

ARTICLE

The psychopolitics of (and psychotherapy required by) neoliberalism

Bert Olivier

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein,
South Africa

Correspondence

Bert Olivier, Department of Philosophy,
University of the Free State, PO Box
339, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa.
Email: OlivierG1@yahoo.co.uk; bertzaza@
yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This paper focuses on the currently hegemonic economic system in the world known as “neoliberal capitalism” or “neoliberalism.” It attempts to gauge the neoliberal psychopolitics accompanying the unfolding and reinforcement of neoliberalism—as well as the psychological impact this has on individuals worldwide. The work of several authors, including Naomi Klein, Bernard Stiegler, Paul Verhaeghe, Michel Foucault, Shoshana Zuboff, Byung-Chul Han, Laurent de Sutter, Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is enlisted firstly to demonstrate the endemic inequality (and its health consequences) brought about by neoliberalism, and secondly to clarify what is meant by “neoliberal psychopolitics.” Whereas the former has been shown as accompanying the capitalist strategy of “shock,” the latter is characterised by Byung-Chul Han as the quintessential psychic strategy employed by neoliberal capitalism to enhance “positive control” of neoliberal subjects in a quest to optimise productivity and profit. This is a strategy at odds with that of disciplinary societies (as typified by Foucault), which produce “docile bodies.” To be able to gauge the kind of psychotherapy commensurate with neoliberal psychopolitics, Han's analysis of the “entrepreneurial” self, enlisted by neoliberalism to maximise profit and productivity, is scrutinised—which leads to his turn towards “idiocy” and the need to inaugurate a new language or “idiom” as a way to resist neoliberalism. This is amplified by a discussion of Heidegger's notion of “everydayness” (of which neoliberalism is currently an embodiment) as a covering-up of human beings' potential for discovering their

(liberating) “singularity” by facing their own death resolutely. To conclude the paper, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “schizoanalysis” is briefly examined, showing how the threads of the argument culminate in what it entails: namely, the freeing of subjects’ desires through the dismantling of constraining forms of identification, such as that demanded by neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS

Byung-Chul Han, capitalism, entrepreneurial self, inequality, psychopolitics, schizoanalysis

The kind of revolution in subjectivity that occurs inside the clinic makes of the clinic a quite specific site of refusal—one that is extimate, implicated in the social at the moment it refuses it—but even then it is the site of refusal of the very capitalist world that made it possible. It gives birth to glimmering, fading, and glimmering again of a subject open to change, to subjectivity in revolution. (Ian Parker, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity*, 2011, pp. 198–199)

It's not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons. (Gilles Deleuze, *Post-script on Control Societies*, 1995, p. 178)

1 | NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM AND INEQUALITY

Assurances of capitalism being the economic system to which there is “no alternative”—as Margaret Thatcher and later David Cameron notoriously remarked—and by implication, therefore, the “best” economic system yet devised by human beings, are becoming increasingly suspect. Present socio-economic conditions, marked by widespread inequality, paint an altogether different picture (Piketty, 2014). Francis Fukuyama (1992) went as far as to claim that history had finally come to an end with the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union and with it and its satellites embracing liberal democracy as a historical political *telos*—which, of course, entailed capitalism. However, several authors including Paul Verhaeghe (2014) and Silvia Federici (2013), have elaborated on the socio-economic disadvantages of capitalism, as I shall demonstrate below, while Naomi Klein (2007) and Bernard Stiegler (2013) have alerted us to the sufferings and injustices of the current incarnation of capitalism from different perspectives.

In Klein’s work (Klein, 2007) one encounters a penetrating exposé of the latest strategy inspired by Milton Friedman’s Chicago School, namely “disaster capitalism”—the kind that capitalises (in more than one sense) on people’s sense of disorientation following traumatic experiences. These include natural disasters such as tsunamis and hurricanes, as well as the shock of having their familiar political frames of reference suddenly replaced by others. In the former category, she focuses on and analyses (among other events) the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the community of New Orleans and capitalist agencies’ exploitation of the situation by privatising schools. In the latter case, she concentrates on several countries where fundamental political change by “shock” led to similar kinds of economic intervention, each time with demonstrably deleterious results for these countries’ inhabitants. In the case of South Africa, for example, she points out that after the ANC’s negotiators were “forced” to accept the imposition of “free market” economic policies with the fall of apartheid in 1994:

rather than meeting in the middle between California and the Congo, the ANC adopted policies that exploded both inequality and crime to such a degree that South Africa's divide is now closer to Beverly Hills and Baghdad. Today, the country stands as a living testament to what happens when economic reform is severed from political transformation. Politically, its people have the right to vote, civil liberties and majority rule. Yet, economically, South Africa has surpassed Brazil as the most unequal society in the world. (Klein, 2007, p. 198)

Living in South Africa, as I do, one witnesses what is arguably the set of consequences of this inequality on a daily basis—from endemic crime such as murder (the average daily rate stands at almost 58 at present, BusinessTech, 2019) to muggings, assaults, rapes, burglaries, theft, and violent protests on highways (where motorists are pelted with stones and sometimes even petrol bombs). It takes no genius to understand that, unless the inequality attendant upon capitalist practices is drastically ameliorated, if not completely removed, this situation will only worsen.

Why should this be the case, one might inquire—is capitalism not touted as the 'best' available economic system by its many apologists, as stated at the outset? Stiegler offers a convincing explanation of the disruptive behaviour that increasingly erupts in contemporary, severely unequal societies (as exhaustively uncovered by researchers such as Piketty, 2014). In *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals* (2013), Stiegler argues that contemporary (neoliberal) capitalism has brought humanity to the sorry pass where it faces the loss of a distinctively human phenomenon—namely, "spirit." He is referring here to the human faculty that surpasses individual boundaries and is the provenance of the "trans-individuation" that enables bonds, connections, and affiliations between individuals. How can one rescue spirit, in this collective sense, in a world where inequality has become so severe that people can no longer assume that they share the same assumptions and values—not even regarding something as basic as the safety of driving on roads that all motorists (and pedestrians) are supposed to share, where economically impoverished and disaffected individuals pelt motorists with stones (and in South Africa, sometimes with Molotov cocktails)? In the introduction of the book he observes that:

No longer having anything to expect also means no longer having anything to fear ... with desperation comes a lack of fear—and the proliferation of repressive mechanisms intended to cope with the effects of this loss of authority that is also a loss of spirit turns out to be less and less effective and, ultimately, to increasingly engender the opposite of that for which they were intended, in extreme and totally irrational forms. This is the point at which we have arrived, and it is very bad news: the hyper-power of the technical system of the hyper-industrial epoch can only maintain its power for as long as everyday, blind trust ... remains possible, a trust inevitably ruined by the destructive irrationality resulting from the liquidation of the kingdom of ends [that Kant linked to ethical behaviour]. Now, trust is a precondition of the functioning of hyper-power: from the moment trust is lost, hyper-power is inverted into hyper-vulnerability and impotence. The loss of motives of hope then spreads, encompassing all of us like a contagious illness. But this "all" is no longer a we: it is a panic. (Stiegler, 2013)

Stiegler believes that individuals in contemporary societies become "uncontrollable" because of the "spiritual misery" (not in any vague, mystical sense, but relating to the erosion of the bond between individuals and their communities), that is inflicted on them by various aspects of banal consumerism. This includes the disruptive severance of traditional links with the cultural reservoir on which previous generations depended (Stiegler, 2019), and the measures of control that are concomitant with the increasingly conspicuous obsolescence of our technological-industrial economic system. This state of affairs is characterised by the unabated intrusion of "the market" into people's everyday lives, destroying their ethos or sense of communal place in the process. The result has been that, increasingly, people have nothing edifying to expect or look forward to—except the calculable, albeit uncertain, consequences of their economic involvements. But while economically empowered people—those with the technological training or

education to benefit from the economy's contemporary, information-based structure—can still survive, increasing numbers of people find it difficult to do so:

As the Third World extends further into the industrial world, this being so often the reality of globalisation, there are increasing numbers of people who find themselves excluded from technological development, who benefit the least from such development, and yet who suffer the most from its many forms of pollution. (Stiegler, 2013, p. 15)

Stiegler (2013) argues at length that participating in the global social, economic and technological system presupposes a kind of “blind trust” at several levels. For example: trust in the functionality of the motor car one drives, trust in the integrity of the road system one uses, and trust in other drivers, as well as in people who may be standing on overhead bridges looking down on the freeway. For the global social system to retain its cohesiveness and functionality, pervasive trust of this kind is required. However, if levels of inequality are reached—which has demonstrably already happened—where large numbers of people cannot expect to benefit from this system to the extent that they can earn the means to survive and, importantly, hope for a better future, societies are likely to become incrementally uncontrollable. In other words, as Stiegler (2013, p. 16) observes, the “technological system [that] can be considered rational only so long as it works—which presupposes that the beneficiaries of the system trust the system.” But what happens in societies where growing numbers of people do not benefit from the system? Then trust becomes unsustainable and the technical system becomes progressively vulnerable, because these societies become more and more uncontrollable. People with no hope for a better future have nothing to lose; hence they attack the system, as shown in the case of so-called “suicide bombers,” who “are *intrinsically* invulnerable and uncontrollable” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 18).

Verhaeghe, a Belgian psychoanalytical thinker, approaches the theme of inequality from a different angle. He draws attention to personality disorders and personal pathological conditions that have proliferated under social conditions of inequality brought about by the neoliberal, market-based economy. Evidently, one has to pay a price for living in neoliberal society, which is not surprising considering that “the neoliberal organisation of our society is determining how we relate to our bodies, our partners, our colleagues, and our children—in short, to our identities. And you can't get much more disordered than that” (Verhaeghe, 2014, p. 4).

Precisely what he means by “disordered” becomes clear when he turns his attention to the question of the link between living in a society dominated by the ideology of neoliberalism and the (lack of) psychological wellbeing of people. To understand this, he discusses the differences between “two approaches to diagnosis”—the “biopsychosocial” psychiatric model, which focuses on the individual situation of a patient within a broader social context, and the medical or “illness” model (Verhaeghe, 2014, pp. 183–188), which assumes that pathological symptoms invariably betray underlying physical processes that remain unchanged over time (which explains why this diagnostic model lets everyone “off the hook,” from psychologists and psychiatrists to parents and teachers). Crucially, Verhaeghe claims that, despite the dominance of the illness model in psychiatry and psychology, there are signs of people increasingly realising that psychic pathologies are manifestations of social censure on the basis of accepted social norms at any given time in history (something Foucault, 1978, also draws attention to in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*). So, for example, Verhaeghe (2014) points to the British Psychological Society and the World Health Organisation, both of which recently openly criticised the illness paradigm by arguing that diagnoses of “mental disorders” under its authority (as articulated in the canonical DSM) ignore the conspicuous fact that these diagnoses are based on prevailing social norms. In other words, instead of representing judgements supposedly rooted in scientifically “objective” knowledge, they are themselves symptoms of social and economic factors that often frame individuals' lives—such as poor housing, crime, violence, and debt, to which one could also add neoliberal pressure to outperform one's colleague-competitors.

Verhaeghe therefore argues that problems such as “mental disorders” are fundamentally tied to prevailing social and economic conditions, and in the present era particularly conditions of economic and social inequality. At present:

we see an avalanche of depression and anxiety disorders among adults, and ADHD and autism among children. This is most marked in the rise in medication. According to official figures, in 2009 one in every ten Belgians was taking antidepressants, and between 2005 and 2007 the number of Ritalin prescriptions doubled. In 2011, the use of antidepressants in the Netherlands had gone up by 230% over a period of 15 years; prescriptions for ADHD medication increased annually by more than 10%, with the result that in 2011 the number of prescriptions exceeded one million. Social phobia among adults is currently such a serious problem in the West—despite it being one of the safest regions in the world—that in 2000 the *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* referred to it as the third most frequent psychiatric disorder after depression and alcoholism. Is it too far-fetched to assume that this general fear of others is connected to the exponential increase in evaluations, audits, performance interviews, and CCTV cameras, combined with the disappearance of authority and trust? (Verhaeghe, 2014, pp. 193–194).

It is not surprising to find that social phobia and performance anxiety commonly occur amongst working people today—even executives are not exempted (Verhaeghe, 2014). This becomes more comprehensible when one considers that in contemporary neoliberal society, your colleagues in the workplace fall either into the category of those who have the task of evaluating your performance or that of competitors (which includes your friends at work). Sometimes, they are in both categories. Hence, it is difficult for everyone not to experience anxiety intermittently, something that could easily develop into a chronic condition. It is clear from Verhaeghe's findings that the provenance of social phobia is similar: under conditions of intense competition, one involuntarily suspects people's motives when they talk to you about your work—and, again, this could balloon into a general condition. One could also add the neoliberal practice of salary differentiation based on performance, which results in the income inequality that is characteristic of neoliberal societies. The proliferation of problems relating to “mental health” today cannot be separated from this state of affairs.

To substantiate his insights, Verhaeghe cites the work of two eminent, widely respected social epidemiologists, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson (who have conducted studies on the link between people's health, broadly speaking, and the society they live in). As far as social inequality is concerned, their findings are clear (Verhaeghe, 2014, pp. 195–196): “an increase of this kind [in income inequality] has far-reaching consequences for nearly all health criteria. Its impact on mental health (and consequently also mental disorders) is by no means an isolated phenomenon.” Stress proved to be the decisive factor in their study; it has been identified as having an impact on human immune and cardiovascular systems. It appears that stress is also directly linked to income inequality, which seems to imply (at least indirectly) that one could add social phobia and anxiety (particularly in the workplace), both of which are connected to income differences and therefore contribute to stress.

A striking conclusion of Wilkinson's first book (*The Impact of Inequality: How to Make Sick Societies Healthier*, 2005), was that in a country or city where there is high income inequality, “the quality of social relationships is noticeably diminished: there is more aggression, less trust, more fear, and less participation in the life of the community” (Verhaeghe, 2014, p. 196). For this to make sense, one should keep in mind that income inequality is directly linked to differences in social status—and, regarding the latter, Verhaeghe observes that low social status has a “determining effect on health.” It comes as no surprise that he arrives at the disconcerting conclusion that even in “prosperous ... Western Europe, it isn't the quality of health care ... that determines the health of the population, but the nature of social and economic life. The better social relationships are, the better the level of health” (Verhaeghe, 2014, pp. 196–197). Evidently, judging from Verhaeghe's research, health has been deteriorating steadily under the neoliberal regime. Corroborating Verhaeghe's findings, Parker (2011) also indicates that a host of pathological conditions accompany the behaviour of the subject under capitalism. According to Parker, these display the structural features of obsessional neurosis, such as ineradicable anxiety and doubt-based, repeated performance of certain work procedures.

It is also not difficult to see the connection between the unequal, market-oriented society described by Verhaeghe and the “burnout society” encountered in the work of Byung-Chul Han. This Korean-German thinker moves the discussion to a different level—one that goes beyond earlier, more “negative” conceptualisations of human societies to the point where one can understand the role of “positivity” and “achievement” in the lives of individuals who are *participants* in the neoliberal system (and I emphasise “participants” in the light of Stiegler’s observations regarding the exclusion of some people from the system, as discussed earlier). He reminds us that we no longer inhabit the disciplinary societies that Foucault (1995) so graphically characterised in terms of mechanisms such as “hierarchical observation” (observation that establishes a gap between the subordinated and superiors), “normalising judgement” (judgement that establishes norms for uniform behaviour) and the “examination” (in which the former two are combined). All of these denote the *negativity* of discipline in the service of (political) docility and (economic) productivity (of bodies). In contrast, we live in a society of unbounded *positivity* (Han, 2015; Salecl, 2010):

Today’s society is no longer Foucault’s disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society ... Also, its inhabitants are no longer “obedience-subjects” but “achievement-subjects.” They are entrepreneurs of themselves ...

On one level, continuity holds in the paradigm shift from disciplinary society to achievement society. Clearly, the drive to maximise production inhabits the social unconscious. Beyond a certain point of productivity, disciplinary technology—or, alternatively, the negative scheme of prohibition—hits a limit. To heighten productivity, the paradigm of disciplination is replaced by the paradigm of achievement or, in other words, by the positive scheme of Can; after a certain level of productivity obtains, the negativity of prohibition impedes further expansion. The positivity of Can is much more efficient than the negativity of Should. Therefore, the social unconscious switches from Should to Can. The achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject. However, the Can does not revoke the Should. The obedience subject remains disciplined. It has now completed the disciplinary stage. Can increases the level of productivity, which is the aim of disciplinary technology, that is, the imperative of Should. Where increasing productivity is concerned, no break exists between Should and Can; continuity prevails. (Han, 2015, pp. 8–9)

But there is a price to pay for all of this, as Han is quick to point out. In a society where everyone is interminably encouraged to “become themselves” (in other words, where the goalposts are always shifted as far as “achievement” is concerned) exhausting depression and “burnout” have become endemic. This is exacerbated further by the decrease in (personal) attachment so typical of an increasingly fragmented society, and by the systemic violence in this society where the “pressure to achieve” never lets up. Small wonder he remarks that “Seen in this light, burnout syndrome does not express the exhausted self so much as the exhausted, burnt-out soul” (Han, 2015, p. 10).

Furthermore, Han discerns a connection between such exhaustion and the fact that contemporary society is one that regards nothing as being “impossible”—a theme elaborated on by Gil Germain (2017) in relation to the centrality of technology today, where he demonstrates in graphic technological terms the extent to which contemporary society is committed to the actualisation of the so-called Technium (a veritable technological heaven where all “posthuman” needs are catered for). The problem is that given indications of the toll taken by the “burnout society” on individuals, consequent upon the implicit belief that “nothing is impossible,” one is witnessing signs that the burnt-out person has tipped into a mindset where “nothing is possible”:

No-longer-being-able-to-be-able leads to destructive self-reproach and auto-aggression. The achievement-subject finds itself fighting with itself. The depressive has been wounded by internalised

war. Depression is the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity. It reflects a humanity waging war on itself. (Han, 2015)

It seems that no matter what perspective one adopts on contemporary neoliberal society, what one uncovers is more evidence of the deleterious consequences of the increasing inequality that characterises this society. This is exacerbated by the fact that achievement on the part of (reflexively) competing individuals expresses itself on a differential scale: someone is always seen as having achieved more than oneself, which spurs the achievement-individual on to “do better,” with concomitant deleterious consequences as far as depression and burnout are concerned. One could easily overlook something in this regard, namely that—paradoxically—the achievement imperative, which is at the basis of the phenomenon of “burnout,” presupposes that individuals remain “healthy”—even if such health is not regarded as a precondition for attaining something valuable beyond mere “self-referential” health. In capitalist society the latter is, after all, taken for granted on the part of subjects who, as “entrepreneurs” of themselves, have to remain “fit and healthy” for the sake of productivity. Significantly, however, such a mode of living has nothing to do with the “good life” in the ethical, value-infused sense (Han, 2015). Instead, in capitalist achievement society it has been:

stripped of all transcendent *value*, it has been reduced to the immanency of vital functions and capacities, which are to be maximised by any and all means. The inner logic of achievement society dictates its evolution into a doping society. Life reduced to bare, vital functioning is life to be kept healthy unconditionally. Health is the new goddess. (Han, 2015, p. 51)

This observation (specifically concerning the link between achievement and a “*doping society*”) points to a related perspective which, in a certain sense, one cannot avoid calling the “final straw” in the process of unmasking capitalism as an inhuman system—because it seems to bear on the very possibility of *existing* as an embodied, sensible, sensitive, (potentially) rational, valuing and value-oriented human being.

2 | NEOLIBERALISM, GLOBAL ANAESTHESIA AND THE SENSE OF VALUE

What the perspective in question reveals is that capitalism does not merely systematically bring about endemic economic inequalities, with all their attendant social maladies, but adds insult to injury by further profiting from the very maladies that it has engendered. I am referring to the findings in Laurent de Sutter's recent book, *Narcocapitalism—Life in the Age of Anaesthesia* (2018), where (in a nutshell) he uncovers the connections between the global narcotics trade (specifically cocaine as metonymy for all other narcotics, including the “innocuous” ones available at pharmacies), and the capitalist society of today. Putting it differently, De Sutter shows that at present one lives in a largely (chemically) “anaesthetised” global capitalist society, which has become “passive-reactive” to such a degree that “desire,” in the psychoanalytical sense of the concept (that which unconsciously impels one to live a meaningful life, Germain, 2017; Lacan, 1997), is largely absent. This suits neoliberal rule very well; after all, individuals who are *not* largely anaesthetised, and hence still capable of desiring, may just value social and political freedom, and could easily become “troublemakers”—unlike the “anaesthetised” who, incapable of desiring, nevertheless labour to ensure profits for the corporations (Parker, 2011) in the misguided belief that they are promoting their own interests—that is, until they reach the point of “no-longer-being-able,” where depression and burnout lurk.

De Sutter (2018) traces the growth of the pharmaceutical industry from the time when global companies such as Merck realised the profitability of narcotics like cocaine (which used to be available at pharmacies) to the present, where a large number of so-called “antidepressants”—including Sarafem, Prozac, and Adofen—are available to the public. It is the degree of distribution of these putatively “calming” chemicals, the use of which keeps a large percentage of the world's population tranquillised, that justifies the appellation “narcocapitalism” as embodying the defining characteristic of contemporary society, according to De Sutter. The extent to which the use of chemical means,

supposedly to maintain people's health, is already regarded as the norm, is evident where De Sutter discusses the side effects of antidepressants, highlighting the dehumanising effects of these pharmaceuticals on people:

antidepressants enjoy a remarkable degree of tolerance from the authorities, even though they can have very harmful consequences. The range is very broad, and includes muscular spasms, a slowing of cognitive activity, a paradoxical risk of dependency, Parkinson-type symptoms, bouts of akathisia [an extreme form of restlessness and dismay], and even a fatal disruption to the nervous system. But most revealing, in terms of the way in which neuroleptic [neurological function-suppressing] antidepressants like chlorpromazine work, is the fact that most users end up suffering from anhedonia [the inability to experience pleasure] and sexual impotence. (De Sutter, 2018, pp. 19–20)

De Sutter's investigation into the pervasive "management" of contemporary society by means of chemical technology is a stark reminder of the chasm that separates it from earlier societies (including Indian, pre-Victorian, and ancient Greece and Rome). By all accounts, these societies attached fundamental value to the enjoyment of life, including sexual pleasure (Foucault, 1992). This is apparent from the present role of "norm-establishing" practices and institutions, which reflects an asymmetrical degree of power on the part of current pharmaceutical and medical practices:

That an individual might no longer feel or desire anything seemingly poses no problem for doctors or public authorities (or pharmaceutical companies); it is even accepted that this is the ultimate meaning of the phrase "getting better." "Getting better" is not getting anywhere at all—it is existing only in the negative mode of a being whose stability badly conceals the emptiness, as well as the suffering of not suffering, or of feeling that you do not feel your suffering, in an inescapable downward spiral ... in truth, no one would have it any other way—they would not want finally to cure it (De Sutter, 2018, p. 20)

One cannot fail to link the implicit reference in the final observation above—"they would not want finally to cure it"—to the decisive role played by the profit motive on the part of many, if not all, psychiatric professionals and pharmaceutical corporations. Nor can one ignore De Sutter's insight that contemporary individuals are systematically deprived of their constitutively human capacity of experiencing or desiring anything of value by pharmaceutical/medical practices and means. This does not only pertain to sensual or sexual pleasure. Yet, when one's sensory capacity is sufficiently dulled that one *cannot experience pleasure* any longer—such as the pleasure of listening to music, of reading great literature, of conversing amicably with friends or family, or of enjoying the intimacy of lovemaking—then it is doubtful whether one could speak meaningfully of a "*valu-able*" life. This is not where it ends, either. The worldwide situation exposed by De Sutter, which bears on the capacity of human beings to be axiologically sensitive (and sensible), rests on a more basic process where the world economy and the narcotics trade are inseparably intertwined. Referring specifically to the link between capitalism and cocaine, he writes:

at the beginning of the development of industrial capitalism, cocaine played a role similar to the one it was meant to play for its consumers: the role of the most powerful stimulant. It was thanks to it (and certain related products) that the modern pharmaceutical industry managed to get off the ground ... Clearly, this kind of development could not take place without producing embarrassing grey areas—and, in fact, cocaine is always to be found where modern capitalism is most susceptible to suspicions of corruption, namely, its relationship with public authorities. (De Sutter, 2018, pp. 36–37)

It is not difficult to see this connection between cocaine and the pharmaceutical industry in a historical perspective—after all, initially cocaine was sufficiently acceptable in medical circles (partly due to Sigmund Freud's initiative in

1884) to be used as local anaesthetic during eye surgery. But De Sutter's (2018) subsequent revelation—which confirms Jacques Derrida's (1994) earlier observation on the inextricable interwovenness of international crime and the capitalist world economy—is shocking even to someone with no illusions about the iniquities that human beings are capable of:

still today, the world economy only sustains itself on the money that circulates in it from the extraction, transformation and trade in the alkaloid. At the time of the subprime crisis in 2007, it was the profits from cocaine trafficking that enabled the banks, whose gambling had put them in a difficult position, to survive while they waited for the state to put its hand in its pocket and get them out of a fix. For a few months, when traditional investors were withdrawing their cash from the banks, only drug dealers carried on pumping liquidity into the system—which they needed to give their cash a legal appearance. (De Sutter, 2018, p. 37)

Nor does De Sutter hesitate to draw an explicit parallel between the narcotics trade and financial capitalism:

Just as industrial capitalism had been made possible by cocaine, it was to cocaine that it delegated the task of saving it from itself, having become intoxicated by its own power following the turn to financialisation—born, by another paradox, in the same period as the “war on drugs” [an allusion to Richard Nixon's announcement in this regard in 1971]. (De Sutter, 2018, p. 37)

Is it at all possible, in the light of the evidence adduced by De Sutter, to overestimate the axiological significance of these developments concerning the convergence of the medical utilisation of antidepressants, tranquillisers and anaesthesia, the global narcotics industry, and the encompassing capitalist system? That seems doubtful. What it means is that this lethal convergence could potentially be the last nail in the proverbial coffin of humanity's sense of value, dependent as it is on the capacity to *desire* (Germain, 2017) which, as argued earlier, has been dulled, or undermined, by the widespread use of a spectrum of anaesthetising drugs. This much is evident when De Sutter dwells on a transformation in the meaning of human beings as “subjects”:

Anaesthesia had transformed individuals into subjects, through the intervention of a chemical technique that led to the bracketing of everything that, in them, belonged to the world of “excitation” ... Rather than as the opening of the age of anaesthesia, perhaps it would be better to speak of the opening of the age of anexcitation—the age of the ablation of individuals' animation principle, transforming them into simple bodies, subject to examination and manipulation. Thanks to anaesthesia, surgeons had peace: an anaesthetised body is a body that causes no bother ... To become the subject of an operation is to become, therefore, more or less organised matter, a material mass of organs and flesh available for fixing, repair, amputation, observation and so on. (De Sutter, 2018, p. 109)

Accompanying the process described above, De Sutter asserts that a new word made its appearance in political discourse: “masses” replaced the word “crowds” for “large numbers of people” (2018). According to him this was no coincidence: underlying the transformation of the individual, something else had occurred: “Crowds had to become matter so that you could forget that they had a soul” (2018, pp. 109–110). Needless to emphasise, given the connections uncovered by De Sutter between capitalism, the pharmaceutical industry, the narcotics trade, and the upshot of these symptomatic linguistic developments (namely, that they reflect a devaluation of human beings' philosophical-anthropological (and therefore simultaneously their political) status), it stands to reason that at present one is witnessing in a particularly acute form what Freud once referred to as “civilisation and its discontents.”

3 | NEOLIBERALISM AND PSYCHOPOLITICS

In light of the above perspectives—all of which point in a direction where asymmetrical power relations and psychical wellbeing (or alternatively, psychic discontent) converge—it should come as no surprise that the economic system known as neoliberalism has distinct (quasi) pathological “psychopolitical” consequences for contemporary subjects (Han, 2017; Verhaeghe, 2014). To avoid confusion, the term “psychopolitical” should be distinguished from the notion of “biopolitical” as it was used by Michel Foucault with reference to the 18th century, when “there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of “bio-power”” (Foucault, 1978, p. 40). Hence, for Foucault, “biopolitical” practices and techniques concerned the increasing capabilities on the part of the state and capitalism to harness the forces of human bodies for economic and political ends. It pertained to the adjustment of the ability to govern, on the one hand, and (or with) the capacity to produce on the other—or the reconciliation of “docility” and productivity (Foucault, 1995). Biopolitics was, for Foucault, above all a somatic matter. It involved the “investment of the body, its valorisation, and the distributive management of its forces” (Foucault, 1978, p. 141). From Foucault’s analysis it is apparent that the development of capitalism in the 18th century was part and parcel of the emergence of the political and economic regulation of populations through an investment in living bodies. Accordingly, the “biopolitical” marked the advent of technologies capable of administering, disciplining and organising *living* bodies for purposes of control and production, in contradistinction to the “power of death” wielded by the sovereign in an earlier age (Foucault, 1978, p. 139).

In contrast to the concept of the “biopolitical,” then, and against the backdrop of its relevance for power over, or control of, the body, “psychopolitical” clearly applies to the psyche, by way of suggesting the analogous notion of power being wielded over it. In the present era, the “sovereign power” subjugating—or perhaps rather, manipulating—people globally through psychopolitical means is variously called “Empire” (Hardt & Negri, 2001), “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019) and “neoliberalism” (Han, 2017; Parker, 2011; Verhaeghe, 2014). The following excerpt from Han, which resonates with what was written earlier on his insights in *The Burnout Society* (2015), gives a good indication of what is at stake:

As the entrepreneur of its own self, the neoliberal subject has no capacity for relationships with others that might be free of purpose. Nor do entrepreneurs know what purpose-free friendship would even look like. Originally, being free meant being among friends. “Freedom” and “friendship” have the same root in Indo-European languages. Fundamentally, freedom signifies a relationship. A real feeling of freedom occurs only in a fruitful relationship—when being with others brings happiness. But today’s neoliberal regime leads to utter isolation; as such, it does not really free us at all. Accordingly, the question now is whether we need to redefine freedom—to reinvent it—in order to escape from the fatal dialectic that is changing freedom into coercion.

Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty—emotion, play and communication—comes to be exploited. It is inefficient to exploit people against their will. Allo-exploitation yields scant returns. Only when freedom is exploited are returns maximised. (Han, 2017, pp. 2–3; see also Parker, 2011)

Han is not the only one who has noticed the “freedom trap” (or myth of optimal freedom within the world market) of neoliberalism. Verhaeghe (2014), Parker (2011), Zuboff (2019), Salecl (2010), and Hardt and Negri (2001) have all drawn attention to this fiendishly clever capitalist ruse. Han (2017) reminds one that this was also one of Marx’s key insights: after all, the watchword of market-based capitalism is “free competition,” which presupposes individual freedom. And without people—consumers and producers—engaging in so-called “free competition,” capital would not grow. If one turns this (last) sentence around—“capital would not grow without people engaging in free

competition"—the truth about capitalism stares one in the face: capital needs people to grow, and the latter therefore serve capital; not the other way around. Hence the "[d]ictatorship of [c]apital" (Han, 2017, p. 3), which means that people become enslaved to its dictates while labouring under the false impression that they are free.

Today this situation has reached the point where the very technological inventions which have seemed to promote such individual freedom—notably the internet and all the virtual social activities it has made possible via so-called social media (websites) like Facebook and Twitter—have become the means of covertly manipulating consumers' or users' needs and desires. This process constitutes a novel phase of capitalist development termed "surveillance capitalism" by Shoshana Zuboff (2019), which is characterised by what she terms "instrumentarian power." In the light of this kind of technology-dependent power, it does not seem far-fetched to think of "surveillance capitalism" as a contemporary incarnation of covert fascism—covert, because the power in question is wielded over individuals who are mostly blissfully unaware of it. In fact, they are the agents of expanding and consolidating this power, at least until they reach the stage of depression and burnout because of the excessive demands of the "achievement society" (discussed earlier). And if this is the case, for "psychotherapy" (conceived of broadly as a reconfiguring of one's relationship with power (Parker, 2011)) one should perhaps turn to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983) call "schizoanalysis"—liberating one's "desiring-production" in the face of all agencies (such as capital) that activate individuals' desire for power through desirable images which instil superfluous needs in subjects, in the process gaining power over such individuals. After all, as Foucault puts it in the Preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*:

the major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism ... And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilise and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. (Foucault, 1983, p. xiii)

It is not difficult to understand "the very thing that dominates and exploits us," in light of what has been written so far, as capital in its neoliberal guise. All of this is already sufficient to persuade one that a specific kind of non-adaptative psychotherapy is required to disabuse one of the illusion that freedom is possible under neoliberal capitalism—at least what one might call "relative freedom," insofar as absolute or complete freedom is not within human reach. This much one already learned from Immanuel Kant in the 18th century: physically speaking, in the realm of *sensibility*, human beings are bound to the same laws as other bodies in time and space (like stones, we fall when we jump over a cliff; Kant, 1998). Morally speaking, humans are free to choose between good and evil, *but* only in the realm of *intelligibility* (Kant, 2002). Small wonder that someone like Jean-Paul Sartre (2001) concluded from this that human subjects are *unavoidably* free (in this limited sense)—even if you do not want to exercise free choice, this amounts to a (free) choice! However, when the impression is created that the choices one faces are morally neutral (Salecl, 2010), it is easy to be bamboozled into performing (online) actions that are ultimately deleterious to the unwitting individual's interests, as Zuboff implies where she writes that "surveillance capitalism" is:

A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales; [and that it comprises] A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 8)

What this amounts to is that through its "instrumentarian power," surveillance capitalism:

covertly claims private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data. Some data are used to improve services, but the rest are turned into computational products that predict your behaviour. These predictions are traded in a new futures market, where surveillance

capitalists sell certainty to businesses determined to know what we will do next. This logic was first applied to finding out which ads online will attract our interest, but similar practices now reside in nearly every sector—insurance, retail, health, education, finance and more—where personal experience is secretly captured and computed. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 16)

Predictive data, Zuboff informs us, are not only based on *monitoring* online behaviour, but also come from actually *directing* it, the way Facebook used “subliminal [online] cues” to influence users’ emotional states and behaviour. This formed the foundation for analyses of people’s affective conditions (feelings) which, in turn, enabled marketing agents to evoke (if not provoke) certain predictable behaviours when users are most receptive to suggestions or cues. The most morally dubious aspect of this state of affairs is that these “inventions were celebrated for being both effective and undetectable” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 16). To add insult to injury, the company known as Cambridge Analytica showed that these techniques could be implemented to determine political choice.

Corroborating Zuboff’s insights, Byung-Chul Han (2017) draws a comparison between Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the “panopticon” (the prison optimising prisoners’ constant visibility), employed by Foucault (1995) to characterise contemporary society as “carceral,” and the “digital panopticon” of the present:

Initially, the internet was celebrated as a medium of boundless liberty. Microsoft’s early advertising slogan—“Where do you want to go today?”—suggested unlimited freedom and mobility on the web. As it turned out, such euphoria was an illusion. Today, unbounded freedom and communication are switching over into total control and surveillance. More and more, social media resemble digital panoptica keeping watch over the social realm and exploiting it mercilessly. We had just freed ourselves from the disciplinary panopticon—then we threw ourselves into a new, and even more efficient, panopticon. (Han, 2017, p. 8)

Moreover, as Zuboff has revealed, the current panoptical practices on the part of powerful corporations such as Google and Facebook do not pertain merely to what one does in the present, or did in the past as something archived; they amplify their power by the future-directed strategy of influencing behaviour—something with tremendous political implications. The question that arises is: do individuals have the ability to free themselves from the insidious neoliberal power identified by the likes of Han, Zuboff, Verhaeghe, Parker and others? And could one perhaps think of the process of reclaiming one’s own power as a mode of emancipatory psychotherapy?

4 | NEOLIBERALISM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

But why claim that a certain kind of psychotherapy is needed in the face of the psychopolitical hold that neoliberalism (in the guise of “surveillance capitalism”) evidently has on denizens of the “network society” (Castells, 2010) today? Would it not be more accurate to say that the problem is an ethical one and that the agents of the neoliberal system should be held to account? I would resist such a suggestion, not because I believe for one moment that neoliberal practices can be ethically justified, but because of its obvious, and demonstrable, disregard for ethical or moral considerations (Bakan, 2004). At least since Machiavelli it has been clear that power usually trumps ethics. It is therefore up to contemporary subjects to free themselves from the multi-dimensionally deleterious power wielded by neoliberalism. Foucault gives one an indication of what the requisite kind of psychotherapy might be to enable one to free oneself from the clutches of neoliberalism. In the Preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) he writes:

This art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending, carries with it a certain number of essential principles which I would summarise as follows if I were to make this great book into a manual or guide to everyday life:

- Free political action from all unitary and totalising paranoia.
- Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchisation.
- Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.
- Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.
- Do not use thought to ground a political practice in Truth; nor political action to discredit, as mere speculation, a line of thought. Use political practice as an intensifier of thought, and analysis as a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action.
- Do not demand of politics that it restore the “rights” of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to “de-individualise” by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchised individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualisation.
- Do not become enamored of power. (Foucault, 1983, pp. xiii-xiv)

All of this seems to make perfect sense, at least in the (historical) context in which Foucault wrote it, and in which Deleuze and Guattari wrote *Anti-Oedipus* (which appeared in French in 1972), namely the situation in France surrounding the student protests in the late 1960s, with the memory of German and Italian fascism still fresh in people's minds. But today, fifty years later, we know—partly thanks to Deleuze and Guattari's insight into the “schizophrenising” process of capital in this very book (1983, pp. 33–34)—that Foucault's call to promote desire(s) by “proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction”, and to prioritise the “positive and multiple, difference ... flows ... [and] mobile arrangements,” was heeded and put into operation by capital *itself* with astonishing meticulousness and success. As Hardt and Negri remind one in *Empire* (2001), the world market flourishes on difference. In other words, capital is an inimitably adaptable force and, although Foucault's advice above is no doubt sound regarding fascism in its past historical embodiments, contemporary capital(ism) in its metamorphosed, protean guise would appear to be immune to these precepts because it is *already* functioning in accordance with them in exemplary fashion. Zygmunt Bauman imparts further comprehensibility to this state of affairs in his appropriately titled *Liquid Modernity*, where he says of capital in the present era (2000, p. 58): “Nowadays capital travels light—with cabin luggage only, which includes no more than a briefcase, a cellular telephone and a portable computer.” And, establishing the link between this state of affairs and power (Bauman, 2000, p. 11): “The prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement with its cumbersome corollaries of order-building.”

But, returning to Foucault, there are two of his exhortations above that may serve as clues to resisting the newly transmogrified beast of capital, even if it calls for some difficult interpretive work, namely, “[b]elieve that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic,” and “[d]o not become enamored of power.” Capital comes across as anything but sedentary; in fact, ostensibly it is as “nomadic” as can be, endlessly traversing potential spaces of and for profit, or even creating new spaces for this purpose, which is inseparable from the power it wields. But a brief glance at the meaning of “nomadic” for Deleuze and Guattari (1987) dispels this impression, unmasking capital as pseudo-nomadic at best. For them, the “nomadic” is precisely that which is most at home in predominantly “smooth”, “deterritorialised” (that is, “freed-up”) spaces, and which initiates “lines of flight” to escape the territorialisation of “striated [cratologically organised] spaces.” Capital can never be nomadic in this sense given its indissoluble attachment to power, even as it projects the ostensibly unambiguous image of a “nomadic” force that constantly, interminably deterritorialises spaces along “trajectories of flight” which lead to

novel territories to be deterritorialised in turn. How so? Capital cannot afford to lose territories it has conquered; hence its alliance with state apparatuses such as the law to shore up its acquisitions—no sooner has it deterritorialised a space than it reterritorialises it through legislation or treaties (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Olivier, 2014).

Hence, even if capital has today transformed itself into multifarious, adaptable, mercurially (and confusingly) pseudo-nomadic forms that seem to defy any attempt to “pin them down”—a constantly self-renewing series of incarnations of Marx and Engels’s “all that is solid melts into air” (1985, pp. 83–84)—it is inseparable from power. And it is this power that must be defused or neutralised whenever and wherever possible; which, however, appears to be a difficult if not impossible task given its mercurial adaptability. What would this amount to in concrete terms then, living under the neoliberal regime? Not to be “enamored of power” would, in the first place, index the rejection of the transmogrified fascism inherent in the “instrumentarian power” wielded by neoliberalism (or “surveillance capitalism”, to use its most recent nickname). By “transmogrified” fascism I mean the very effective disguise capitalist power obtained by its refusal to manifest itself as “power over”—as Byung-Chul Han (2017) has so cannily observed. Instead, as he perspicaciously points out, its most recent mask is that of enabling individuals’ self-empowerment, of turning the self into an incrementally better qualified entrepreneur—ostensibly for self-improvement, but actually for the expansion of capital and the further entrenchment of the culture of capitalism, that is, having cleverly been coerced into its service. And he raises the pertinent question: “whether we need to redefine freedom—to reinvent it—in order to escape from the fatal dialectic that is changing freedom into coercion” (2017, p. 2–3). Put differently: what is the therapeutic direction or “line of flight” to take?

Here one can get an initial clue about its implications in analogical terms from Heidegger who, in his epochal *Essay concerning technology* (1977) argued that our attitude towards technology should be an ambivalent one: we cannot return to pre-modern times by using ox-drawn ploughs instead of tractors, nor would we want to do without the convenience of (smart)phones and the like. *But*—and this is crucial—we should keep these technical devices at arm’s length. That is, by all means use them, but don’t let them “use you”; or, put differently, don’t allow the “essence of technology,” called “Enframing” (*Gestell*) by Heidegger, become the sole framework in terms of which you think and act. *Mutatis mutandis*, by all means empower yourself in every way possible by using capital, but don’t let capital use you. By all means learn the language or discourse of capital, *but don’t be imprisoned by it*. The fact that neoliberalism today enlists the *free self* to do its work of expanding its grip on society is a *pharmakon*—poison and cure—insofar as capital’s genius lies in exploiting this vaunted freedom, *but only for as long as the self plays the game according to capital’s rules, and participates in the discourse of capitalism*.

Instead, Byung-Chul Han (2017) advises us, shift the discursive terrain to what would appear, from the perspective of neoliberalism, as *idiocy*, recalling that an *idiot*, for the ancient Greeks, was a “private person” (as opposed to someone who participated in public life; see *online etymological dictionary* (www.etymonline.com): “from *idios* ‘one’s own’” [related to “idiom”). One might interpret this more freely as someone who inhabited the circle of his or her own “unintelligible” ideas, that is, someone who spoke “gibberish”—as the person who escaped from Plato’s (1991) mythical cave would surely have seemed to be speaking to the still-shackled ones inside the cave upon her or his return from the outside, sunlit world after the initial escape from the cave. This would explain Plato’s remark, that they would “kill the man who attempts to release and lead [them] up” (1991, p. 196), out of the cave of conventional wisdom; after all, the expression of idiosyncratic views, to the detriment of those in power, always entails a risk. Plato’s lesson is that one should be forewarned: just as this person would risk her or his life by (presumably) trying to share with the cave-dwellers the news about the world outside the cave—because he or she would have to resort to a language foreign to theirs, adapted as the latter is to the shadows on the cave-wall—so, too, would one who attempts to convince the unwitting slaves of capital of their true status as helots, because her language would be unintelligible *unless* they are already receptive to it.

Here one encounters a surprising resonance between Plato’s insight into the incommensurability between the cave-dwellers’ ontological-linguistic framework and that of someone who has surpassed its conventionality, and

Han's notion of emancipating oneself from the paradoxical power of capital(ism) by turning to "idiocy"—with the difference that Han detects significant therapeutic value in this notion. Citing Deleuze, he observes:

One of the roles of philosophy is to play the fool, or idiot. From its inception, philosophy has been closely tied to idiotism. Every philosopher who has brought forth a new idiom—a new language, a new way of thinking—has necessarily been an idiot. Only the idiot has access to the wholly Other. Idi-otism discloses a field of immanence of events and singularities for thought; this field eludes subjectivation and psychologisation altogether. (Han, 2017, p. 81)

As a "technology of domination," Han (2017, p. 78) argues that the psychopolitics of neoliberalism employs "psychological programming and steering" to preserve and fortify the existing economic system. This is why one has to embark on a "praxis of freedom," which entails "de-psychologisation" as a way of neutralising neoliberal psychopolitics. After all, contrary to the impression created by the success of neoliberal "entrepreneurialism of the self," he points out (corroborating my earlier statement in this regard), it is a "means of submission" (p. 78). And significantly, the de-psychologisation of the subject unlocks an existential mode that is nameless—"an unwritten future" (p. 78). The turn to a praxis of "idiocy" reinforces the inauguration of such a future beyond neoliberalism.

This may seem counter-intuitive, but the history of philosophy amounts to nothing less than a history of "idiotisms," of which Socrates is an exemplar—recall his famous "*docta ignorantia*," or admission that his only knowledge is that "he does not know" (Han, 2017). If Descartes also comes across as such an idiot with his *Cogito ergo sum* (arrived at through "methodical doubt"), however, Deleuze (as quoted in Han, 2017, p. 81) disabuses one of this thought by contrasting Descartes, an "old idiot who wanted indubitable truths," with the "new idiot" who "wills the absurd." Again—if this seems to run counter to all one's epistemic instincts, recall that to "de-psychologise" oneself today entails liberating oneself from the ostensibly self-empowering, but in fact enslaving, psychopolitics of neoliberalism—which, analogous to Plato's cave-escapee, means surpassing the imprisoning effect of conventionalism.

To grasp what is at stake here, Heidegger (1978) comes to one's aid again heuristically with his insistence that in the social realm of "everydayness," where the "they"—society in its conventional, fashion-obsessed guise, characterised by "idle talk," "ambiguity" and "curiosity"—sets the tone of "inauthentic" existence, the only way to gain a sense of one's singular self is to listen to the *silent* voice, or "call," of one's conscience. This call is "silent" because characteristically, one's conscience (which transcends the mores of a time- and convention-bound society) cannot "speak" in terms of normalising discourses. In this manner, Heidegger (1978) claims, through "anxiety" one is called "back" to oneself, and to the most singularising experience possible: the realisation of one's "ownmost possibility" of non-existence. That is to say one's unavoidable death, which is an "uncertain certainty" (you know *that* you will die, but not *when*). In Heidegger's words (1978, p. 294): "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein [Heidegger's term for the human being]". To face this ineluctable possibility "anxiously", and "resolutely" is to free oneself of the hold that the "they," or "everydayness," has on you—not in the sense of being able to avoid this realm, or bypass it (which is impossible), but insofar as this enables one to become one's own singularising "pro-ject" (*Entwurf*), instead of allowing oneself to "fall" into convention. Today, ironically, this is the discursive convention of making oneself into an "entrepreneurial project," which is hardly singularising—on the contrary. As Byung-Chul Han (2015, 2017) has indicated, what it means to be conventional today is to allow oneself to be swept along by the wave of sameness-promoting, hyper-positivity of the competitive Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, self-improvement, entrepreneurial society, which results in burnout and other neuro-illnesses.

Learning to listen to one's conscience, as Heidegger indicates, is tantamount to discovering one's singularity, which is a precondition for being able to liberate oneself from "everydayness" which, today, means that of neoliberal practices. Crucially, permeating such practices, which are today structured in such a manner as to ensure optimal

financial profits through the entrepreneurial dedication of neoliberal subjects, is a careful avoidance of the topic of death, as indeed it has always been in conventional circles: “*The ‘they’ does not permit us the courage for anxiety in the face of death* [italics in original]” (Heidegger, 1978, p. 298). And ultimately, it is in the *anxious* and yet *resolute* confrontation of one’s own inescapable and singularising death—because no one else can die for you; it is yours alone to face (Heidegger, 1978)—that one encounters the most enduring therapeutic liberation from the psychopolitics of neoliberalism. Importantly, Heidegger points to the paradoxical situation that: “Resoluteness ... does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating ‘I’ ... Resoluteness brings the Self right into its current concerned Being-alongside what is ready-to-hand, and pushes it into solicitous Being with Others” (1978, p. 344).

Why is this paradoxical? Recall that the notion of the “singularity” of *Dasein* (every human being), which is fundamental to Heidegger’s argument, is crucial for what has been argued in this paper. Not surprisingly, it is integral to Han’s argument too, as I shall show below. But importantly, as Heidegger reminds one powerfully above, subjects who have managed to free themselves from the tyranny of the “they” and its suffocating “everydayness” do not, in so doing, become isolated—or in his terms, “a free-floating ‘I’”. Put differently, the *singular* person—or the “idiot”—is not in principle detached from others, as the example of Socrates (or Nietzsche, for that matter; Han, 2015) demonstrates. To be able to alert others to the “wholly other,” she or he invents a new language or discourse, a novel “idiom” (which is fitting for an “idiot”), in this way creating the possibility of a new community, or a future people beyond the psychologising constraints of the present incarnation of the “they”—that is, neoliberal society. Byung-Chul Han puts this in an amplifying perspective:

The idiot is a modern-day heretic. Etymologically, *heresy* means “choice.” Thus, the heretic is someone who commands *free choice*: the courage to deviate from orthodoxy. As a heretic, the idiot represents a figure of resistance opposing the violence of consensus. The idiot preserves the magic of the outsider. Today, in light of increasingly coercive conformism, it is more urgent than ever to heighten *heretical consciousness*. Idiocy stands opposed to the neoliberal power of domination: total communication and total surveillance. The idiot does not “communicate.” Indeed, he communicates with the incommunicable. As such, the idiot veils himself in silence. Idiocy erects *spaces for guarding silence ... quiet, and solitude*, where it is still possible to say what really deserves to be said [italics in original]. (2017, p. 83).

It is fitting that Han credits Deleuze with having realised the value of “such a *politics of silence*” (p. 83) as far back as 1995, and understandably so—few recent thinkers understood the power dynamics of neoliberalism as well as Deleuze, as his well-known *Postscript on Control Societies* (1995) testifies. Yet again one is confronted with something counter-intuitive: resisting the suffocating conformism of neoliberal society through the “free choice” of heretical consciousness makes sense, but a withdrawal into *silence*? That seems impossible, and counter-productive to boot. On reflection they don’t seem that far apart, however. Think of what orthodoxy entails in contemporary society: endless texting and tweeting on smartphones, interminable “liking” (or its opposite) on Facebook, and so on. Small wonder Sherry Turkle (2011) alludes to “performance exhaustion” on the part of Facebook users! In the midst of this veritable cacophony of electronic “(pseudo-) communications,” would a bit of quiet, a smidgen of silence and solitude, not create the opportunity for rediscovering the precondition for, and hence the power of, saying something sensible—such as that which the idiot who engenders a new idiom, according to Han, articulates? Surrounded by an excess of (mostly vacuous) electronically mediated text-exchanges among millions of users, silence is therapeutic—and may just prepare one for rediscovering one’s “self,” as the practitioners of meditation have claimed for a long time (Hanh, 1987). In a society that never seems to come to a standstill to recollect itself, this seems to me to be sound advice, parallel to Gil Germain’s (2017) humorous but profoundly insightful suggestion—among several other such practical proposals—that in our

technocratic society (another face of neoliberalism), where one is constantly urged to intervene technologically in the flow of events, it would be in our own interest to discover the wisdom of the exhortation: "Don't just do something; stand there!"

5 | CONCLUSION

Returning to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), in the light of the preceding considerations one can finally attempt to articulate the consequences and implications of their notion of "schizoanalysis" for the therapeutic exercise of surpassing the "self-enhancing" exhortations of neoliberalism. It is pertinent to the present theme that they attribute a revolutionary function to schizoanalysis—to wit, a "schizoid revolutionary pole," which is distinct from its opposite pole of "libidinal investment," which pertains to "the paranoiac, reactionary, and fascisising pole" (p. 366). In their discussion that follows, it is apparent that along this trajectory schizoanalysis may lead to the overthrow of (a certain kind of) power, which would exhibit, in varying modes and degrees, the structure of fascism. Their observation (1983, p. 367) that the "fascisising pole" of libidinal investment is "defined by subjugated groups," while the "schizoid revolutionary pole" is marked "by subject groups," resonates with what has been argued about neoliberalism in this paper. It is clear that they conceive of schizoanalysis as a practice capable of overthrowing the social and psychic shackles that all kinds of "territorialisations" and "(re)codings" (such as entrepreneurialism) of social life impose on people, subjugating them to the weight of anaesthetising "identification." This can take many forms, from constricting bureaucracy through political totalitarianism to an ostensible "free market system," which is just as capable as other politico-economic systems of "ensnaring" and subjugating people through the mechanisms that are inseparable from it (some of which have been discussed above). Given the apparently ineluctable tendency of individual subjects to identify with some or other "object of desire"—"the people," "the state," "the party," "the church," "the market," or "the entrepreneur"—it would seem to me that one might understand Deleuze and Guattari as saying that the subject's freedom comes at the price of intermittent points of identification. These must be repeatedly subjected to new processes of schizoanalytic dismantling, aimed at these constraining 'identities', and liberating the subject's desire in the process.

In light of the evidence adduced above from a variety of sources, all indications are that at present, the subject's "desire"—in the previously specified sense—is hitched to the project of neoliberalism, which has produced deeply unequal and pervasively anaesthetised societies globally. And among those who can afford the trappings of the "information (or network) society", such as smartphones, it has fostered a pseudo-ethos of positivity, self-enhancement and self-marketing (in the service of capitalism) that leads to ailments such as depression and burnout. Moreover, the members of this society yield the details of their most private lives in online spaces such as Facebook, unwittingly supplying these to sophisticated surveillance algorithms devised by the agents of these social networking sites that anticipate, predict and sometimes manipulate their future online as well as "real-world" actions. The schizoanalytic approach to one's subjectivity, advocated by Deleuze and Guattari, putatively enables one to raze the identity foisted upon one as a subject of neoliberalism, which may motivate subjects to reject socio-economic inequality and promote equality in a variety of ways. In liberating one of fascist tendencies in the pursuit of power, it is also capable of alerting one to the "silent call of conscience" in relation to the need to surpass the "everydayness" of neoliberalism, and—perhaps most fundamentally—of instilling in one the awareness that the hyper-communication of the neoliberal Twittersphere is drowning out the silence required to reflect, "idiotically," on the possible contours of a new idiom, capable of inaugurating a future beyond neoliberalism. The question that remains is: are contemporary subjects receptive to the promise of such drastic psychotherapy?

REFERENCES

- Bakan, J. (2004). *The corporation: The pathological pursuit of profit and power*. London, UK: Constable.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

- BusinessTech. (2019). 58 people are murdered every day in South Africa—These are the worst areas. Retrieved 23 September 2019, from <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/340577/58-people-are-murdered-every-day-in-south-africa-these-are-the-worst-areas/>
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- De Sutter, L. (2018). *Narcocapitalism: Life in the age of anaesthesia*. B. Norman, Trans. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1995). "Postscript on control societies". In *Negotiations 1972–1990*. M. Joughin, Trans. (pp. 177–182). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Vol. 1) (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H.R. Lane, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Vol. 2) (B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx*. P. Kamuf, Trans. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Federici, S. (2013). With philosophy and terror: Transforming bodies into labor power. In A. Marvakis, J. Motzkau, D. Painter, R. Ruto-Korir, G. Sullican, S. Triliva, & M. Wieser (Eds.), *Doing psychology under new conditions*. Concord, Ontario: Captus Press Inc.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*. (R. Hurley Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1983). Preface. In G. Deleuze, & F. Guattari (Eds.), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Vol. 1) (pp. xi–xiv) (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, M. (1992). *The history of sexuality, Vol. 2: The use of pleasure*. (R. Hurley, Trans.). London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Germain, G. (2017). *Thinking about technology: How the technological mind misreads reality*. New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- Han, B.-C. (2015). *The burnout society*. (E. Butler, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*. (E. Butler, Trans.). London, UK: Verso.
- Hanh, T. N. (1987). *The miracle of mindfulness. An introduction to the practice of meditation*. (Mobi Ho, Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *The question concerning technology and other essays*. (W. Lovitt, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.
- Heidegger, M. (1978). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason*. (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2002). *Critique of practical reason*. (W. S Pluhar, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: The Hackett Publishing Company.
- Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Lacan, J. (1997). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan—Book VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis 1959–1960*. (D. Porter, Trans.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1985). *The communist manifesto*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Olivier, B. (2014). The subject: Deleuze/Guattari or Lacan? *Phronimon: Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities*, 15(1), 46–66. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/2212>
- Parker, I. (2011). *Lacanian psychoanalysis. Revolutions in subjectivity*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. (A. Goldhammer, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Plato (1991). *The republic of Plato*. (A. Bloom, Trans.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Salecl, R. (2010). *Choice*. London: Profile Books.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2001). Freedom. In S. Priest (Ed.), *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic writings* (pp. 177–190). London, UK: Routledge.
- Stiegler, B. (2013). *Uncontrollable societies of disaffected individuals: Disbelief and discredit*, Vol. 2. (D. Ross, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Stiegler, B. (2019). *The age of disruption: Technology and madness in computational capitalism*. (D. Ross, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Verhaeghe, P. (2014). *What about me? The struggle for identity in a market-based society*. London: Scribe Publications.
- Wilkinson, R. G. (2005). *The impact of inequality: How to make sick societies healthier*. New York: The New Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Bert Olivier's principal position is that of Honorary Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He has published academic articles and books across a wide variety of disciplines, including philosophy, art theory, architecture, literature, psychoanalytic theory, cinema, communication studies and social theory. Bert received the South African Stals Prize for Philosophy in 2004, and a Distinguished Professorship from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2012. He is also an NRF B-rated researcher, and writes regularly on the Mailand Guardian's Thoughtleader-website.

How to cite this article: Olivier B. The psychopolitics of (and psychotherapy required by) neoliberalism. *Psychother Politics Int.* 2020;18:e1519. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1519>