



## Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire

*Frédéric Lordon*

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Why do people work for other people? This seemingly naïve question is at the heart of Lordon's argument. To complement Marx's partial answers, especially in the face of the disconcerting spectacle of the engaged, enthusiastic employee, Lordon brings to bear a "Spinozist anthropology" that reveals the fundamental role of affects and passions in the employment relationship, reconceptualizing capitalist exploitation as the capture and remolding of desire. A thoroughly materialist reading of Spinoza's *Ethics* allows Lordon to debunk all notions of individual autonomy and self-determination while simultaneously saving the ideas of political freedom and liberation from capitalist exploitation. *Willing Slaves of Capital* is a bold proposal to rethink capitalism and its transcendence on the basis of the contemporary experience of work.

## Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire Details

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## From Reader Review Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire for online ebook

### Steven says

I am not sure if I have the philosophical to properly understand the book, its postulates and its implications, but it was such a great read. I won't deny it was a bit sad at times, seeing oneself and one's life being described as it is, but it's well worth it. Yes, it might be depressing, but knowing what one is up against and how one willingly gives up one's desires or aligns them with someone's/something's else while believing one is doing it by one's own uncorrupted free will it's the best way to counteract and analyse one's own actions. Being introduced to Spinoza's ideas just opened my mind further and will be reading him, hopefully soon.

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### max says

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.

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### Mamadou Diallo says

Le capitalisme tel qu'il est pensé par Marx, c'est à dire comme mode de production historique et rapport social, éclairé par des concepts spinozistes dont celui de Conatus, pulsion toujours présente et désirante qui, quoi qu'elle dirige vers des objets de désirs qui lui sont externes, est immanente. L'ordon il me semble dit très bien ce qu'est le salariat, une capture, par un désir et une puissance d'agir maître patronal, d'une multitude d'autres puissance d'agir dont il travail à l'alignement des désirs sur le sien. Ce rapport, cette transaction, loin de se nouer sur une scène vierge et neutre et entre des agents sociaux également aptes à garantir la prééminence de leurs désirs, se fait jour dans un monde social que caractérise une division du travail avancée, qui rend inconcevable la monade économique, et l'inégale accès à la monnaie. Il faut, pour survivre dans un tel univers, de l'argent; les capitalistes ont accès aux financements bancaires, le grand nombre au salaire qui, tout en leur permettant de survivre, met leur puissance d'agir au service du désir d'un autre. Il n'y a plus, sous cet angle spinoziste, ni contrainte ni assentiment, ni aliénation ni autonomie du sujet, mais seulement des affects, tristes ou joyeux. Le cadre supérieur est plutôt, dans la relation salariale, mu par des affects joyeux, il a la culture d'entreprise et les gratifications sont pour lui nombreuses; l'employé est conduit au salariat par la crainte, s'il ne s'y soumet, de dépérir, son salaire seul lui offre, par la consommation, quelques jouissances. L'hétéronomie est indépassable, Le sujet humain est nécessairement esclave de passions qui ont leurs sources non pas dans sa fantaisie pour l'essentiel mais dans le social. Ainsi, le fâcheux dans le capitalisme, ça n'est plus l'aliénation du sujet, le concept est insensé, mais son enrôlement systématique et toujours consentie aux desiderata du capital, l'appauvrissement du champ des possibles de l'emploi de sa puissance d'agir. Les métaphores géométriques que mobilise l'auteur pour figurer la nature des relations salariales sont éclairantes. Mais le salariat n'est finalement que l'une des déclinaison de cette opération de captures de puissances d'agir par des désirs maîtres, que l'humanité a connu avant le capitalisme mais aussi sous les régimes qui, au XXe siècle, se sont vus son dépassement. Ces considérations ne conduisent pas L'ordon à renoncer à l'hypothèse communiste, mais à l'idée du grand soir et des lendemains

qui chantent, pendant séculier des eschatologies monothéistes.

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## Caleb Parks says

An incredible 162 pages on the institution of Neoliberal employment. By combining Marx and Spinoza, Lordon has created a circuit that brings both better into current times than either by themselves. This was such an amazing read that I'm pursuing Spinoza as my next intellectual project.

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## Önder Kurt says

Önemli yerlerin altın çizip, not almak bu kitapta i'e ayarmıyor zira kitabın tamamının altın çizmek gerekiyor..bu "bir kitap okudum hayatım de?i?ti" kategorisinde yerini alabilecek türden bir kitap, özellikle Marxistler için. Bu kitap, kapitalizmin bütün vah?ili?ine rağmen nas?l oluyor da r?za ve gönüllü kölelik üretti?ini anlama araçlar? sunan Spinoza'nın ya?ad??m?z geç kapitalizm evresinde sömürü dinamiklerini anlamak için Marx'ın çok önemli bir tamamlayıc?s?, orta?? olabilece?ini ortaya koyuyor.

?u paragraf bir fikir verebilir:

"Kapitalizme özgü toplumsal yapı?lardan kurtulmak, duygusal kölelikten kurtulmamız? sa?lamaz. Tek baş?na, arzunun ve sarf edilen güçlerin baş?bozuk ?iddetinden kurtaramaz bizi. Spinoza'nın duygular konusundaki gerçekçili?i, bu noktada belki en çok Marksist ütopyanın i?ine yarar: Sars?p kendine getirir. Sın?fların ve sını?f çat??malarının tamamen tasfiyesiyle siyasetin ortadan kaldır?lması, proletaryanın zaferiyle bütün husumetlerin a??lması, sını?f ç?karları?ndan tamamen arınm?? sını?fsların ortaya çıkması... - bunların hepsi post-siyasal birer hayalden ibarettir ve belki de Marx'in yapt?? en büyük antropolojik hata budur:56"

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## Brad says

Fascinating account of neoliberal capitalist employment relations. I hadn't read anything this intellectual/philosophical/academic in some time. If you like words like aporiae, co-linearisation, and epithumogenesis, this is the book for you! There is even a mathematical diagram with vectors and stuff. Certainly lots going on to think about here like our voluntary servitude to our capitalist masters.

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## Anna says

I started reading 'Willing Slaves of Capital' in the first class carriage of a train home from my Christmas holiday, having had the rare luck to find a cheap advance ticket. It seemed like a fitting milieu. As translated French political philosophy goes, this is not too hard to follow. I haven't read any Spinoza, yet Lordon explains him clearly enough that I didn't feel the lack. His thesis uses Spinoza's concepts of desire to build on Marxian analysis of labour exploitation. In the 21st century, we do not merely sell our labour for subsistence, resenting it all the while. Instead, neoliberalism teaches us to find joy in our subjugation and meaning in our obligatory tasks. Lordon explains this in terms of 'epithumogenesis', a delightful term meaning 'development of a regime of desire'. The desires of the employee are carefully aligned to the

master-desire of the organisation - usually, maximising shareholder returns. I found this analysis interesting and useful, although there were understandably areas it missed, inevitable in such a short book. One was personal identification with the job, which I consider a slightly different thing to aligned desires. Likewise the obligation to be ambitious; satisfaction with the current job is not allowed, you must always be doing more work to demonstrate your fitness for an entirely theoretical more senior position. (My resentment towards academia might be showing here.)

Lordon nonetheless makes some important points, including this on the increasing liquidity of labour:

Once limited to asset markets, and to a very specific property of them, the scheme of liquidity irresistibly overflows and spread throughout the whole of capitalist society, evidently primarily serving those in a position to assert their desire as master-desire. Even though no market, especially not that of labour, can attain the degree of flexibility-reversibility of financial markets, liquidity draws the bullseye and pushes the master-desires towards obtaining the structural transformations that would allow them to get as close as they can. The most typical example is that of the capitalist argument that the only way to lower unemployment is to completely liberate layoffs from any regulatory framework.

The obvious British case study is the zero hours contract, which provides liquid labour as required. Lordon also asks whether it's really so bad if employees have been successfully trained to enjoy their jobs. Yes, it is.

For however successful it is, the process of epithumogenesis has the effect, and in fact the intention, of *fixing* the enlistee's desire to a certain number of objects to the exclusion of others. Within capitalist organisations, the very function of hierarchical subordination is to assign each individual a defined set task according to the division of labour, namely, to an activity object that each must convert into an object of desire. [...] Subjection, even when it is happy, consists fundamentally in *locking employees in a restricted domain of enjoyment*.

Thus employee enjoyment is only permitted when it falls within the master-desire of the organisation and doesn't seek to question or change the organisation itself. This synthesis of Spinoza obviously has implications for Marx's theories of class conflict, which Lordon handles as follows:

But this [new] definition of class does not possess the simplicity of the initial bipolar scheme, since belonging to the 'employee-class' (the class of 'labour') is no longer itself as strongly predetermining as it used to be; crucially, it no longer has the homogeneity that enabled it (at times) to act as a historical driving force. Nevertheless, this relative fragmentation of the class structure and the ensuing blurring of the social landscape in no way prevents re-homogenisations from taking place, but these must follow a different logic, notably, the affective logic of discontent.

Lordon also includes a solid explanation of desire alignment on a continuum, with the fit becoming close the more senior the employee. I was less convinced by the critique of Marx's notions of value, using a comparison to Spinoza's. I couldn't escape the sense that the two were discussing fundamentally different

things, to different ends. Lordon does not mention what seemed to me a significant aim of Marx's theories on value: an explanation of prices not based solely on willingness to pay. This is vital as prices should not be a concept inseparable from free market economics. While there are definitely grounds to criticise Marx about value, Spinoza's desire-based idea of value is pure free market economics and thus adds nothing of substance.

The final chapter considers the prospects for capitalism giving way to something new ('re-communism') and what this would mean for work. I found it notable that Lordon didn't consider any of strains that technology is placing on capitalism, making his assessment of its weaknesses seem curiously pessimistic (or optimistic, if you're rooting for The End of History). Lordon suggests that providing employees with creative freedom could bring it down; I'm more convinced by Paul Mason's argument in Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future. Nonetheless, Lordon's arguments are novel, thought-provoking, and occasionally inspiring. He's certainly right that neoliberal capitalism tries to teach us to love our own exploitation. This is a somewhat abstract and esoteric book, yet it makes pragmatic and useful points.

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### **Devon says**

An awesome book and very fun read. The style is comedic at times- yet quite serious... Lordon develops a set of metaphors to describe the workings of contemporary capitalism as it relates to our subjectivities and explores the insights into our condition that this approach provides. His explication of Spinoza's determinism and how it can help shed new light on Marx's analysis is really brilliant. The affects produced in me by reading this were certainly joyful and thus my power to act is increased...even though in the end we are all still slaves to the passions...

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### **Anna Nicole Smith & Wesson says**

I'll always cherish the memory of one pompous professor who, at the beginning of his lecture, loudly proclaimed that, "you are all enslaved! You have no idea how enslaved you are!" To which I replied, "actually, I work in retail..."

Lordon's Willing Slaves of Capital has very, very little to do with Marx, and a whole lot to do with a Spinozist theory of desire under late capital. The text is very dense, but Lordon's use of "sad" and "happy" affect will illicit a smile. The text wasn't particularly memorable, other than perhaps Lordon's definition of enslavement and "bossing". It is repetitive, and like a lot of monist theory, single-minded. But, if you're working on a contemporary critique of capital on a somewhat macro level, Willing Slaves of Capital will probably be a good place to go. For casual critique I prefer Lazzarato or Bifo.

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### **Ietrio says**

A scary apology of the Total State and of the brotherly protection Big Brother can bring to the poor imbeciles living under His watch.

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## Can says

Aylar süren okuma sonunda bitirmeyi ba?ard?m. Normalde kurgu d??? türde okurken notlar al?r?m, baz? bölümleri yeniden de?erlendiririm ve geri dönüp kar??la?t?rmalar yapar?m. Uzun sürdü çünkü, k?sa olmas?na ra?men bu kitapta alt? çizilecek, not al?nacak o kadar çok bölüm var ki okuma süresini bir hayli uzat?yor. Ayr?ca okurken baz? paragraflar? anlayabilmek ve özümsemek için tekrar tekrar okurken buldum kendimi s?kça. Tüm bunlar bence kitab?n de?erini vurguluyor.

?çerikten biraz bahsetmek gerekirse, kapitalizm üzerine ele?tirileri Marksist bak?? aç?s?n?n yan?nda Spinoza'c? duygular dünyas? taraf?ndan yorumluyor. Sömürü düzeninin i?lemesini sa?layan duygusal mekanizmalar çok güzel aç?klan?yor. R?za nedir ve gönüllü kölelik var m?d?r gibi pek çok soruya cevap ar?yor. ?ki dü?ününün i?birli?i konusunda da yazar çok ba?ar?l? bir i? ç?karm???. Farkl? bak?? aç?lar? kazand?rd???ndan benim için oldukça ufuk aç?c? oldu?unu söyleyebilirim.

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## Jason says

It follows that is is part of power and by right to have made oneself sensitive to a great variety of affections, and to have opened wide the field of one's affectabilities. We could mention in this context the scholium of diet, in which Spinoza recommends supplying the body with all the varied elements that correspond to the complexity of its structures: tasty food, naturally, but also pleasant scents, melodious sounds, a variety of visual pleasures, ect. Alienation is fixation: indigent enticements of the body, narrow confines of the things one can desire, a severely restricted repertoire of joys, obsessions and possessions that tie one's power to a singly place and impede its expansion. (146)

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## Denis says

Using Spinoza, Lordon brings Marx up to date. Having worked in a large organisation for over 20 years, I now know what it was all about. In addition to Spinoza and Marx, Lordon also quotes Bourdieu and the historical development of European thought (and the organisation I worked for) gets clearer. Thence, the usual neglect of the Third World which has always been the source of willing slaves when the European ones run out.

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## Luke Echo says

I thought this was an interesting book. Broadly, it seems Lordon is attempting to reformulate "exploitation" purely within the Symbolic without recourse to Marx's economic categories. But does he succeed? I'd say no.

I think the core problem is Lordon's attempt to understand "Capture"/"Alignment" of one's desire as domination/exploitation, within an Spinozist Metaphysics which claims to be anti-aristotlean (in the sense of denying the distinction between potentiality and actuality). Lordon here relies on Pascal Sév rac, but it seems unclear how his formulation is not also guilty of a certain nostalgic "re-union" with an origin of open desire.

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