 5% return of investment (Pobłocki, 2017), and more broadly as a long-term historical process whose sole principle is the accumulation of capital. There are also multiple concepts that overlap with capitalism: market economy, modernity and neoliberalism (Braudel, 2008; Ganti, 2014; Goody, 2004). Moreover, modern descriptions of capitalism are strikingly Eurocentric, whereas its history extends far beyond this continent (see Goody, 2004; Graeber, 2011; Wallerstein, 2006). Finally, capitalism has historically taken different forms in many places: mercantile, industrial, financial, etc. (Kocka, 2018). Still, regardless of these complications, the main feature of capitalism is that it "demands constant, endless growth" (Graeber, 2011: 345).

Ensuring ever-growing profits is also a principle embraced in contemporary economics, dominating the socio-political sphere to such an extent that "everything is supposed to justify its existence in terms of its contribution to productivity growth" (Chang, 2010: 238, 243). Consequently, capitalism has engendered a specific culture that perpetuates it (Sennett, 2006), or the "spirit of capitalism" as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) famously termed it. According to another interpretation, this motivating force is accompanied by neoliberal governmentality — a concept Michel Foucault explained as consisting in the political power exercised by subjects over themselves. As a result, one makes "an entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings;" further, the subject "incurs expenses by investing to obtain some kind of improvement" (Foucault, 2008: 226, 230; see also Sugarman, 2015; Thomas, 2019). This vision also embraces the necessity to develop profitable relations through robust networking: "always to have something in mind, in the pipeline, with other people whom one meets out of a desire to do something" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007: 110). Even the closest relationships are haunted by the possibility of individual interest — if not financial then at least professional (Illouz, 2007). Moreover, consuming new products and services — buying new shoes, watching new online shows or visiting new tourist

destinations — is an essential part of life in capitalism (see Trentmann, 2004; McDonald *et al.*, 2017; Finkielsztein, 2022) and thus comprises an important aspect of subjectivity formation.

Although global capitalism has had a clear positive impact on levels of poverty, education and demography, it has also made social life and politics into "a violent world" (Lorenzi & Berrebi, 2016). Widespread inequality, alienation and exploitation lie behind serious psychosocial conditions which include depression, addiction, loneliness, boredom, burnout and fatigue (Fisher, 2009; Han, 2015; Eisenberg-Guyot & Prins, 2022; Finkielsztein, 2022). Mental health issues more or less directly linked to capitalism have been studied by many authors, and some psychologists even recognize their own discipline as complicit (Sugarman, 2015; McDonald *et al.*, 2017; Thomas, 2019; Eisenberg-Guyot & Prins, 2022). The reason may be that capitalism exposes contemporary subjectivity to a series of dialectical tensions. On the one hand, there is a strong preference for self-interest and individualism, while on the other people are alienated from their own needs, which are replaced by new needs created by the market. Although everybody is expected to take responsibility for their own life, they remain constrained by work and consumption. Despite high appreciation for the readiness to adapt and remain flexible, these characteristics often entail precarization and existential insecurity. While it is crucial to develop business relations using soft skills, especially in communication, it is also becoming difficult to create close and strong bonds based on empathy, solidarity or love. Finally, even though rational individuals are expected to act in accordance with their best interests, people are fundamentally emotional beings who crave dignity and good life.

In the face of modern capitalism, seen from the perspective of the above deficiencies and discontents, philosophy acquires special relevance due to its potential to engage in unconditional criticism and rigorous speculation. Ready to reveal and embrace dialectic tensions, contemporary philosophers have elaborated on other economic systems, either directly criticizing capitalism or subversively adopting economic ideas. The following discussion draws on the possibility of intercepting notions from the discourse of capitalism, including the term "economy" itself, in order to encourage individual and collective forms of subjectivity that will not submit to capitalism. Notably, in recent decades this path was taken by, among others, the French philosopher Catherine Malabou. This article discusses the use of economic language and themes within her philosophy of plasticity. Sometimes Malabou's criticism is indirect, for example when she addresses various economic notions; elsewhere, it is direct, especially when she discusses Heideggerian "ontological capitalism" or decries

the illusion that capitalism is natural. Both of these directions are examined here, with the overall goal being to demonstrate how contemporary philosophy can criticize capitalism and rework the language of economics in order to foster resistance to capitalism's harmful and dangerous impact on today's notions of the self.

2. MALABOU'S LANGUAGE OF ECONOMY

Catherine Malabou's philosophy is often associated with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and for several reasons: Derrida supervised her thesis and reviewed her first book (the text of the review was incorporated as the introduction to the 1998 English edition). Moreover, they co-authored the collaborative study *Counterpath* (Malabou & Derrida, 2004), which nevertheless reveals clear differences between their intellectual positions. Malabou's relationship with Derrida was certainly close, but it would be a misunderstanding to regard her philosophy as a mere continuation of Derridean deconstruction — an interpretation explicitly rejected by Malabou herself (Malabou & Vahanian, 2008). However, from the perspective developed here, the two authors share an interest in the language of economy. The case of Derrida is not addressed here, nor is the question whether Malabou followed him in turning to economic terms, although this is made plausible by one of her earliest publications (Malabou, 1990). This article focuses on Malabou's consideration of the language of economy as a constitutive element of her philosophy.

In a recent interview Malabou admitted that, "[u]ntil now, I had never really produced any kind of political thinking outside of what I say about capitalism in *What should we do with our brain?*" (Malabou, 2022c: 317). She would debate with authors who disclose the mechanisms of biopolitics as well as develop feminist thought and rethink the concept of anarchism (Malabou, 2015, 2022a, 2022b).[1] These contributions, however, acquire fuller meaning only in reference to her earlier works: the aforementioned *What should we do with our brain?* (2004) and above all *The future of Hegel: Plasticity, temporality and dialectic* (1996) and *The Heidegger change: On the fantastic in philosophy* (2004). The two works are, as Alexander Galloway put it, "the essential foundations of Malabou's oeuvre" (Galloway, 2012: 29). It is for this reason that the

[1] Surprisingly, in this interview Malabou omits her earlier discussion of social exclusion (Emmanuelli & Malabou, 2009).

following discussion focuses on these three books, although other texts are also taken into account.

2.1. The word and the concept

The term "economy" refers to the circulation of goods, usually through money or other means of exchange. More generally, however, it denotes "the arrangement or mode of operation of something" or "a system especially of interaction and exchange" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). It is in the latter sense that Malabou employs the term. In her first book, *The future of Hegel* (Malabou, 2005b: 18; hereafter FH), the word "economy" appears in many different contexts. For instance, Malabou writes about "an economy of sensible translation" when she refers to the interchange between the spiritual and the sensual. In the chapter "The Proper of Man' in Question", she confronts the "economy of signification" with the "natural economy of the sign" (FH: 65). Elsewhere, the subject of expression is human, with the particularity of individual expression consisting in the fact that it "involves an economy of auto-referentiality" (FH: 68). Furthermore, Malabou mentions the "economy of the absolute Idea" when discussing the place of natural contingency in the Hegelian concept of spirit (FH: 139). These are only several examples among dozens found in *The future of Hegel*. In her later book, *The Heidegger change*, the situation is similar. The word "economy" appears in the context of Heideggerian philosophy, denoting change or a "mutability" that has its proper "general economy" (Malabou, 2011c: 11; hereafter HC). To define the stakes of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Malabou uses the term "the economy of modification" (HC: 223). More examples could be provided.

The word "economy" recurs throughout Malabou's oeuvre. In *What should we do with our brain?* she describes the functioning of the brain in terms of an "economy of transmission assured by a play of 'signals'" (Malabou, 2008: 60; hereafter WSB). In *The new wounded*, she argues that the Alzheimer disease "disturbs the cerebral economy of affects" (Malabou, 2012a: 9). In *Morphing Intelligence*, she applies the term "economy" to the dialectical tension of intelligence, claiming that it both follows and challenges automatism (Malabou, 2019: 101). In *Au voleur! Anarchisme et philosophie* the term recurs in presentations of Giorgio Agamben's or Jacques Rancière's thought (Malabou, 2022a: 257, 281). All in all, Malabou employs the discussed term as an "ordinary word", akin to Heidegger's use of the words *Wandel*, *Wandlung*, and *Verwandlung* (HC: 5). Drawing on her own formulation, although she "constantly mobilizes" this word, she "seems not to vest it" (HC: 5). Still,

unlike Heidegger's triad W-W-V, Malabou's "economy" becomes the object of "etymological research or a thinking translation" (HC: 5; see Malabou, 2005a: 105; also discussed further, hereafter HCDC). Such explicit self-awareness in the use of the word enables us to interpret Malabou's philosophy, specifically the concept of plasticity, as a kind of philosophical economy. Her frequent use of the term appears to be a deliberate indication, or an antipatory trace, that plasticity is not only a certain ontological economy but also a way of imagining a different capitalist economy — perhaps even an economy altogether apart from capitalism.

This becomes clearer upon shifting focus from the word itself to the concept and its many dimensions. From this perspective, economic threads in Malabou's writings become easily discernible. For example, her account of Hegelian phenomenology and philosophy of spirit is phrased in these categories. Subjectivity is "dispossessed of itself" and consequently "the soul is possessed by the possession of itself" (FH: 31, 35). Further on, the specificity of mankind consists in the ability "to place energy in reserve", or to establish "a reservoir of potential energy" — energy that otherwise "circulates throughout in each and every life" (FH: 50, 76, 193). Moreover, philosophy's future task after (and with) Hegel "remains an enterprise [*entreprise*] of 'form-donation'" that is not constrained "to exploit only the resources of a knowledge possessed already" (FH: 138, translation modified, 169). Finally, Hegel's reader is "required to give form" and accept "letting-go [*se desaissir*] of the particular 'I' and its rigid form" (FH: 179, 181). Generally, plasticity is defined in the Hegelian context as the "dynamism of the reception and donation of form", whereas Malabou's goal is to "show that the Hegelian notion of temporality is located nowhere else but in the economy opened up by this articulation" — the articulation of temporal totality and "factual [*événementielle*] eruption" (FH: 186). Ultimately, this articulation locates plasticity as "the originary operation of receiving and giving form", that "is not a rigid and fixed structure but an instance which can evolve, which means that it can give itself new forms" (FH: 186).

In *The future of Hegel* Malabou defines plasticity in terms of reserve, dispossession, circulation as well as donating and receiving — all of them are related to the economy. Similarly, in *The Heidegger change* she shows that the Heideggerian concept of Being involves constant exchange, including "the event of the exchange of the inaugural event — the first beginning — and the terminal event, the other beginning" (HC: 68). Exchanges are movements of thought that entail counter-movements which are "caught in comparability, that is, in a sense, in the logic of the *value for*. It is this *equivalence* that must be metamorphosed and displaced" (HC: 107; emphasis in the original).

Exchange is above all an act of giving and withdrawing, which creates an unstable structure of substitution (*Ereignis*): "an interchange in which the elements that circulate or 'play' stop seeking to exercise mastery on each other and being of value for each other" (HC: 127). The Heideggerian concept of *Ereignis* is also defined as "the appropriating event that suspends the proper" (HC: 276). In this sense, Heidegger's ontology — or as Malabou puts it, his metaphysical "fantasy" about the general exchange of gifts between Being and beings — can be also regarded as "a metabolic circulation [which] takes place between man and *Dasein*, God and god, being (*Sein*) and be-ing (*Seyn*), and essence (*Wesen*) and essencing or swaying (*Wesung*)" (HC: 24). Again, economic notions of exchange, circulation or value are used to establish key ideas. Similar patterns are also found in Malabou's other writings where they may not refer directly to the dominance of capitalist discourse, but indirectly insofar as they draw on the language of the economy.

2.2. Ontology and capitalism

Although the language of economy is evidently important in Malabou's philosophy, its use in her writings is not limited to economic metaphors or even broader meanings of the economy. Her 1990 article "Économie de la violence, violence de l'économie (Derrida et Marx)" clearly shows that from the beginning of her career she has been critical of the violence caused by the capitalist economy. There are two particular cases where she directly addresses this sociopolitical system. While *The Heidegger change* and related texts draw on the discourse of the economy to develop the ontology of plasticity, *What should we do with our brain?* explicitly criticizes global capitalism. This section discusses both cases.

As shown above, the language of economy informs Malabou's key concept of plasticity. The term, which derives from Greek, has two meanings: "on the one hand, to be 'susceptible to changes of form' or malleable [...] and on the other hand, 'having the power to bestow form, the power to mould'" (FH: 8). This passive-active dialectic of being formed and forming is reflected in common uses of the word "plastic" in the context of art, education, brain development, synthetic materials, and even "all living things" (FH: 8–9). As Derrida noted, plasticity refers to the concept of form: "[t]o the plasticity of a form [...] to the plasticity of another form, to the plasticity of a form involved in its process of formation, to the plasticity of the unformed, to the plasticity of 'plastic matter';" at the same time, it suggests the possibility of destruction: "the plasticity of gelignite, of what can at any time explode

or threaten to explode, for example, the self-identity of the present" (Derrida, 2005: xiv). Indeed, "plastic explosive" is a "material with a nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose base that can set off violent detonations" (FH: 9). Similar descriptions can be found elsewhere, not only in *The future of Hegel* (see WSB: 5; Malabou, 2010: 87, note 13; 2011). Eventually, in Malabou's account, plasticity characterizes reality as always already "self-exappropriating" (as Derrida could put it), or as constantly renegotiating its own principles of being with regard to possible crises. In short, it is economic.

On this ground, in *The Heidegger change* Malabou reads Heidegger in terms of ontological economy, distinguishing two kinds: originary and secondary. The former is associated with the Heideggerian concept of Being — the most general fact of being, or factuality as such — while the latter refers to everything that is or exists in a certain form, as a particular fact or series of facts. Hence, economy can be understood as pertaining either to the ontological structure of reality, or to all perceptible, given events — as either virtual formality or actual forms. This means that a deeper economy of ontological difference preconditions the metaphysical economy of existing things. This interpretation is introduced in the "First Incision" in *The Heidegger Change*: "We have arrived before the astonishing economy of an exchange before exchange and prior to all economy; one prior to money, price, and sex — prior, even, to commerce" (HC: 71). The point here is to show a pre-capitalist economy that establishes capitalism as a metaphysical economy. "Ontological capitalism", Malabou argues, "designates the economic system opened by the originary exchange of presence with itself: beings for being via the money of essence" (HC: 73). Beings circulate and exchange on the basis of common value: the value of presence, or the factual appearance in the here and now. As philosophy has traditionally argued, some beings are substantial whereas others are merely contingent; some are universal, while others are only accidental. This traditional economy foregrounds the circulation of entities but neglects the circulation between themselves and their being.[2]

Heideggerian philosophy opposes "traditional ontology" and its "system of exchange that proceeds from usurpation — being taking the place of Being — and from accumulation", as Malabou argues in the article HCDC (106).

[2] Alberto Toscano (2015) holds that Malabou misconceives the roots of capitalism. In his view, it is not the result of some originary metaphysical economy; on the contrary, any notion of origin is the effect of a specific social form, namely of money. So, the concept of plasticity is useless in current political struggles. From Malabou's point of view, however, the kind of post-Marxist causality that sees metaphysics as the product of social form is evidently non-dialectic.

In this text, she discusses the Greek etymology of the word "economy", which is a blend of *oikos* and *nomos*: "the law of the household", as Malabou puts it (HCDC: 105). In the case of Heidegger, "ontological economy" refers to the house of Being, or rather the ontic home for Being based on the assumption of a proper sense, of "propriety" inherent in things — or even in the world as such. However, these are just metaphors which do not have anything proper about them — they cannot own anything. In fact, possession is illusory because all property — every belonging including the fact of belonging somewhere — is a volatile effect of constant negotiation with Being. The latter does not possess any household because it comprises the ongoing exchange between itself and the other: its own being is different from being. In this perspective, Being expropriates beings from their proper sense, from the appropriation of sense and of being. It interrupts the process of the "thesaurization of the literal sense [*sens propre*]" (HCDC: 107). Thus, Being has no home, literally or metaphorically. Nevertheless, there is a sense of an expropriated belongingness insofar as this economy "makes one think about belonging [*donne à penser l'appartenance*]" (HCDC: 110). To put it differently, although values still work, they are always already devalorized; the "logic of profit" persists but is constantly substituted by "disinterested commerce" (HCDC: 107, 108). Thus continues the "originary circulation of change" (HCDC: 110).

2.3. Responsibility of the brain

The Heideggerian onto-economic formula can be summarized as follows: beings and Being, both conceived of as systems of (ex)change, circulate between each other and articulate one another. Ultimately, the ontological economy comprises capitalist violence as well as revolutionary resistance, commodified existence as well as deconstructed property and belonging. "Heideggerian philosophy", Malabou argues, "unceasingly transports us back to this neither archaic, nor classic, nor mythic prior of the prior where everything seems (ex)changed. Where everything that comes comes about only to be exchanged, passing into the strange vestibule that is the first room, the very first, of the house of being" (HC: 71). This entrance is governed by an economy whose *nomos* is different than the capitalist one. The latter is based on *Geltung*, a notion explored by Malabou: "*gelten*: to be valid, in force and effective, to apply; *gelten für*: to be of value for; *gelten als*: to pass for. The verb *gelten* and the substantive *Geltung* — validity, worth, currency" (HC: 74). Ultimately, "ontological capitalism [...] is a system of generalized equivalence ruled by *Geltung*" (HC: 74). *Geltung* facilitates evaluating and calculating the worth of beings as property, the worthiness of our

properties and belongings, and consequently enables setting them in order. This logic is confronted, in the "Second Incision", with the notion of *Gunst* which means "favor, benevolence, good grace, privilege, gift, and opportunity [...], *günstig* is what one calls an opportune, interesting, or propitious thing" (HC: 149). It may be "interesting" but not in the sense of its interest rate. Ontological capitalism as well as actual modern capitalism are governed by the logic of value and profit which Malabou contrasts with the non-violent and mutually beneficial "exchange without privilege, in which no instance, rightly, receives f a v o r a b l e t r e a t m e n t" or "exchange involving neither mastery nor violation, exchange through letting be" (HC: 147, 149; my emphasis).

Although these metaphysical reflections are elaborated further by Malabou (see 2010: 44), she also discusses the socio-political dimension of the capitalist economy. In the foreword to the second edition of *What should we do with our brain?* Malabou admits that this book was an intellectual turning point for her (Malabou, 2011a: 34) insofar as it addresses not just theoretical issues but also present-day challenges. Taking her cue from Boltanski and Chiapello regarding the "new spirit of capitalism" and from Alain Ehrenberg's diagnosis of modern psychosocial issues, she discerns the dangers and promises of the latest discoveries in neuroscience. She notably assumes the philosophical perspective rooted in Heideggerian thought, specifically by developing the notion of plasticity, or the ontological circulation of forms, which she applies to the human brain. Following contemporary neurobiology, Malabou underlines the plasticity of the brain, its ability to be formed as well as to form or re-form itself — even to transform abruptly (WSB: 5). In this account, the brain is not the centre of subjectivity and its activity is not a "process of centralization" (WSB: 33). Plasticity "generates the image of a fluid process, somehow present everywhere and nowhere, which places the outside and the inside in contact by developing an internal principle of cooperation, assistance, and repair, and an external principle of adaptation and evolution" (WSB: 35). Contemporary capitalism can certainly be described similarly: it is decentralized and fluid, promoting mobility and networking, its main features being relationality and interchangeability (see WSB: 41). According to Malabou, this is also precisely the problem: comparison with neural plasticity allows today's form of capitalism to be presented as natural, thereby justifying its injustices (WSB: 40).

However, Malabou argues that the naturalization of the new spirit of capitalism is based on a misconception. The flexibility that underpins the psychosocial dimension of capitalism should not be confused with plasticity (WSB: 12–13). Flexibility is the ability to adapt and develop new relations by abruptly severing previous ones — to shift focus from one project to another whenever

required. Flexible subjectivities and individual brains are thus subjugated to the logic of capitalism, or made obedient by way of self-control, because "what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style" (WSB: 12). In a sense, flexibility defines the subject of the *Geltung* economy, where "the brain is analyzed as personal capital, constituted by a sum of abilities that each must 'invest optimally'" (WSB: 46). Meanwhile, acknowledging the brain's plasticity — the fact that "the brain is a work" — or what Malabou termed "the consciousness of the brain" (WSB: 1, 2)[3] could reveal a different economy, one governed by Heideggerian *Gunst*. Embracing the full scope of the brain's plasticity could "allow us to think a multiplicity of interactions in which the participants exercise transformative effects on one another through the demands of recognition, of non-domination, and of liberty" (WSB: 31). In this alternative system of exchange, individual agents could resist late-capitalist domination and control. Plastic, self-aware brains could develop "a new responsibility" of economic life, which would be both ethical and political (WSB: 14, 30).[4] It would be ethical because plasticity reveals the capacity for "solicitude, treatment, help, repair, rescue", and political because it reveals the "double movement of the receiving and the giving of form" (WSB: 30). Plasticity thereby emerges as Malabou's term for an alter-capitalist subjectivity and economy.

3. DOUBTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The capitalist form of subjectivity is varied and many-faceted, but generally it predominates in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, this discursive and

[3] The English edition uses "consciousness" as the translation of the French *conscience*. However, the word "consciousness" seems to lose the ambiguity of the original term, which refers not only to consciousness but also to moral conscience. It is worth noting that Malabou later criticized *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* for accepting the difference between brain and machine, or plasticity and automatism (in *Morphing intelligence*). Innovations in the field of AI as well as scientific developments regarding intelligence have led her to review her previous position. Nevertheless, the concept of the consciousness of the brain maintains its validity.

[4] Francis Russell (2020: 65, 73–74) asserts that Malabou produced "a neurobiologically grounded, individualistic ethics" and ignored the agonistic aspect of politics in favour of the ideal of deliberative democracy. This interpretation goes awry first of all because for Malabou individualism is not in-divisible, and secondly because her account of subjectivity spans both the individual the collective. Moreover, she explicitly affirms the agonistic character of political ethics: "my definition of structure [...] implies fight and struggle [...] And I think that if there should be an ethical value, the notion of recognition would be the one for me, and, of course, this notion implies fight and struggle" (Malabou & Vahanian, 2008: 11–12).

intellectual dominance does not entail absolute and unconditional determination of what a subject can be, how it can act or what it can perform. Individuals and groups are never fully determined by the actual common spirit, culture or mentality. Capitalism has always met its otherness, it has always been accompanied and acted upon by various forms of critique and resistance (see Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Kocka, 2018). Of course, as has been indicated by many authors, such variations have often been embraced and absorbed by capitalist entities (Jameson, 1991; Fisher, 2009). Still, the possibility of a society formed by non-capitalist individual or group subjectivities always persists. Michel de Certeau (1984) showed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that human beings have a stunning ability to act in a subversive way, for example to reshape conventions imposed by mass culture. A similar intuition was expressed by Michel Foucault (2003) in lectures known under the title *Society must be defended*, where he confronted the main current of history with repressed counter-histories. These kinds of reflections demonstrate that every state of the world, every human actuality, is open to change. Because every given psychosocial order is always already deconstructed by alternative ways of living, ways of doing things, of being together, of speaking or writing — and of thinking about ourselves. The economy also participates in the general circulation of things and concepts, in multiple systems of exchange; the economy itself is subject to change, and it produces its own counter-histories. In this history, philosophy has had and an important part to play.

In *Debt: The first 5,000 years* David Graeber differentiates between "human economies" and "commercial" or "market economies". Unlike the latter, the former are "primarily concerned not with the accumulation of wealth, but with the creation, destruction, and rearranging of human beings" (Graeber, 2011: 130). We all partake in a system of human economy that is not governed by the imperative of profitability. It can be even understood as a quasi-transcendental or quasi-metaphysical plastic structure — at once conditioning and conditioned by the actual systems of exchange that regulate both society and human subjectivity. This deep structure of economy emerges in Malabou's discussions of Hegel and Heidegger but is also invoked in her direct critique of contemporary capitalism. Nevertheless, some ambiguities are unavoidable in this context, especially concerning the future of capitalism. On the one hand, within the Heideggerian dialectic of originary economy and capitalist metaphysics, as outlined by Malabou, the latter cannot be overcome and hence capitalism cannot be overpowered. On the other, however, in her later defence of crypto-currencies she does mention the "possibility of the emergence [...] of an anti-capitalism" (Malabou, 2020). It remains unclear whether she means

a change by explosion — an explosive revolution[5] — or an unprecedented event that would be somehow messianic in spite of her own declarations (see Malabou, 2010: 75–77). It would have to be specified whether Malabou's announced resistance to capitalism, even in revolutionary form, would involve a turn in a dialectical exchange or be based on a fantasy about a utopia "to come". Furthermore, when concluding her analysis of anarchic philosophers, Malabou differentiates between ecology and economy and suggests that the latter ought to be denounced and expelled (Malabou, 2022a: 396). She does not reflect on the significant fact that the word "ecology" was defined by its inventor, Ernst Haeckel, as "the economy of nature" (Smith & Pimm, 2023).

Another important question concerns the concept of the "consciousness of the brain". Malabou herself wrote extensively about human brain and psychic life: showing the role of emotions in the formation of selfhood; deconstructing the concept of intelligence by presenting it as creative as well as automatic; and exhibiting the possibility of a neurobiological trauma which leads to an abrupt shift of identity — even its destructive transformation (see Johnston & Malabou, 2013; Malabou, 2012a, 2012b, 2019). All these inquiries undoubtedly raise awareness about the embodied mind. And yet it remains unclear how societies should implement the knowledge about the plasticity of the brain? Would it require deep reforms of centralized educational institutions, or rather new anarcho-democratic cooperatives, not yet established? Even if the consciousness of the brain was established, would it necessarily lead to the formation of a non-capitalist conscience? Would such a new subject still be an economic being, or would it be rather an "unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbours nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. A form born of the accident, born by accident, a kind of accident" (Malabou, 2012b: 2)? These issues are particularly urgent because so far it is capitalism that seems to have learned about its own plasticity — about the economy as plasticity. Therefore the challenge is as follows: How to teach (about) the consciousness of the brain in a state of considerable urgency?[6]

These matters require more study and the present discussion can serve as an introduction to original readings of the Malabou's most recent writings on feminism, biopolitics and anarchism. Hopefully, however, the above reflections lead to two conclusions: one general and one particular. The first is that contemporary philosophy can mobilize the language of economy

[5] "The mark of revolution is the fracture constituting us" (HC: 278).

[6] About the notion of urgency see Emmanuelli & Malabou, 2009: 26–50.

in various ways, proposing means of resisting the physical, discursive, affective and intellectual dominance of capitalism. The second is that, as Malabou claims, the rule of capitalism can be resisted by forming a consciousness of the brain. By embracing its plasticity, which reflects ontological plasticity, human subjects may reject the governance of the Graeberian market economy and turn (or return) to a human economy. Philosophy in general and Malabou's thought in particular can assist in replacing the harmful tensions within capitalist subjectivities with a more constructive dialectic of the self. In the long run, intercepting the concept of economy — along with notions of value, interest, circulation and exchange — may transform the way we think about who we are, shifting away from the idea of being "entrepreneurs of ourselves". In this way, even if it remains impossible to fully emancipate ourselves from the logic of capital growth and profit, it might at least become possible to base growth on mutual favour, recognition and care.

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