

NORMATIVE ORDERS

Cluster of Excellence at Goethe University Frankfurt/Main

Normative Orders Working Paper

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Taming the Superlative, Embedding the Comparative A Form of Subjectivation for a Post Growth Society

Dagmar Comtesse

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Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

Historisches Seminar – Wissenschaftsgeschichte, IG-Farben-Haus
Norbert-Wollheim-Platz 1, 60323 Frankfurt am Main

d.comtesse@em.uni-frankfurt.de



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Taming the Superlative, Embedding the Comparative A Form of Subjectivation for a Post Growth Society

by Dagmar Comtesse

Talk at the Conference “Good Life Beyond Growth” in Jena, May 21-23, 2015

Abstract: Adam Smith formulated a fundamental critique of economic growth in his philosophical oeuvre *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in the year 1759. What might seem to be irony concerning the history of ideas – irony in the sense of the exclamation “he of all people” – is actually not irony at all. Smith wrote a substantial review of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, referring to Rousseau’s critique of commercial society.¹ Additionally, one of the principal topics of Rousseau’s critique, the deformation of fundamental needs to passions in service of the satisfaction of self-love, is a major subject in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. But whereas Rousseau suggests egalitarian politics, Smith proposes individual stoicism: “In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.”² Nevertheless, both authors and analysts of pre-capitalist society identify the difference between fundamental needs and desires as having been born out of comparison as both a source of unhappiness and of economic development.³

This connection between unhappiness and economic development is reflected upon by post growth economists like Mathias Binswanger, who also sketches out a connection between comparison and unhappiness.⁴ However, comparison is not a specific behavior of members of capitalistic societies. In fact, it is not a behavior at all. Comparison precedes all forms of knowledge, and is therefore a cognitive procedure which is fundamental for human beings.

I want to focus on the cognitive and affective operation of comparison and its connection with the growth imperative of capitalist societies. Inspired by Rousseau’s critique of social inequality in his *Second Discourse* and Frederick Neuhausser’s analyses of this seminal text, I try to grasp the anthropologically-grounded connection between comparison, *amour-propre* and economic growth. If, however, one departs from this connection, then it is necessary to think about changes in the structure of recognition for a post growth society as I will discuss.

¹ Smith did not only disseminate Rousseau in the Scottish Enlightenment but he “continued to grapple with the issues raised by Rousseau” and “shared a number of the same misgivings [of commercial society]”. Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society. Adam Smith’s Response to Rousseau*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University Press 2008, p. 51.

² Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*, New York, Prometheus Books 2000, p. 265.

³ *Ibid*, p. 263. and Rousseau, ‘Discours sur l’inégalité’, OC III, Paris 1964, p. 174-175.

⁴ Mathias Binswanger, *Die Tretmühlen des Glücks*, Freiburg, Herder Verlag 2006. Binswanger conceives of four treadmills of happiness. The first one is called the treadmill of status which concerns the comparison of status within a society.

1. COMPARISON AS A COGNITIVE URFORM

The World's Billionaires is a list that the famous US magazine Forbes has published every year since 1987. The 2010 list, for example, places the Mexican Slim Helu on the first position, which was promptly deemed a "replacement" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11. Mar. 2010) of Bill Gates – and Gates' return to the top of the list in 2014 as a "dethronement" (Fox News Latino, 03. Mar. 2014) of Slim Helu. To the common reader, differentiating between Gates' and Helu's wealth might prove difficult. Nonetheless, he or she would immediately identify a hierarchy upon encountering such a list.

The epistemology of a list consists of establishing relationships between the listed entities. Lists are one of the oldest documented forms to generate knowledge as sources out of Mesopotamia show.⁵ Lists not only permit, but actually emphasize the comparison between the represented units. To compare is definitely one of the oldest documented forms of generating knowledge, and it is also, ontogenetically, one of the first steps in its generation. Epistemologies like sensationalism or empiricism, as well as studies in cognition or toddler psychology, situate the cognitive procedure of comparison at the beginning of the genesis of knowledge, ideas or comprehension. The idealistic tradition, beginning with Plato, operates by comparing ideas with perceptions of reality, while the empiric tradition, beginning roughly with Aristotle, compares sensations and elaborates principles out of them. Condillac (*Logique*, 1780), for example, situates comparison as the second step in his description of the genesis of knowledge. In his view, only attention precedes the operation of comparison. Categories, principles, notions, knowledge, recognition or analogies engage, in one way or another, the procedure of comparison. Nevertheless, this formal status of comparison as a necessary step in the generation of knowledge cannot explain how the cognitive operation of comparison is linked to social inequality and the growth imperative of capitalist societies.

⁵ Anette Imhausen, Experten und die Umsetzung normativer Ordnungen im Alten Ägypten: Theorie und historisch fassbare Praxis, in: Imhausen/ Fahrmeir (Ed.), *Die Vielfalt normativer Ordnungen. Konflikte und Dynamik in historischer und ethnologischer Perspektive*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus 2013, p. 52.

2. THE LONGING TO BE BETTER

In his reconstruction of Rousseau's anthropology, Frederick Neuhouser develops an ample theory of amour-propre. In a way, he conceives of Rousseau's entire oeuvre as an answer to the problem of inflamed amour-propre. The relevance of Neuhouser's reconstruction in this context (the possibility of a post growth society) is the link he makes between inflamed amour-propre and social inequality in capitalist societies.⁶ I want to reconstruct this link in three steps: First, I want to emphasize a non-essentialist understanding of amour-propre as a drive for recognition; second, I want to describe the dynamics of amour-propre and its tendency toward 'inflammation'; third, I will depart from Neuhouser's link between amour-propre and increasing social inequalities and show the pathological characteristics of economic growth in capitalist societies today.

1) Amour-propre as a Drive for Recognition

Whereas Neuhouser describes Rousseau's anthropology as an essential conception of human nature, I take an explicitly non-essentialist stance. Because I assume all strong normative approaches to be metaphysically founded, I prefer by far a thin normativity, such as that of the physical, natural laws. Rousseau speaks of natural law, as well as natural right or natural goodness. Therefore, the range of possible interpretations spans from natural law perspectives to essentialism. I interpret Rousseau's anthropological laws of human nature in a Newtonian way, due to the fact that Newtonianism was the discourse upon which the second half of 18th century France was structured.⁷ From this perspective, his anthropological assumptions hold the status of descriptions, which inform his political philosophy.

To speak of human nature is, for Rousseau, to speak of a drive for conservation and well-being through satisfying one's basic needs such as eating, drinking, sleeping, taking shelter and having sex. These are the needs he defines for the 'isolated' human being. It also means that humans are able to develop (without a telos) certain capacities, namely speaking, thinking, and engaging in moral behavior, which means taking control of one's basic needs according to their will. These basic needs and capacities are overshadowed by a social-anthropological structure. The analytical

⁶ See: Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*, Cambridge University Press 2014, pp. 137-142 and pp. 164-208.

⁷ I elaborate upon this stance at length in my thesis: *Radical Democratic Popular Sovereignty in a Postnational Europe*, Nomos Verlag, forthcoming.

distinction between anthropology and social-anthropology is laid out by Rousseau in order to separate all forms of power and domination from human nature. Although this distinction implicates the hypothetical assumption of an isolated human being (which was legitimately criticized as “Robinsonade” by Friedrich Engels⁸) Rousseau’s intention is honorable, as he aims to denaturalize all kinds of domination, except, unfortunately, the one between the sexes. The social-anthropological structure, amour-propre – which has some analogies to Freud’s concept of narcissism in and of that it is natural to possess it, and yet it tends to result in pathological behavior⁹ – originates out of the dependency of the individual on being recognized and loved by others. This drive for recognition is the motivation for each individual to know the criteria that structures the distribution of recognition. Knowing this criteria is necessary in order to conduct oneself in a way that guarantees recognition, which is to say, the more a person fits neatly into others’ criteria, the more recognition they will receive. In the Second Discourse, Rousseau puts this longing to better at the beginning of every development of social inequality:

“Everyone started looking at the others and wanted to be looked at; and this public esteem had its price. The one who was the best dancer or singer, the most beautiful, the strongest, the fittest or the most eloquent became the most recognized person and this was the first step towards inequality and towards vice at the same time [...].”¹⁰

Neuhouser reconstructs this drive as the psychological motivation for the development of rationality and morality. Humans are fundamentally interested in the opinion of the others, thus they are oriented towards others, try to understand their point of view, and are therefore willing to abandon their own point of view. This change of perspective permits the development of the moral standpoint as Neuhouser argues. In this sense, amour-propre is not the beginning of the evil – as Rousseau tends to represent it in his Second Discourse, which is due to his intention of giving a genealogy of social inequality – but the precondition of the good. Even if one is skeptical about the “goodness” of amour-propre, there is no doubt that its satisfaction is essential for our well-being.

⁸ Friedrich Engels, Anti-Dühring, in: Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), Bd. 27,1, Berlin 1988, p. 83.

⁹ „Narzißmus in diesem Sinne wäre keine Perversion, sondern die libidinöse Ergänzung zum Egoismus des Selbsterhaltungstriebes, von dem jedem Lebewesen mit Recht ein Stück zugeschrieben wird.“ Sigmund Freud, Zur Einführung des Narzissmus, Fischer Verlag 1946, S. 2.

¹⁰ Rousseau, “Sur l’inégalité”, OC III, S. 169. (Trans. D.C.)

2) Inflamed Amour-Propre

There is no definite turning point in the development of amour-propre. The longing to be better is necessarily linked to a hierarchical qualification. I can't be better if there is no one who is inferior to me. Even more problematic is the longing to be the best. The structure of the superlative implies the subordination of everyone else. But the drive for recognition does not necessarily culminate in this problematic structure.

Neuhouser distinguishes between two kinds of recognition that can satisfy amour-propre. On the one hand, there is a human need to "count as someone of value."¹¹ This "egalitarian" structure of amour-propre does not implicate a hierarchical qualification but permits an equal standing of everyone. If I am "of value" to my friends, my parents, my children or my employer, it does not mean that I am more or less valuable than another person. There could be another friend, child, parent or colleague who is as worthy as I am. Moreover, the claim to be "of value to someone" is restraint. I don't want to be "of value" to everybody but only to some people – in most cases for those people who are "of value" to me. This is a reciprocal structure of recognition. It can be easily satisfied in an interpersonal relationship which is orientated towards equality. Even in a complex relationship between the members of a collective the egalitarian structure of amour-propre is easily satisfied by distributing exactly the same rights to everyone. Every denying of this equal status is a form of disrespect that frustrates amour-propre.

On the other hand, there is the human need to be superior. In this case, there must be someone who qualifies as inferior. This is not necessarily an "inflamed" form of amour-propre. The longing to be better than yourself could be satisfied exclusively in love relationships like parental love or romantic love. In these kinds of relationships, one is better than others or perhaps even the best for someone else. The longing to "be" collectively and publicly recognized as better or even the best can be satisfied in particular competitions. One of the oldest forms of a particular kind of superlative is sports, as the tradition of Olympia shows. To be the best in one discipline does not mean to be the best athlete or the best citizen. Nevertheless, being superior is intrinsically linked to an inferior ranking of others and therefore to frustration. Neuhouser's insight is to claim that every political and social philosophy should

¹¹ Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford University Press 2010, p. 45.

acknowledge this problematic but anthropological structure and “that it would be unrealistic to want to construct a society in which all forms of that desire were lacking or in which no social inequality of any kind existed.”¹²

The inflamed form of amour-propre develops out of the dynamic of the longing to be superior. The desire to be better or the best tends to be never satisfied since others do their best to obtain the title. Even if someone is the best, he or she is always afraid of losing this position. Whereas a stable romantic relationship or parental love guarantees a lasting superior position to someone, troubles in these relations considerably unsteady amour-propre. Jealousy – be it in parental or romantic love relationships – is an expression of the fear of losing the position of a superior standing. The superior standing in public esteem seems to be even more uncertain. In a collective, individuals tend to be good in practices acknowledged as important or difficult to realize. If public esteem meets with one’s own judgment of one’s practices, amour-propre is satisfied. Trying to be better in several practices, choosing practices which are exclusive to the majority, or feeling alienated by performing or engaging in certain practices – these are indications of an inflamed amour-propre. A formal definition of the inflamed form of amour-propre is a kind of universalizability test: a desire for superior standing is an expression of an inflamed amour-propre if an enactment of this desire makes it impossible for others to satisfy their own needs of amour-propre¹³. So, every desire to be the best of all at all times is clearly inflamed. A situated superlative – holding the most interesting talk at a conference – frustrates the amour-propre of the others but restrains this frustration to this event. The more the longing for a superlative is situated, the less it is an expression of an inflamed amour-propre. And vice versa. The inflamed form of amour-propre tends to subordinate all of one’s activities with the goal of securing the exclusiveness of recognition. Like a virus, amour-propre infects all desires and therefore colonizes all activities to serve just the one purpose. Moreover, the inflamed form of amour-propre orientates the infected individuals to dismiss all others.

3) Economic Growth as Social Pathology

Rousseau begins his description of the fatal development of social inequality with the division of labor and the introduction of private property. In his account, the turning

¹² Neuhouser, Rousseau’s Critique of Inequality, p. 83.

¹³ Neuhouser, Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, p.100.

point from a decent form of collective life to domination and alienation is the combination of an unequal division of labors which led to an unequal distribution of wealth¹⁴ with the establishment of a rule of law, which fixes the asymmetry and condemns the poor to be exploited by the rich. The superior standing in this pre-modern society is marked by estates and the consumption of luxury (like riding in a cab). Even though property plays a fundamental role, Rousseau's pre-modern account of the link between social inequality and amour-propre is nothing in comparison to capitalist societies today. I say this because the estate property was limited, because consumption did not threaten the very existence of the planet, because superior standing was not yet an ideology¹⁵.

Whereas the economical anthropology – the model of the homo economicus – conceives of humans as natural born capitalists, which means they long for an accumulation of wealth in order to satisfy all their possible needs, the perspective of amour-propre permits us to describe the desire for being wealthy as longing for being superior. Being wealthy is just one expression of this anthropological structure, but it is a fatal one in capitalist society. This fatality, which could be called social pathology¹⁶, of modern capitalist society for amour-propre is threefold:

a. Individualism and Differentiation

The development of the European bourgeois society presupposes the advent of humanistic individualism and the urban economy. Individualism led to a concept of the private, autonomous individual which corresponds perfectly with the inflamed form of amour-propre. Whereas the egalitarian structure of amour-propre – the idea of giving the same amount of respect to everyone – is satisfied by the modern rule of

¹⁴ Rousseau takes for granted that from the cultivation of land, its division followed. It is not necessarily true that common land was transformed into private property by the division of labor, although it is probable. In the *Contrat Social*, Rousseau conceives of private property as redistributed state property, which clearly shows his distance from a Lockian model of property. See: Neuhouser, *Critique of Inequality*, p. 102-103.

¹⁵ The beginning of meritocracy as a model for the legitimization of authority might be the former meaning of aristocracy. But the critique of the Ancien Régime denied merit to aristocracy. This critique was formulated and published by scientists, or, as they said, by the philosophes. Having authority through knowledge, by a better knowledge or understanding than your colleague satisfies the longing to be better in a completely new way: the longing is fulfilled by recognition and by institutionalized authority. Meritocracy as a model for the bourgeois society is very ambivalent to amour-propre: it promises complete satisfaction for a few, but potentially everyone can try to make it since the criteria of merit claims to be independent from origin, gender, race or belief.

¹⁶ The notion of social pathology comes out of the psychoanalytic tradition. I think of it in the terms of Axel Honneth: *Die Krankheiten der Gesellschaft*, in: *West End 2014*, p. 45-60, p. 59: A social pathology is a „disturbance of the function of integration “which hinders a society or an individual from “unfold(ing) in a prosperous way.”

law which is marked by formal equality, the longing to be better is systematically stimulated by the modern promise that anyone can achieve anything if he or she tries hard enough. The development of individualism is very ambivalent concerning amour-propre: the paradigm of individual rights guarantees an egalitarian minimum of recognition – at least after 1945 – but the principle of meritocracy promise recognition only for a few who are called “the best.” The belief in “performance” as measurable and therefore objective criteria for merit is a kind of motor for social integration. The more this criteria is applied, the more members of the collective long to be better. Formal equality and meritocracy implement the superlative as an achievable goal for everyone. Differentiation of society and its specialization in all fields of production, is ambivalent towards amour-propre, too. On the one side, the pluralization of fields, disciplines or practices permits much more situated superlatives. On the other side, specialized labor can lead to alienation and therefore amour-propre can no longer be satisfied by labor. Furthermore, both developments, individualism and differentiation, lead to privatization and therefore tend to separate the individual from politics. This is detrimental to amour-propre because politics, understood in a republican way, can satisfy the longing to be better on various levels. The practical identity of a citizen of a republic satisfies their amour-propre by their mere belonging to this particular republic, by the possibility of being acknowledged as an especially good citizen and by the promise of being honored as one of its best citizens by fulfilling their duties or tasks. In his proposal for the Gouvernement de Pologne, Rousseau conceptualized the whole republican administration as a way of satisfying the amour-propre of the citizens.

b. Endless Wealth and Increasing Inequality

Rousseau argues that the accumulation of property in form of estate enslaves the poor by exposing them to the landlords. Even though this asymmetry is hard to break, the longing for wealth was bound to a limited good: land. The industrial revolution greatly expanded the means of production and therefore the opportunities to be wealthy. But it is the abstract form of wealth, money, which expands the possibility of wealth to infinity. Marx already describes the mythical tendency of money to make rich people to want more money – instead of spending it.¹⁷ Even the

¹⁷ Karl Marx: Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte, 3. Manuskript, Abschnitt III. Bedürfnis, Produktion und Arbeitsteilung, in: Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels: Werke, (MEW), Bd. 40, Berlin 1985, S. 549: „Je weniger du ißt, trinkst, Bücher kaufst, in das Theater, auf den Ball, zum Wirtshaus gehst,

digital revolution fostered this development. The so called “casino capitalism” decouple money and industrial production so that money became even more abstract than before. The infinity of wealth makes the rich omnipotent. Nevertheless, the measurability of money makes it easy to compare the richest people. The longing to be better converges with the longing to be richer because money can – as Marx describes it – serve as a substitute for all other practices or objects. The infinity of money, its perfect measurability and the substitution of all other goods or practices (about money or “earning money”) are noxious for amour-propre. Money is the predominant criterion for amour-propre, and it tends to inflame it chronically.

The tendency of rich people to invest in money and not in consumption or industrial production leads to ever increasing inequality in wealth – as it is prominently shown by Thomas Piketty’s study of capitalism in the 21th century (the famous $r > g$ equation). A high degree of inequality injures amour-propre if it endangers the egalitarian form and if the inequalities are fixed and therefore frustrate permanently the amour-propre of other members of the collective. The egalitarian form of amour-propre is endangered when it is possible to substitute money for rights. Since the rule of law is absolutely constitutive for western capitalist societies, all arrangements that injure this rule of law are heavily criticized.¹⁸ Much more common is another case: the fixed and highly asymmetrical form of social inequality frustrates permanently the amour-propre of other members of the collective. One of the effects is the so-called “keeping up with the Joneses” phenomenon, which entails the consumption of goods that are too expensive for one’s income. “Keeping up” expresses the urge to imitate

denkst, liebst, theoretisierst, singst, malst, fichtst, etc. um so [mehr] sparst du, um so größer wird dein Schatz, den weder Motten noch Staub fressen, dein Kapital. Je weniger du bist, je weniger du dein Leben äußerst, um so mehr hast du, um so größer ist dein entäußertes Leben, um so mehr speicherst du auf von deinem entfremdeten Wesen. Alles, was der Nationalökonom an Leben nimmt an Menschheit, das alles ersetzt er dir in Geld und Reichtum, und alles das, was du nicht kannst, das kann dein Geld: Es kann essen, trinken, auf den Ball, ins Theater gehen, es weiß sich die Kunst, die Gelehrsamkeit, die historischen Seltenheiten, die politische Macht, es kann reisen, es kann dir alles aneignen; es kann das alles kaufen; es ist das wahre Vermögen. Aber es, was all dies ist, es mag nichts als sich selbst schaffen, sich selbst kaufen, denn alles andere ist ja sein Knecht, und wenn ich den Herrn habe, habe ich den Knecht und brauche ich seinen Knecht nicht.“ [The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theater, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour – your capital. The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being. Everything which the political economist takes from you in life and humanity, he replaces for you in money and in wealth; and all the things which you cannot do, your money can do. It can eat and, drink, go to the dance hall and the theater; [...] it is true endowment.”]

¹⁸ The case of Eccelstone, who paid 100 million euros to the Bavarian state to stop a lawsuit against him provoked massive critique in the German media. Eccelstone praised “this capitalist system” (his interview with BILD) inherent in the German legal system (Vergleichszahlungen).

those who possess more. Any “falling behind” is first of all a lack of recognition. In times of increasing inequality – fostered by dynastical mechanisms, as the Piketty thesis goes – an increasing majority is ‘falling behind’ the richest people. Since capitalist culture celebrates the distinctive practices and goods specific to the rich, the excluded majority of the collectives suffers a permanent frustration of amour-propre.

c. Consumption and Frustration

Whereas the ‘protestant’ character of the early capitalism¹⁹ preached ascetic productivity, the consumption of goods was and is one of the most relevant elements of capitalism. Since goods and consumption are visible and culturally structured, consumption is the place where distinction is practiced. Consumption – the procedure of buying, having, showing and using private property – is, as Neuhouseer puts it, “an external marker of one’s standing for, and in relation to, others.” This “material extension of [oneself] and reflection of [one’s] standing in relation to others”²⁰ is the most visible place for inflamed amour-propre. The longing to be better than the others can be satisfied by buying goods which are new or distinctive due to their cost. The advertising industry, by announcing new goods seasonally, profits from this desire for betterment through consumption. Amour-propre and the capitalist law of sale stimulate each other. The more amour-propre is inflamed, the greater the need for new goods or distinctive (mostly expensive) practices is perceived to be. In other words, inflamed amour-propre fits quite well into a capitalist economy.

Frustration as a result of consumption is not only caused by the incapacity of “keeping up with the Joneses.” Satisfying the longing to be better with consumption of goods forecloses the practical dimension of recognition. Rousseau qualified inflamed amour-propre as “living outside oneself”²¹ because there is no more a corrective from inside the subject. Rousseau does indeed assume that the human capacity for free will implicates a facility of judgment which then interacts with the subscribed norms resulting from the opinions of the others. This capacity for

¹⁹ Besides the famous thesis of Max Weber it is once again Marx who discovered the ascetic character of capitalist culture: Marx, *Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte*, S. 549: „Die Nationalökonomie, diese Wissenschaft des Reichtums, ist daher zugleich die Wissenschaft des Entsagens, des Darbens, der Ersparung, und sie kommt wirklich dazu, dem Menschen sogar das Bedürfnis einer reinen Luft oder der physischen Bewegung zu ersparen. Diese Wissenschaft der wunderbaren Industrie ist zugleich die Wissenschaft der Askese, und ihr wahres Ideal ist der asketische, aber wuchernde Geizhals und der asketische, aber produzierende Sklave.“

²⁰ Neuhouseer, *Critique of Inequality*, p. 100.

²¹ Rousseau, *Sur l’inégalité*, OC III, p. 193.

judgment is at work in assessing the “perfectibility” of one’s work (Rousseau describes this procedure in “Émile” who wants to be a good carpenter).²² If a subject is “living outside itself” the connection to internal judgment is inactive. Neuhouser calls this phenomenon alienation.²³ My point is that this kind of alienation is fostered by consumption of goods. Buying is not producing; choosing from the given range of products hardly engages skills which promote a robust sense of self-esteem. Whereas Émile measures his performance by comparing his own work day by day, the consumer has no performance to compare his own to. Of all practices, consuming is the most passive.

4) Marx’ and Rousseau’s Answers to Inflamed Amour-Propre

The most famous alternative to capitalist society was formulated by Karl Marx. He opposes the anthropology of the homo oeconomicus, the model of a self-sufficient human relationship. Nevertheless, he gives no answer to the anthropological structure of amour-propre. In his view, humans express themselves, they don’t long for recognition.

The difference between humans and animals is the means of production. Producing the means of subsistence is the primary expression of human nature. Even after guaranteeing subsistence, every human practice shapes the world and humans themselves, because mastering nature is the essence of humanity human essence. On the one side, this essence is absolutely historically situated; on the other side, Marx assumes generically shared needs and capacities (or instincts, as Marx wrote in the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts). Marx conceives of man as an “active,” “instinctive” and “suffering” being that it has the capacity to satisfy its needs through artificial means. But humans do not only satisfy their biological needs by labor; to

²² Neuhouser, *Theodicy of Self-Love*, p. 257. Neuhouser argues here that Rousseau conceives two poles of judgemental power: the pole of “self-sufficiency” which is located in one’s practices and the pole of public opinion. “Thinking through Rousseau’s treatment of these issues in *Emile* and the *Social Contrat* suggests, I submit, that the antinomy of rational agency can be resolved only by abandoning the assumption that rational obligation must have a single, supreme source and by regarding instead as flowing from two independent sources, neither of which can be granted a priori the authority to trump the other cases of conflict.”

²³ Neuhouser, *Critique of Inequality*, p. 184: “The ill in question is what I have been calling alienation, though Rousseau never uses this word to describe it. As I noted above, Rousseau characterizes alienation in terms of individuals living ‘always outside’ themselves, or ‘only in the opinion of others’, a consequence of which is that they ‘know how to be ... content with themselves [only] on the testimony of others rather than on their own’ [...]. These formulations denote a condition in which persons lack all internal resources for self-affirmation and so are unable to enjoy a ‘sentiment of their own existence’ unless they are unceasingly the object of the approving gaze of others. Such individuals suffer from an extraordinarily fragile sense of their own worth that makes them desperate to please, to be approved of, to be noticed, or to think the same thoughts and espouse the same values as ‘everyone else.’”

transform nature is to realize human essence. Humans articulate themselves by transforming nature. Therefore, labor is a practice which both affirms being and helps to realize self-consciousness. And since labor is the human essence, it is through the reorganization of labor that Marx answers the problems of capitalist society. Instead of subordinating “the need for money” to a more fundamental need for recognition, he conceives of the “need for money” as the fundamental but historically situated need that influences everything, even biological needs. To tame this fatal need, the whole capitalist structure of labor has to be changed: instead of working for utility (and money is just the abstract form of utility), labor should be the realization of human essence. Basic, constant needs have to be satisfied, but utility must be restrained to the wishes of the individual. “For Marx, the goal of socialism was the development of the individual personality.”²⁴ Marx’s notion of freedom was the freedom to do²⁵ something, to actualize one’s ideas, dreams and wishes, to experiment with nature as an expression of curiosity and not of knowledge with the intent to control. To achieve this individualistic emancipation (as an actualization of one’s personality) a collective revolution has to take place. The collective control of the means of production should just guarantee the satisfaction of the collective needs, which might be different and certainly placed on a higher level than biological needs. From this perspective, there is no longing to be superior to others. Marx’s idea of emancipation excludes recognition by others. His model includes resonances through objects. To this end, given the anthropological structure of amour-propre, amour-propre is satisfied by merely being a good carpenter, for example. Even if Marxists misunderstood Marx in proclaiming the abolition of private property as the solution for domination (which could be true) and alienation (which is less probable), it is clear that Marx did not take the longing to be better into account. According to Marx, a remedy to inflamed amour-propre would be to foster a “resonating”²⁶ human-nature relationship which is meant to actualize the essence of humans. The longing for

²⁴ Erich Fromm, *Das Menschenbild bei Marx*, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, S. 44.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 44. Marx distinguishes between positive and negative liberty in a way of avoidance of physical obstructions (negative Kraft) and “expression of one’s true individuality” (positive Macht). See: Marx, *Die Heilige Familie*, MEW, Bd. 2, S. 261. Marx has a strong notion of positive liberty and its core is individualistic expression (in the world).

²⁶ One benefit of Hartmut Rosa’s notion of resonance is that he includes the human-nature relationship in his theory of „world relationship(s)“. It would be a worthy project to combine his concept of resonance with the Rousseauian concept of amour-propre. See Hartmut Rosa, *Weltbeziehungen im Zeitalter der Beschleunigung. Umrisse einer neuen Gesellschaftskritik*, Berlin 2012.

superior standing in relation to others can't be satisfied in this model of self-sufficiency.

In contrast, Rousseau departs from his anthropological analyses. "The spirit of competition is an inescapable feature of human reality"²⁷ and therefore the political and social order must consider the consequences which derive from amour-propre. Rousseau composes a political philosophy which corresponds to his anthropological analysis. Amour-propre is imagined to be satisfied through egalitarian politics and through public competition in which republican virtues are measured. Particularly his drafts for the Corsican and Polish Republic make plenty of suggestions as to how men can usefully and morally be the best in a collective. I call this an embedded comparative.

The Contrat Social conceives formal equality for all male members of the collective. The same respect for every person is institutionalized by the principle that no one can alienate him from his rights, especially the right to vote. Formal equality is even the criterion for social inequality: No citizen should be rich enough to buy another citizen, and no citizen should be so poor to be forced to sell himself.²⁸ The egalitarian form of amour-propre is institutionalized by rights, by economic regulations and by education. Rousseau gives one of the first accounts of a secular education system in combination with a political philosophy. And his aim is here, once again, to foster an egalitarian form of amour-propre. All children should be "raised together and in the same manner" in public institutions free of charge or "at least to a price which is affordable to the poor."²⁹

The longing to be better is, however, part of the educational system. The children should "duly be used to rules, to equality, to fraternalism, to competitions, to live under the eyes of the citizens and to long for public recognition".³⁰ The citizens should compete in being the most productive farmer, the most virtuous citizen or the most virtuous state secretary and all of them are competing for public esteem.³¹ To make the recognition visible, Rousseau imagines a whole range of medals and

²⁷ Neuhouser, *Theodicy of Self-love*, p. 96

²⁸ Rousseau, *Contrat Social*, Book 2, Chap. 11, OC III, p. 391-392. In our times that could mean that there has to be a welfare state. It could although mean that one citizen has no right to be the employer of the other citizen.

²⁹ Rousseau, *Gouvernement de Pologne*, OC III, p. 967.

³⁰ Rousseau, *Gouvernement de Pologne*, OC III, p. 968.

³¹ All these descriptions can be found in the drafts for the Corse and Polish Republic.

decorations which serve as “external signs.”³² The republican culture of recognition, formulated in the drafts for the Corsican and Polish republic, suggests a very productive way for the collective to structure the longing to be better. However, there might be some traditionalist pitfalls if one follows Rousseau too closely. Neither the ideal of the most productive farmer nor that of the procreative farmer’s wife who is “the most chaste, whose senses are less inflamed by the practice of lust and [therefore] bears more children than the other [women]”³³ are attractive for a post-traditional, differentiated society. But what is inspiring here is Rousseau’s strategy of imagining a society where the inflamed form of amour-propre is very unlikely. And this strategy is a mix between egalitarian politics and republican virtues. It is clear that this inspiration has to be actualized for (post) modern societies today.

5) A Post Growth Form of Subjectivation

The Rousseauian strategy of fostering equality through equal rights, extended political participation and restriction of the gap between rich and poor citizens is quite fitting for (post)modern societies. Equal rights for all citizens are widely recognized as democratic standard – even if it is only for some decades that the institutionalization of equal rights for non-white people and women has been fully established in the so called western countries. Doubtless, this instrument of equality secures a minimum of mutual respect and therefore guarantees satisfaction of the egalitarian form of amour-propre. A post growth society can benefit from this structure and expand it to immigrants. The more people have equal rights within one society, the more the attitude of equality becomes normal behavior. All assaults on formal equality – in the form of arrangements in court or exclusion of immigrants, for example – endanger the satisfaction of the egalitarian form of amour-propre.

A far more complicate question is the regulation of economic inequality. One radical policy would be to introduce an inheritance tax of 100% for any kind of wealth. No dynastical accumulation project would be feasible any longer, and social inequalities would immediately decrease dramatically. Companies would be nationalized in case of the death of the owner and could be sold to those who propose the best plan to continue production. Furthermore, the criteria for the “best” plan in a post growth society are likely to include ecological and social standards. Investors would have to

³² Rousseau, *Gouvernement de Pologne*, OC III, S. 1007.

³³ Rousseau, *Constitution pour la Corse*, OC III, S. 905.

run the risk of discontinuity. Such a radical policy, however, has no chance at the moment. Piketty famously suggests a progressive wealth tax which would decrease the C (capital)/I (income)-quota (that is, the relation between those who possess and those who have to work). Both policies would decrease social inequalities to such an extent that they would challenge the very existence of capitalism.³⁴ But even if a post growth society would opt for such radical changes, there is still the longing to better which has to be considered.

Egalitarian politics are a kind of basis for the less institutionalized realm of practices. One of the most crucial structures to tame the superlatives of capitalist societies are interpersonal relationships. Romantic and parental love, as well as friendships are modes of interactions which distinguish one individual as the most important individual for another. Nearly every human being is likely to experience this form of relationship during their lifetime.³⁵ A post growth society can take advantage of this anthropological structure. Instead of undermining these relationships by imposing more and more flexibility upon its employees and by expanding the work place through new technologies to the bedrooms and playgrounds, the separation between work and leisure and family time should be taken seriously. This does not mean establishing a liberal distinction between a private and a public spheres, but protecting interpersonal relationships. Concepts like “buen vivir” take into account that the flourishing of humanity depends on symmetrical relationships (not only between people but to nature) and that this value should guide policies. Speaking in terms of amour-propre, the concept of buen vivir makes it likely that the longing to be better could be satisfied for almost all citizens and in a reciprocal way. Instead of endangering the collective, this kind of superlative strengthens the individual and makes it unlikely that he is consumed by the principle of meritocracy. The taming of the superlative is an important element in the critique of capitalism. However, it is not yet formulated in anthropological terms, but rather is analyzed sociologically,

³⁴ This very interesting thesis is formulated by Christoph Deutschmann in: Piketty und die Zukunft des Kapitalismus, WestEnd – Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, 01/2015, p. 45-64, especially p. 54-59.

³⁵ Neuhausner argues this way for sexual love but I would expand the argument for all love relationships and even for friendships: „Sexual love is inseparable from amour propre because it involves an especially intense and intimate confirmation of one’s value for another subject. Because it seeks confirmation of one’s preeminent value from only one subject rather than from all or many, it makes the desire for a standing above others satisfiable in principle for everyone.” Neuhausner, Critique of Inequality, p. 149, footnote 55.

mostly in a post-Marxist way.³⁶ By choosing the perspective of the anthropological structure of amour-propre, it is possible to combine the anti-Eurocentric concept of buen vivir with the European (post-)Marxist tradition of critique of capitalism and orientate reflections about a post growth society toward a critique of meritocracy.

Even if the superlative is tamed, there is still the problem of the comparative. Rousseau suggests that the republican tradition of virtue and citizenship embed the comparative. The imagined citizens of the constitutional projects for Poland and Corsica compare each other concerning their eagerness to promote the bonum commune. Rousseau, however, cites Spartanian or Roman historians who praise the Spartan women, who endured the loss of their sons in war, and the Roman soldier who was “un citoyen.” It is not the heroic, masculine language of the republican tradition of virtue that I want to propose for embedding the comparative into society. It is the mere possibility of politicizing the criteria of comparison. How does Rousseau conceive of becoming a citizen of his ideal republic? He sketches out a school system wherein the public determines what should be learned and chooses the teachers. He formulates a model of a citizen army in which all male citizens have to serve, and states that the whole hierarchy should be measured by who has best served the country. He proposes an election system where the advantages and disadvantages of every person who is presented to the election are posted in public. He projects a competition of farmers who is the most productive farmer in the district. All these proposals show how Rousseau formulates the classical powers of subjectivation of the nation state – school, army, political representation – even though the nation state does not yet exist in the middle of the 18th century. But Rousseau projects a democratic structuring of these subjectivation powers. Whereas the nation state forms its citizens by nationalized schools, armies and political party systems, Rousseau proposes a democratic subjectivation. The citizens participate in judging, voting and determining the structure – and the personal – of the subjectivation powers. This is the Rousseauian radical democracy I want to propose for the subjectivation in post growth societies. If humans are necessarily comparing themselves with one another, they could do so in ways they have reflected upon and established collectively.

³⁶ Sighard Neckel/ Kai Dröge 2002, Die Verdienste und ihr Preis: Leistung in der Marktgesellschaft, in: Axel Honneth (Hg.): Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit. Paradoxien des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus, Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, S. 93-116.

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