

# Psychoanalysis and Social Change

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper focuses on the psychoanalytic claim that *jouissance*, or excessive enjoyment, is different from the pleasure guaranteed by the pleasure principle – which serves homeostasis in the subject – and is achievable only at the cost of transgressing some prohibition enshrined, if not in the moral Law, then in some conventional symbolic order. It further argues that capitalism is characterised by a certain kind of negation – of commodities by commodities, and of subjects’ capacity for *jouissance* – and it examines the question, whether *jouissance* is possible on capitalism’s terms, given that capitalism promises *jouissance* through commodity consumption. Upon investigation, the promise turns out to be illusory because, although it is the case that the neoliberal capitalist order is the present conventional symbolic order, it is not characterised, like the moral Law, by prohibition as much as by the exhortation to “enjoy.” Hence it is nonsensical to speak of transgression of a capitalist prohibition which would yield *jouissance* for transgressive subjects. Psychoanalysis is therefore in the position to prepare subjects for social transformation or revolution by creating the space where questioning subjects may “assume their desire” by refusing the pseudo-*jouissance* that capitalism offers through commodity consumption. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

**Key words:** consumer capitalism; *jouissance*; Lacan; negation; neoliberal; psychoanalysis; transgression

## INTRODUCTION

The present article is predicated on the psychoanalytic notion that *jouissance*, or excessive enjoyment, is different from the pleasure guaranteed by the pleasure principle – which serves homeostasis in the subject – and is achievable only at the cost of transgression of some prohibition enshrined, if not in the moral Law, then in some conventional symbolic order. It further argues that capitalism is characterized by a certain kind of negation – of commodities by commodities, and of subjects’ capacity for *jouissance* – and it examines the question, whether *jouissance* is at all possible on capitalism’s terms, fully cognisant of the fact that capitalism promises *jouissance* through commodity consumption. The problem with this is that the promise turns out, of necessity, to be illusory because, although it is the case that the neoliberal capitalist order is indeed tantamount to being the present

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conventional symbolic order, the transgression of which would supposedly yield *jouissance* for transgressive or revolutionary subjects, it is not characterized, like the moral Law, by prohibition as much as by the exhortation to “enjoy”. In other words, capitalism’s promise of enjoyment as *jouissance* has to be spurious, because it encourages conformity to its pattern of negation, and thus desire for its substitutes for *jouissance*, which precludes the transgression on which the latter is predicated. In light of this, it is argued, psychoanalysis is in the position to prepare subjects for social transformation or revolution by creating the space where the questioning subject may “assume their desire” in the face of dominant capitalist power, in the realisation that it is only by transgressing the norms of capital that desire may point the way to an unattainable, but sustaining *jouissance*. The work of mainly Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Žižek, Kristeva and Parker informs the paper.

### CAPITALISM, DESIRE AND NEGATION

If psychoanalysis is a discipline which may be said to mark the alienation between the subject and extant society – its existence being predicated on the unconscious as the repository of prohibited, and consequently repressed wishes and intentions – it simultaneously signals the distance between the subject and power, the power which ultimately authorises prohibition via conventional morality, if not law. Such prohibition can assume many forms, from overt sexual prohibitions to an implicit, if not overt, proscription of communal bonds (Kovel, 2002) which would (supposedly) undermine individual material wealth and prosperity (albeit strictly in capitalist terms). It is worth quoting Kovel (2002) at length here, to illustrate what is at stake:

what breaks up the life-world of tribal society is some encroachment on the land. With the [non-capitalist] productive foundation of society interrupted, a complex and disintegrative chain of events is set in motion. As the “old ways” no longer make sense, a kind of desire is set loose, and as this is now relatively shapeless and boundless, the virus of capital, with its promise of limitless wealth, is able to take hold. This is always accompanied by the mass-cultural invasion that encodes capital’s logos in the form of commodities. Once “Coca-Cola, the real thing” replaces traditional reality, the internal colonisation that perfects the takeover of peripheral societies is well under way. (p. 54)

This paper is an attempt to draw out some of the implications of existing theorisations (such as Parker, 2011) of the possibility that psychoanalysis may provide the crucial sphere of provenance of the subject’s questioning of itself with regard to its inescapable personal alienation as well as its relation with dominant power, preparing the way for a reconfiguration of the latter relationship in the social sphere.

Given the undeniable role of “desire” in capitalist consumer culture, a good place to start is to ask if there is a link between the concepts of desire and negation, as conceived by Hegel, on the one hand, and capitalism’s arguably unfulfillable promise of *jouissance* via commodity consumption, where *jouissance* is understood as extreme, unbearable enjoyment or pleasure – a “path towards death” (Lacan, 2007b, p. 18). According to Hegel’s scrupulous analysis of the dialectic of mind or (self-)consciousness (1807/1966) the dialectic of mind/spirit is set in motion by negation in conjunction with desire – desire for food, for sex, for power, and so on – more precisely where the movement of desire is marked by instances of negation. When I eat,

the food is negated, “nihilated” or cancelled in its given form, and assimilated by the eater; when one craves power over others, the other (that is, the other’s power) is negated, thus constituting him/her a slave to the master. Similarly, when consumers desire certain commodities, a process of negation or “nihilation” is set in motion at various levels, as will be argued below.

To be sure, one should not neglect to mention that, for Hegel (1807/1966), the dialectical unfolding of Spirit through negation includes the crucial moment of the “negation of the negation” (pp. 225–227), which, in turn, entails what he called “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) – the process in which what is negated is cancelled (Hegel 1835/2004, p.75), but also, simultaneously, preserved and elevated to a higher level of (spiritual) existence. One does not have to subscribe to the tenets of metaphysical idealism ultimately affirmed by Hegel, however, to perceive the accuracy of his analysis of desire and negation. In other words, one could – should, I would argue – dispense with the notion of “sublation” where capitalist consumption is concerned. As Zygmunt Bauman’s (2008) analysis of consumerist behaviour shows, far from “sublating” earlier stages of production or consumption of commodities, (negation in) consumption consists in an intermittent discarding of commodities in favour of “new” ones (which do not embody a sublation of previous attributes, as may be seen in the example of the arbitrary replacement of one range of cosmetics by another).

In a (materialist) poststructuralist context, too, one could agree that desire is the machine, the motor, driving the process of social, economic and political becoming, punctuated, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) have shown, by intermittent stages of “identification”, when “bodies-without-organs” are hypostatised as (themselves unproductive) figures of authority – the self, the state, the church, capital – which function as impossible guarantors of *jouissance*. It is in this capacity that capital operates in the endlessly interconnected universe of desiring-production, and the production of sites *for* desire, implicitly capable of functioning as motivators of desire on the part of the “subjects” of capital – intermittently constituted as such in the act of desiring commodities, such as “the real thing”, Coca-Cola (a phenomenal metonymy of the Lacanian “real” of capital; see Žižek, 2000, 2009), or the ultimate smartphone, iPad, tablet, automobile, and so on. These comprise an endless progression or concatenation of different (but metonymically related) objects, the negation of which, through consumption, supposedly generates *jouissance*, but arguably generates, as Kovel (2002) put it, “a sense of dissatisfaction or lack – so that it can truly be said that happiness is forbidden under capitalism, being replaced by sensation and craving” (p. 52). Confirming this, Hardt and Negri (2001) pointed out that the world market flourishes on difference (supposedly the defining characteristic of the postmodern subject), while its obverse is articulated by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) in terms of the subject as concatenation of desiring-machines, attaching itself intermittently to capital as the “body-without-organs”.

Negation is therefore inseparable from capitalist processes of production and consumption. Not only do consumers consume, and concomitantly “nihilate” products (that is, turn them into “nothing” that is valuable any longer), from food to mobile phones, but the products or commodities themselves (especially those that display marks of technological innovation) “nihilate” their predecessor products, where the technically new and the comparably obsolescent are also locked in an indissoluble embrace. Harvey (1990) provided an illuminating discussion of the necessary conditions of capitalist production – growth, exploitation of labour, and technological as well as organisational dynamism – which, I believe, is compatible with what I argue here about negation or nihilation. Growth, for example, is achieved on the basis of different kinds of negation – social, political and/or ecological – in so far as something is usually

negated in these areas for growth to happen. Social (for instance, family) bonds are negated, for example, by the individualistic competition encouraged by capitalism. The control or exploitation of labour by balancing profit margins and labour costs, too, entails the negation of labourers' individual creativity, and technological/organisational progress of necessity negates not only earlier conditions in these domains, but labourers' needs (by technology making manual as well as some skilled labour redundant) and ecological integrity as well.

This paradoxical relation between capitalism and social change is intimately related to this double sense of negation/nihilation: consumers negate commodities through consumption, and products nihilate earlier and/or technologically obsolete commodities, in this way pointing to a third sense of "nihilation", namely consumers' negation of their own intrinsic human potential for autonomy (Olivier, 2010) through subjecting themselves to the economic flux of capitalist consumer patterns (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

### AUTONOMY, SUBJECTIVITY AND *JOUISSANCE*

By "intrinsic human potential for autonomy" is meant their ineradicable ability to position themselves, via questioning of hegemonic power, affirmatively in relation to the production of "new" power relations, as conceived by, among others, Lacan (1978, 2007a, 2007b), in the questioning role of the hysteric *vis-à-vis* the discourse of the master, seen together with that of the analyst, which mediates the production of new (now relativised) master signifiers on the part of subjects. Similarly, one could adduce Foucault's (1988) account of the individual appropriation of autonomy of the self in the Hellenistic era, under the difficult regime of the "care of the self", as an exemplary model to be emulated. Power, including subjection to power, as well as self-empowerment, is here conceived of in discursive terms, where subjects are inserted into power relations by the discursive-linguistic constitution of subjectivity. Discourse, as the convergence of meaning and power in language, is conceived of in quasi-transcendental terms: it is the condition of possibility of asymmetrical power-relations, but at the same time also of their erosion or overthrow (Foucault, 1972).

Subjectivity as a by-product of the process of "desiring-production" was articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), and by Lacan through the interlinkage of the registers of the "real", imaginary and symbolic (Lee, 1990). For both the "subject" is constituted in a certain manner and, for both, capitalism's impact on the subject is registered in a notable manner. Lacan expressed this as a specific, duplicitous permutation of discursive relations ( $\$/C > S2 / S1 > a$ ) in which expression  $\$$  stands for the divided subject, C is the signifier for the capitalist,  $>$  means "addresses", S2 signifies knowledge or the university, / is the bar signifying the truth of the repressed, S1 is the signifier for the master, and a stands for *jouissance* or surplus pleasure. The capitalist's discourse masquerades as the hysteric's discourse, the truth being that it is surreptitiously orchestrated by the master (Lacan, 1978; Olivier, 2009); while Deleuze and Guattari (1983) attributed a specific kind of schizophrenisation of the subject to capital as the body-without-organs, the subject "being born of the states that it consumes and being reborn with each new state" (p. 16).

*Jouissance*, enjoyment, orgasm, as distinct from pleasure, marks, for Lacan, that moment of transgression of the pleasure principle that yields an unbearable, or "painful" pleasure, and is therefore fundamentally in contravention of the constraints imposed on the subject by the pleasure principle (Lacan, 1997, 2007a, 2007b; Evans, 2006). The latter promotes

the economy of homeostasis, and therefore limits the subject's enjoyment to the minimum: pleasure is conservative; *jouissance* is excessive (Parker, 2011), and the subject constantly tends towards such excess in the face of the prohibitions imposed on it by the pleasure principle – significantly referred to by Freud (1911/2006b) initially as the “unpleasure principle”. Silverman (1983) aptly described the pleasure principle in terms which clarify the difference between the pleasure principle and *jouissance*:

For Freud, pleasure represents the absence of unpleasure; it is a state of relaxation much more intimately connected with death than with life. Indeed, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) at one point refers to the pleasure principle as the “Nirvana principle”. (p. 54)

It is significant that Lacan (1997) linked *jouissance* explicitly to prohibition via Freud's (1919) myth (in *Totem and Taboo*) of the parricide of the primal father, and points out that:

without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*, and ... that is precisely the function of the [moral] Law. Transgression in the direction of *jouissance* only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law ... what we see here is the tight bond between desire and the Law. (p. 177)

Because prohibition, that is, the institution of the Law, is only possible through discourse, because it is a function of the cratological and ethical aspects of the symbolic register, it means that *jouissance* is in a certain sense pre-symbolic and trans-symbolic. It is pre-symbolic because entering the symbolic requires renunciation of the *jouissance* that the subject strives to attain in the imaginary register, that is, imagines to be possible in phallic terms in relation to the mother (Evans, 2006; Parker, 2011). This is the meaning of “symbolic castration”: being disempowered by language as discourse, or alienated from enjoyment by the signifier – and the kind of prohibitions that the subject faces are therefore paradoxical. What is prohibited (*jouissance*) is structurally unattainable, in any case, except by “transcending” the symbolic, or transgressing it. This is its trans-symbolic meaning. Here *jouissance* may be seen as being intimately conjoined with the death drive, in so far as the latter surpasses the symbolic at that limit, *até*, beyond which the subject cannot dwell or exist (Lacan, 1997). Hence *jouissance* may be understood as being intolerable, but no less desirable for that reason. In fact, the thoroughly paradoxical status of *jouissance* becomes apparent where Lacan, refusing the temptation to construe it as something “mystical, instinctual or energetic”, articulates it instead as “something constituted by the very human activity that keeps it at bay, constituted as a something beyond, something that drives the subject as they speak, and drives them beyond speech” (Parker, 2011, p. 53).

Moreover, as Kristeva (1996/2000) has argued passionately, nothing less than human fulfilment is at stake when it comes to what she calls “revolt” – closely related to what Lacan calls *jouissance* – in the sense of “returning to oneself”, that is, “assuming one's desire” for the sake of autonomy, and concomitantly approximate, if not actualise, *jouissance*:

Happiness exists only at the price of a revolt. None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realise ourselves as autonomous and free ... on the social level, the normalising order is far from perfect and fails to support the excluded: jobless youth, the poor in the projects, the homeless, the unemployed, and foreigners, among many others. When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with ideologies, with shows and entertainments that far from satisfy the demand for pleasure, they become rioters. (p. 7)

## CAPITALISM AND PSEUDO-JOUISSANCE

In light of this, it could be argued that capitalism systematically promotes the illusion that the enjoyment proscribed by the pleasure principle (the incest taboo, metaphorically speaking) is possible and attainable, albeit simultaneously forbidden, in the process offering what it cannot deliver, namely *jouissance*. At best it could offer a spurious version of *jouissance*. Why spurious? Because the injunction, on the part of consumer capitalism, to “Enjoy!”, delivered in imaginary and symbolic terms – think of the conjunction of symbolic representations with iconic embodiments of *jouissance* in advertising and branding – implies that the symbolic may be surpassed, which is impossible in the case of subjects being exhorted to *affirm*, instead of *transgress*, the very symbolic order that would have to be transcended if *jouissance* were to be truly approximated, if not instantiated. It must be stressed that what is at stake here applies to the condition of late, specifically “consumer” capitalism, where the emphasis is not, as in the Marxist evaluation of earlier stages of capitalist development, on the eventual confluence between work and enjoyment on the part of workers (for more on which see Bauman, 2008).

Recall that *jouissance* implies transgression of the Law in its prohibitive guise. Again, why? Because the signifier has always already driven a wedge between the subject and the real, where *jouissance* lies (Silverman, 1983). This is why, according to Lacan (1991/2007b; 1975/2007c), “there is no sexual relation” (pp. 6, 69): the signifier has always already interrupted sex – “real” sex – and only fantasy can fill the gap, or appear to (Evans, 2006; Žižek, 2007). In the case of capitalism the *Ersatz jouissance* offered via commodity consumption does not invite transgression, because it does not impose any prohibition. On the contrary, it exhorts subjects to affirm societal norms as embedded in the conventional symbolic order, or the cultural context of what, in consumer society, is currently regarded as being socially “normative”: “Thou shalt enjoy!” Deleuze and Guattari (1983) have theorised this in terms of the intermittent attachment and uncoupling of “desiring machines” to the “body without organs” of capital, where they are said to “garner” (p. 16) sensual pleasure with every attachment. This is a suggestive metaphorical description of what is here understood as a variety of “pseudo-*jouissance*”, perhaps better described as fetishism. Norms should not be confused with the (moral) “Law”, or “the set of universal principles which make social existence possible” (Evans, 2006 p. 98). This was noted earlier by Žižek (1995) in an essay entitled (borrowing from Marcuse) “The deadlock of ‘repressive desublimation’”, in which he argued that, in the contemporary world, one witnesses the strange reversal of the superego’s erstwhile function of *prohibition* (of certain enjoyments) to that of issuing the social command to “Enjoy!” – an uncharacteristic superego role in classical Freudian terms. In this regard it is interesting to note a corresponding interpretation on the part of Bauman (2008) concerning the complex field of current social developments and concerns, which he persuasively described as a “reversal” of the relations between the pleasure and reality principles as conceived by Freud: “It is now the ‘reality principle’ that has been forced to go on the defense; it is daily compelled to retreat, self-limit, and compromise in the face of renewed assaults by the ‘pleasure principle’” (Bauman, 2008, p. 50).



In Žižek's words (1995):

The bourgeois liberal subject represses his unconscious urges by means of internalised prohibitions and, as a result, his self-control enables him to get hold of his libidinal "spontaneity". In post-liberal societies, however, the agency of social repression no longer acts in the guise of an internalised Law or Prohibition that requires renunciation and self-control; instead, it assumes the form of a hypnotic agency that imposes the attitude of "yielding to temptation" – that is to say, its injunction amounts to a command: "Enjoy yourself!" (p. 16)

For this reason, the imaginary is enlisted to "fill the gap" left by the symbolic regarding capitalist "enjoyment". An endless proliferation of images as sites of identification (Kearney, 1988) – that is, for the approximation of *jouissance* – supplements symbolic exhortations to "enjoy" via the consumption of commodities, each feeding off the other metonymically, and simultaneously negating one another as each new image cluster vies with others as better approximations of capitalist consumer *jouissance*, which is really no better than pseudo-*jouissance*.

As indicated earlier, *jouissance* is hitched to the death drive, and the imaginary supplies what is prohibited by the pleasure principle, namely (the fantasy of) *jouissance*. This may explain why Snyder (2004) depicted "consumers" as zombies, or the "living dead" in his remake of *Dawn of the Dead*: by repeating patterns of consumption compulsively under capitalism, consumers show themselves as being subject to the repetition compulsion signalling the sway of the death drive (Freud 1920/2006a), that is, as mimicking the "living dead". The repetition compulsion manifests itself in consumer behaviour, and capitalism flourishes, precisely because the *jouissance* it promises is unattainable, and the gesture of reaching towards its mirage – brought tantalisingly close by capital-invested images of intense enjoyment through commodities or through money wealth – has to be repeated endlessly.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND OVERCOMING CAPITALISM

So how is this invidious, addictive behaviour pattern, inculcated by well-known capitalist consumer traps, successfully unmasked as a lie, a false promise, and as systematically inculcating the subject's alienation from itself? Psychoanalysis is in a position to do this, in so far as it enables the subject to overcome personal alienation, as critical theorist Habermas (1971) has argued in the context of demonstrating how the "emancipatory interest" of the "critical social sciences" (of which psychoanalysis is one) works. The condition of personal and social alienation experienced in extant society has been passionately evoked by Laing (1990):

No one can begin to think, feel or act now except from the starting-point of his or her own alienation ... Humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities ... Our alienation goes to the roots. The realization of this is the essential springboard for any serious reflection on any aspect of present inter-human life. Viewed from different perspectives, construed in different ways and expressed in different idioms, this realization unites men as diverse as Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Tillich and Sartre. (p. 12)

One can add Parker (2011) to this list, in so far as he consistently draws attention to the alienated condition of people under capitalism. Importantly, he points to the Lacanian

distinction between two senses of *alienation*, both of which are said to be “real” (Parker 2011) – “as the necessary underlying condition for becoming a subject” (p. 88) (here he referred to the subject being torn between “selling” its labour and buying or consuming for survival), and the “real” as “gap in the symbolic” (the contradictions or moments of “excessive irrationality” that shatter the relations between subjects, instantiating “real” alienation). For Parker, psychoanalysis can set the scene, as it were, where subjects can overcome or be emancipated from this alienation.

This is possible because, in Lacan’s (1997) words, the subject can learn to “act in conformity with” her or his “desire” (p. 314) – a desire hijacked by capitalism and yoked to the repetition compulsion through fantasies of *jouissance*. Every time a commodity is “consumed”, it is negated, nihilated, under pressure from desire, only to make way for another act of consumption of another commodity, putatively offering “more” or “better” *jouissance* in the place of the one that was negated. Arguably, *need* is artificially transformed into *desire*, through desirability-invested images of commodities, for example, in so far as capitalism colonises basic human needs such as hunger, thirst and the need for shelter, inculcating in subjects the desire for specific commodities by holding them up, typically, as what has to be *demand*ed by “discerning consumers” to satisfy (carefully cultivated) “needs”. It is worth noting here that, for Lacan, there is always an unclosable gap between *needs* and their articulation as *demands* (which is what capitalism taps into), and this gap is what constitutes *desire* (Lacan, 1977a; Lee, 1990).

To clarify what is at stake here, recall that at the outset the distance between the subject and the power which authorises prohibition via conventional morality, if not law, was pointed out. This power can assume different guises in distinct historical eras. In the Christian Middle Ages it was the Church (or institutionalised religion); in the heyday of the modern epoch, of which the historical Enlightenment was the clearest manifestation, it was the nation state (or an institutionalised political sphere); and, since the middle of the 20th century, it has been capitalism (an institutionalised, increasingly hegemonic economic sphere) (Rossouw, 2006). For any such power to be dominant, it has to inform what Lacan called the symbolic order in a decisive, norm-establishing manner, which has been the case with the three above examples.

Žižek (2007) provided a good indication of what is at stake when this happens through his clarification of the meaning of Lacan’s (1966/2007a) contention, that the subject’s desire is “the Other’s desire” (p. 525):

Lacan’s formula is ambiguous. ‘It is *qua* Other that man desires’ first means that man’s desire is structured by the ‘decentred’ big Other, the symbolic order: what I desire is predetermined by the big Other, the symbolic space within which I dwell. Even when my desires are transgressive [bent on *jouissance*; B. O.], even when they violate social norms, this very transgression relies on what it transgresses. Paul [whom Lacan also refers to in Seminar VII; B.O.] knows this very well when, in the famous passage in Romans, he describes how the law gives rise to the desire to violate it. (Žižek, 2007, pp. 41–42)

Žižek (*ibid.*) has drawn attention to another meaning of “man’s desire is the Other’s desire”, namely the fact that “the subject desires only in so far as it experiences the Other itself as desiring, as the site of an unfathomable desire ... emanating from him or her” (p. 42). Here, in contrast to what he referred to as Levinas’s “ethical domestication of the neighbour” (p. 43) by making “the other” the source of our awareness of ethical responsibility, Žižek recalled



Freud's and Lacan's insistence on the impenetrability of the other. Paradoxically, according to both Freud and Lacan this "abyssal dimension" of human beings was first expressed in the Judaic exhortation, "to love your neighbour as yourself" – a profoundly problematical imperative that, according to Lacan, hides the fact that the neighbour is not merely my "mirror-image" to whom I can attribute everything that I experience; underneath this mask "there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of one about whom I finally know nothing" (Žižek, *ibid.*). Hence the divine law in Judaism that regulates inter-human relations, which is the counterbalance to the neighbour as potential monster.

From this it should be apparent that the neoliberal capitalist order of the present era constitutes the symbolic "Other" which functions as the repository of norms and (capitalist) values which are always, ineluctably, implicated in the actions of individual subjects, whether these serve to affirm and reinforce, or subvert and transgress this order. That is, today, one's desires, whether transgressive or affirmative regarding the capitalist order, presupposes it as the "big Other" that predetermines one's desires. The important point to keep in mind, however, is that while transgressive desires in this socio-economic context are predicated on the drive towards (strictly, unattainable) *jouissance*, the pleasures offered on capitalism's conditions can at best masquerade as means to *jouissance*. In so far as they are locked into the logic of capitalist negation or nihilation, they are purveyors of pleasure in Freud's sense of the quiescence or homeostasis resulting from the regulating operation of the pleasure principle, except that capitalist "pleasures" are fleeting, at best – recall Kovel's (2002) remark (quoted earlier).

## THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Parker (2011), a practising Lacanian psychoanalyst and theorist, is in the best possible position to know the potential "therapeutic value" of analysis for subjects who are willing to confront their own alienation, specifically under capitalism. In the process they are led to questioning their own understanding of, and relationship with, dominant power. However, Parker (2011) has rid one of the illusory beliefs that the "return to themselves" of subjects in analysis under clinical conditions can lead *directly* to emancipatory social and political action outside the clinic. He has also insisted that the Lacanian psychoanalyst is not there to assist the client in "adapting" to (alienated) capitalist society, that is, to accept that capitalism is the privileged site for the (illusory) pursuit of *jouissance*. Instead, he has shown how Lacanian psychoanalysis enables one to confront the impact of the Lacanian "real" on one's self-understanding by enabling the subject to work through the reifying ideological layers obscuring the space where a dislocating, disruptive and painful, but ultimately desirable encounter with the limits of the subject's symbolic horizons can happen. This means that the subject also has to confront the limits and limitations of neoliberal, globalised capitalist discourse as far as conclusively "speaking" (pseudo-)truth about itself is concerned. Perhaps most importantly for present purposes, Parker (2011) has also pointed to the link between "revolutions in subjectivity", enabled by psychoanalytic "working through", and social revolutions such as those prompted by Marxism and feminism, despite the absence of any direct causal link.

Parker (2011) has described the (Lacanian) clinic as a clinic in/of the "real" – one which has a paradoxical, "extimate" relation to (exterior and yet intimately connected with) society.

This means that, on the one hand, it enables a revolution in subjectivity inside the clinic as a site of refusal (but a refusal of a contingently organised, capitalist society) and, on the other, it is predicated on a theory of social revolution outside the clinic. As said before, this does not imply a direct causal relationship between the revolution in subjectivity (which resonates with Kristeva's notion of "revolt") that may happen within the clinic, and a potential social and political revolution outside of it. However, precisely because the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis is enabled, or perhaps provoked, into questioning her own relationship with (capitalist) power, any participation in the revolutionary transformation of social reality is "prepared for" at the level of individual subjectivity.

What, one may ask, could a clinic "in/of the real" accomplish regarding subjects "alienated" from their "true selves" by obsessional neurotic consumerist behaviour? It would have to occasion an experience of themselves as split subjects, forever lacking that something which promises, tantalisingly, to complement themselves, rendering an (nevertheless elusive) experiential plenum or *jouissance* proper. One could perceive in this the illusory counterpart of what Lacan (1977b), early in his career, designated the "empty speech" of imaginary ego-talk, counterweighted by the ironically named "full speech" of the subject of the unconscious. The clinic of the real, then, instantiates the space where the subject may be disabused of any notion of imaginary self-actualisation – for example, the discursively inculcated belief that "making it" as a media "idol" is the zenith of self-fulfilment, or that owning all the available electronic products, from an iPhone to the latest iPad, guarantees perpetual, uninterrupted, extreme enjoyment.

By contrast, the self-questioning subject of the "real" – that is, not a subject literally "in" the real, which is ineffable, but the subject in so far as she or he is subjected to the self-relativising demands of the "real", and can only be approached in the symbolic – realises that *jouissance* or conclusive self-fulfilment can only ever be approached asymptotically. That is, *jouissance* is strictly unattainable, and it is only via the *objet petit a* (*object a*) (any "little other object," such as a song, a painting, a torn shirt, another person, a toy sled named Rosebud, for example, that functions as a metonymy of the unconscious, "real" object of one's desire) that it may be approached in the form of a kind of "partial enjoyment". *Object a* (as partial object) is that which triggers or initiates desire in the subject (Žižek, 1993, pp. 206–207). This desire is fundamentally desire for the (Freudian) Thing, or "profound lost object", in which the subject implicitly (retrospectively and unconsciously) locates an impossible *jouissance*. In other words, the subject of the "real" learns that it is *manqué à être*, lacking being, and that it must ineluctably settle for *object a*, or rather a succession of metonymically related *objects a* or, to put it differently, the subject discovers that it has to alternate hysterical resistance to the *status quo* with intermittently adopted (and eventually questioned) master's discourses.

The point here is that *object a* mediates the subject's desire; it is not *itself* the object of desire. If that should happen – if desire is displaced to *object a* "itself" – it would cease to be *object a* and become a fetish instead (Parker, 2011). To illustrate: in Berri's (1986) film *Manon des Sources* Ugolin, the dim-witted son of the landowner, Papet, becomes infatuated with the beautiful and elusive shepherdess, Manon. He follows her around, hiding in places that afford him the most advantageous voyeuristic enjoyment of her beauty. Smitten with her, but lacking the confidence to tell her, he eagerly appropriates her pink hair-ribbon when she accidentally drops it. The ribbon becomes Manon's substitute to the extent that Ugolin lovingly sews it to his nipple, his own flesh. Instead of functioning as *object a*, which

mediates his desire for Manon, the ribbon has become a fetish on which Ugolin's affection for the girl is lavished instead.

## CONCLUSION

The question here is, therefore, if it is the case that the subject who experiences a revolution in subjectivity comes to embrace his or her symbolic castration, accompanied by an understanding of *object a vis-à-vis* their unrequited desire, what is the case with the obsessional neurotic subject of capitalism? More precisely, what is the status of capitalist desire regarding commodities? Are commodities instances of *object a*, which mediate consumer desire for the capitalist pseudo-version of *jouissance*, or do they function as a fetish in each case, in so far as the exemplary consumer desires the commodity as such? If one considers Parker's (2011) suggestion, that under certain conditions "a fetish object is conjured into being which operates as a stand-in for the mother's phallus" (p. 95) (where "phallus" stands for imaginary *plenum* or fullness of being), it would seem to me that the relation between consumers and commodities might be regarded as instances of fetishism. This is not obvious in the case of everyday consumption, but shows itself more clearly where a consumer's attachment to commodities becomes obsessive to the point of blindly seeking *jouissance* in their very possession. The point is that, under consumer capitalism, desire functions as desire for commodities *as such*, as the putative means of attaining *jouissance* via the very process of their consumption. In fact, however, because they do not function as *objects a*, which occasion desire for "something beyond", this process ineluctably degenerates into, at best, sensual pleasure (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983).

Whatever the case may be here, as I have argued above, it is strictly misguided to believe that capitalist pleasure and/or enjoyment is of the order of *jouissance*: the latter is, structurally speaking, in principle (if not in fact) *transgressive* in so far as it presupposes a set of prohibitions embedded in the symbolic order – where capitalism, as the symbolic big Other today, represents exactly the opposite, namely the absence of prohibition, and the encouragement of unbridled enjoyment. Hence transgression against capitalism would have to assume the character of a kind of "asceticism", with which "a return to oneself", and a rediscovery of the meaning of (relative, not absolute) autonomy, would be consonant.

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