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Lacan's Fifth and Unfinished Discourse: Capitalism's Alchemist Dream

Why is it that we sometimes think of Lacan as Marxist when is so assertively Freudian? Perhaps it is because Lacan perceives Marx rather than Freud as the discoverer of the symptom and furthermore places Marx as central to his fifth Capitalist discourse, in contrast with his previous discourses which are all inspired by Freud. In this way Lacan's final and arguably unfinished Capitalist discourse stands apart from all the others, yet at the same time it reveals contradictions and possible parallels with them as it attempts to unravel the dialectical tensions between the problematic production and consumption of meaning.

The centrality of Marx in discovering the symptom follows from Lacan's conceptualization of Marxian surplus-value as "the cause of the desire which an economy makes its principle".¹ Elaborating on Adam Smith, Marx theorises the process of capitalism as a science which seeks to enhance one's enjoyment, and whose kernel of surplus-value guarantees the continuation of capitalism. Lacan interprets Marx's principle of capitalism as "the extensive, and hence insatiable, production of the failure-to-enjoy"², where surplus-value is on the one hand "accumulated to build up the means of production as capital" and "on the other it extends that consumption without which this production would be pointless, precisely for its inability to procure an enjoyment such that it can slow down".³

¹ Lacan (1970 [2003]). *Radiofonía*. J. Zahar [Trans.]. *Outros escritos*. Rio de Janeiro, p. 434. Lacan goes on: "that of the extensive production, therefore insatiable, of that lack-in-*jouissance*. It is accumulated on the one hand to increase the means of this production on the side of capital. It extends consumption, on the other hand, without which this production would be vain, precisely from its ineptitude in procuring a *jouissance* that would allow it to slow down."

² *Ibid.*, p. 39

³ *Ibid.* Marx's account of surplus-value is not restricted to, on the one hand, the productivity of human labour and on the other to the enhancement of capital, but further identifies this surplus as reliant on the dual character of the commodity being produced: that this is valued not only for immediate consumption in the name of satisfying desire for enjoyment, but also for its exchangeability with other commodities. When the commodity is human

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This contradiction lying at the heart of capitalism provides its cogent internal force conditioned by time and space, where the production of surplus-value and of surplus-enjoyment coincide with the risk of failure-to-enjoy. Although surplus-enjoyment and its anticipation can speed up or slow down, when it is relentlessly and insatiably pursued with no possibility of remediation for lack of enjoyment, there nevertheless remains in this failure to enjoy, this lack, an implicit will towards *jouissance*. The more one consumes in the pursuit of pleasure, the more enjoyment of this consumption reveals itself as also enjoyment of the pursuit. In this way lack is integral to both enjoyment and its pursuit.⁴

Although enjoyment of one's lack is an implicit tenet of capitalism, its pursuit appears a conundrum because enjoying one's lack is simply not always enjoyable, a contradiction which cannot be ignored. The answer here might be that since the will towards *jouissance* is an inherent condition for the speaking being, the enjoyment of one's lack necessarily remains a *bona fide* part of subjectivity.

In addressing subjective lack of enjoyment Lacan proposes a discourse that is both independently self-supporting and one which the speaking being can make its own. It is here that the parallel between Lacan and Marx breaks down. For Marx, enjoyment is imbedded and dependent on hidden social forces whereas for Lacan it is a question of problematic, subjective non-rapport which for the speaking being does not have a social origin, nor ever could have. For Lacan, even where the social bond is truly implicated and recognized, for example in economic exchange, social origin is never just *social* because it is fundamentally a product of the Symbolic Order.

Lacan distinguishes between the Capitalist discourse and that of the Master when stating, "Marx had not set about completing [his theory of capitalism], giving it its subject, the proletariat, thanks to which the discourse of capitalism

labour purchased at its exchange value, there nevertheless remains a surplus of labour time which presents as an increased exchange value, a surplus-value.

⁴ Todd McGowan (2016) offers in *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (Columbia University Press) a robust theorisation of lack within the Capitalist discourse as not only crucial to the will to enjoy, but that it is enjoyment. Furthermore, Samo Tomšič (2015) suggests in *Capitalist Unconscious* (Verso) that the Capitalist discourse is a fake one, manufactured for the purpose of inserting the libido into social relations.

spread wherever the form of the Marxist State held sway”.⁵ What characterizes the Capitalist discourse, claims Lacan, is “the banishment [of castration] from all the fields of the symbolic...”, so that “every order, every discourse which relates to capitalism leaves aside what we can call simply the things of love”.⁶ We can envisage the Marxist state as being, like capital, located under this typology wherein the symptom is precluded in order to ensure the continuation of the state. In confronting capitalism Marx identifies the subject as uniquely proletarian, a pathology which the subject, in needing to be cured, fully supports, rather than remaining an inscription of Adam Smith’s rational economic man, doomed to carrying the symptom of pursuing surplus-enjoyment towards its inevitable consequence, exploitation.

Lacan takes this up not only as a subjective struggle, but also as part of his larger inquiry as to whether there could be a politics which does not keep desire at bay. Such a theoretical politics would have to be either totally distinct from the state which is merely its’ manager, or a politics devoid of the state in that both it and the state are one and the same. Although these positions are barely conceivable as actualities, they do provide a platform from which to think politics as a praxis. For example, in considering how the Marxist state could be hystericized, Lacanians must inevitably turn to the Analyst’s discourse: how could desire be kept alive in the well-oiled state mechanical machine in which every subject is compliant? How does one live within such a politics and at the same time engage with the problem of one’s desire? Here we might look to Lacan’s lack of sexual relation as being an apt metaphor for the social bond whose absence similarly allows interpretation of symptoms as based on desire and therefore on lack. In light of this, perhaps our questions can be reframed as how can politics and desire coexist as one ethical form?

⁵ Lacan, J. (1971-72 [2011]). *Talking to Brick Walls: A Series of Presentations in the Chapel at Sainte-Anne Hospital*. A. Price [Trans.]. Cambridge: Polity, p. 96.

⁶ *Ibid.* What we can glean elsewhere from Lacan is that enjoyment in terms of “the things of love” is value in the absolute, in other words, detached from use and need. This is particularly so at the level of the non-rapport where man’s enjoyment as value in use, is always phallic, whereas that of the woman, being exchange-value, is non-phallic. Samo Tomšič (2016) in *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (Routledge) speak of this inherent contradiction between where “sexuality [is revealed] without the inexistence of the sexual relation” (p. 149), that is sexuality and its commodification emerge via repression.

But first, how are we to interpret these symptoms? Although *jouissance* associated with apathy and ambivalence has always been a part of subjectivity, it is today appearing more and more in the clinic.⁷ Compared with the symptoms which dominated in Freud and Lacan's clinic (hysteria, obsession and phobias), contemporary apathy and ambivalence differ in not signifying some sort of command to address the Other. As with addiction, there is an immediate *jouissance* associated with apathy and ambivalence, which perhaps indicates resistance to the social. Furthermore, unlike traditional symptoms of neurosis which pass through a battery of signifiers, these contemporary symptoms are neither addressed to the Other nor need its support in attaining *jouissance*. We could even say that addiction, apathy and ambivalence deliberately obliterate the Other as mediator of *jouissance*, so that in obtaining the desired object, the Other is not passed through in the passage towards *jouissance*. This by-passing characterizes contemporary symptoms and points towards direct access to *jouissance* whose signification is either repressed or absent. Why contemporary symptoms present in this way is perhaps because the social bond has taken a new form in so far as we are no longer living through the discourse of the Master but rather the discourse of the Capitalist.

Bearing in mind that it is a task of psychoanalysis to analyse the conditions in which discourses emerge and are characterized, it is important not to forget the complexities of symptoms which are contradictory. It seems that the subject of today's symptoms harbours a certain perverse disdain towards investment in the Other. Yet even the figure of the Pervert needs to be heard with regard to how its' law is structured, a requirement which renders the Perverse subject obedient to a meaningful law albeit not that of the Other. Here we can say that the Perverse subject of contemporary symptoms is not by-passing the law of the Other because it appears meaningless or senseless, but because this by-passing is fully accepted as itself *jouissance*.⁸

⁷ Stephanie Swales and Carol Owen provide an excellent overview of these current clinical phenomena in *Psychoanalysing Ambivalence with Freud and Lacan: On and Off the Couch*, 2020, Routledge.

⁸ Todd McGowan (2019, *Écrits* Conference) gives an account of this by-passing as a way of fully submitting to the injunction of the law, claiming that the subject gives representation where meaning fails and that it is via representation where satisfaction can be found, albeit momentarily.

Arguably this is a manifestation of the Master's discourse,⁹ where a premise can become law simply because it is uttered by one who is masterful, even if this is the subject. Discourse is language in process which bears the imprint of conflict and contradiction. Lacan's typology of discourse allows the variety of discourses that exist – for example, those of governance, patriarchy and environment – to come under one of five intersecting discourses, of the Master, the University, the Hysteric, the Analyst and the Capitalist. Each discourse articulates agency relations variously and specifically. The discourse of the Master is hierarchical, subjugating all other subject positions to the rule of the Master, whether this be the king, the name of the father, the law and so on. The discourse of the University (or of knowledge), far from being autonomous as one might expect, serves that of the Master which today is capitalism. The discourse of the Hysteric, by contrast, questions the agency as well as the knowledge of the Master and is willing to encounter resistance in doing so. Yet at the same time any subversive statement, even one manifesting as a revolutionary subjective symptom also mirrors the symptom of the Master. Thus action in opposition to a particular ideological discourse is still caught up within that discourse, for example anti-capitalists are trapped within the discourse of capitalism, and so on.

Rather than pointing towards a particular dominant discourse, what such symptoms reveal is lack. The structural effect of discourse is founded on the subject's employment of the Master signifier as an instrument indicating not only mastery but also that this is the sole apparatus for acquiring knowledge. As well as being in service to the University discourse, the Analyst's discourse functions as mediator between the Hysteric's discourse and that of the Master. In the course of such mediation, what is revealed is that the questioning or criticism of the Master yields, surprisingly, a relativized Master's position which, in consequence of its loss of autonomy in succumbing to questions, produces a signifier of its own. It is with this relativizing of the master signifier in mind

⁹ One way of interpreting Lacan's discourse of the master is in terms of his definition of the subject: "the signifier (S1) represents the barred subject for another signifier (S2)." Insofar as no signifier ever manages to name the subject because the signifier can't signify itself (Seminar XIV), a remainder is always produced, something always slips away (*objet a*). This is what gives rise to the repetitive nature of the symptom in the universe of mastery. The subject's unconscious produces a number of signifying coagulations in an attempt to fill the lack (*objet a*) that can never be filled within the symbolic order. These signifying coagulations are symptoms of the Hysteric.

that Lacan's remarks in his 1972 Milan lecture regarding the discourse of the Capitalist, should be considered:

What is a discourse? It is what ... in the ordering of what can be produced by the existence of language, makes some social link function ... there must be at least two signifiers. This means, the signifier insofar as it functions as an element ... the signifier insofar as it is the mode by which the world is structured, the world of the speaking being, which is to say, all knowledge.¹⁰

Given this definition of discourse as a productive ordering of all knowledge through relations between signifiers, certain clinical implications emerge regarding how discourse determines the structuring of the social. Lacan proposes four signifiers to indicate specific determinants behind the mutable relations which comprise the different discourses (Figure 1).

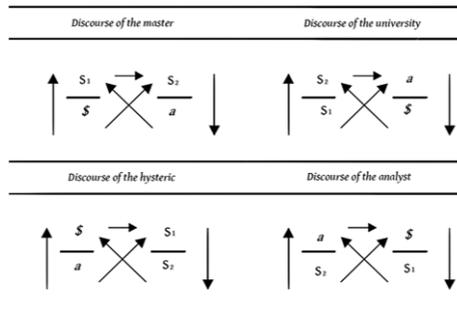


Figure 1: The Four Discourses

These are the master signifier (S_1), the signifier for knowledge (S_2), the divided subject ($\$$) and surplus-*jouissance* (a). In the case of the Master's discourse, the function of the master signifier (S_1) is to organize the social field by establishing dominance over it. Simply put, the master signifier commands. The signifier for knowledge (S_2) both possesses and hides the truth that that the Master is just another subject divided between reason and the unconscious subversion of in-

¹⁰ Lacan, J. (1972). *On Psychoanalytic Discourse: The Capitalist Discourse*. Stone, J.W. [Trans.]. University of Missouri, p. 12.

tegrity and control (\$), while at the same time producing surplus-*jouissance* (a). The signifier for knowledge (S2), the University discourse, addresses the signifier of surplus-*jouissance* in the form of the *objet a*. We can think of this as a partial object, one which does not really exist but is nevertheless constituted within the Symbolic Order, for example the movement of force between things is afforded an object-like character. In its function, the *objet a* elicits a confrontation with one's lack, what one does not possess yet perceives oneself as possessing.¹¹ This produces the divided subject (\$) who attempts to cling on to the *objet a* yet simultaneously keeps it at bay. In this way, the *objet a* operates as the master signifier for the Analyst's discourse and we can understand the trajectory of this discourse as a precise articulation of the agent. Hence the Analyst's discourse addresses the split subject, producing the *objet a*, while the split subject (\$) in addressing the Master's discourse, produces the signifier for knowledge (S2).

Regarding the discourse of the Capitalist, Lacan seems initially to understand it as a conflation with the University discourse.¹² Yet at the same time, he positions the Capitalist discourse alongside the Master's as the most plausible. Later on in his Milan lecture, Lacan comes up with a more decisive and discursive formula. Instead of identifying it as a mixture of the University and the Master's discourses, he calls the Capitalist discourse the most ingenious discourse to date, creating something like an "an eternal motion machine".¹³ This becomes apparent when one looks at his formalisation of the Capitalist discourse. Its structure closely resembles the questioning of and rebelling against the Master, which in turn reveals that the Master (unlike the Hysteric) is a fake because in questioning the knowledge signifier it excludes questioning its own master signifier. Such questioning leads to the generation of surplus-*jouissance*, ironically dependent upon the master signifier, which is why the Capitalist discourse is the one in which we are all hystericized, like it or not.

¹¹ A very recognisable example of this desire for self-possession is when one proclaims to be standing in the name of a particular ethical character such as "I am honest", "I am empathic". This is however no more an attempt to bolster the chosen master signifier in so far as, because we are split subjects such declarations do not preclude us from behaving in ways which are dishonest or uncaring.

¹² Lacan, J. (1969-70 [2007]). *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. R. Grigg [Trans.]. New York: WW Norton, pp. 31-32.

¹³ Lacan, J. (1972). *On Psychoanalytic Discourse: The Capitalist Discourse*. Stone, J.W. [Trans.]. University of Missouri, p. 11.

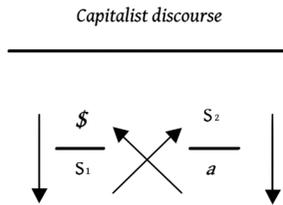


Figure 2: The Capitalist Discourse

The discourse of the Capitalist (Figure 2) postulates that the superego/master signifier (S1) commands the divided subject (\$) to enjoy (*a*) in the form of commodities (S2). Here the key thing to notice is where the master-signifier (S1) and the battery of signifiers, commodities (S2) are unified. It is structurally impossible for there to ever be a direct relation between S1 and S2 because they are both always separated by a third term, either the divided subject (\$) or *jouissance* (*a*). Here, fantasy functions as a supplement, providing a schema where lack is transformed into desire: as the desiring subject under the Capitalist discourse chases lack, this chasing decenters the now disavowed subject of desire.

The Master signifiers at work today seek to manage and discipline lack. For example belief, in uniting desire with the Law, is a way of imagining a tangible but possible certainty. The Master signifier functions further as a limiting field and prohibiting agent sustaining desire, for example empathy is an emerging master signifier in today's climate of increasing liberal tolerance where anguish and outrage are the most expected reactions.¹⁴ Here the body provides an authoritative locus for desire because it constitutes a reality, a way of managing *jouissance*. Desire and the body are implicitly linked not only to the promise of *jouissance* but also to its containment. Desire marks the body and enables the subject to speak about its' possibility notwithstanding that for the subject the body is unknown and unpredictable. Desire becomes a form for the body in that it is both a specter of possible desire and a location in which various meanings

¹⁴ We are increasingly encouraged to become faithful servants in portraying empathy, even when we feel none. Stephanie Swales' (2019, *Écrits* Conference) theorisation of empathy as an extimate fantasy of caring maintains that in so far as capitalism fosters dissatisfaction, it initiates empathy as an identification with the Other in a fantasy of empathy, a narcissistic reduction of another's experience to one's own.

can be construed. The body both regulates and contains *jouissance* as it is revealed through the staging of lack and desire in the context of the social bond.

Psychoanalysis provides a way of interrogating symptoms of the subject's attempt to describe desire which is a substitute for the void. Perhaps as a result of today's mediatized technology the contemporary subject presents with a number of social symptoms arising from this alienation, for example the rise in fundamentalist religion and identity politics. Yet these do not hold much traction for the subject and remain more or less empty signifiers, the result of Symbolic inefficiency: dogmatism, nationalism, racism and so on simply speak to lack and in providing an array of dubious ideologies, are counterpoints to desire.

The problem of understanding desire as intrinsic to capitalism is one faced all the time by the subject of desire. From this Hysteric position, understanding desire is characterized by the impetus to respond to the Capitalist discourse in an attempt to structure and capture desire. That this, of course, cannot be done produces in the subject a void of anxiety in which the fantasy of fulfilling desire is all the time being staged. In this staging lies a promise of subjective transformation because when sublimating desire in the form of consumer objects, the subject is deemed to be acting (for a time at least) as if the sublimated object is not only enough but more than enough. Thus through consumption this sublimated object of desire becomes a surplus of itself. What it was promising but ultimately fails to deliver is a by-passing of the Other and in this we can discern both a method and a literacy of desire within the Masters discourse. However, this is a paradoxical position because for desire to be talked about and given symbolic meaning, it must be attached to a Master of one's choice, notwithstanding that a Master has already been constituted for the subject.

In the Capitalist discourse we get an entirely different set of permutations, where we no longer have only the discourses of the Master, University, Analyst and Hysteric. This suggests that the social relation formalized hitherto by Lacanian discourse theory is fundamentally different under capitalism. It is also worth noting that the Capitalist discourse sits apart from the other four discourses which are always in a relation to one another. When we consider the Capitalist discourse, it appears to present as the master signifier of the previous four discourses; whereas each earlier discourse relies upon rotation in order to transi-

tion to a different agent, the Capitalist discourse stands alone.¹⁵ By way of background to the Capitalist discourse, Stijn Vanheule says that

[i]n the late 1960s and 1970s, Lacan occasionally discussed the impact of capitalist culture on subject formation. In line with his general idea that the human subject comes into existence through the play of signifiers, which originate from the symbolic order, in this period of his work he also assumed that the symbolic order of capitalism moulds the subject in a particular way. Capitalist culture affects the way we deal with distress and suffering; it shapes the way we relate to others; it determines the way the unconscious functions; and it influences the kind of request for help that an individual might extend to a psychoanalyst. Indeed, early in the nineteen seventies he indicated that the capitalist discourse had started to replace the traditional discourse of the master.¹⁶

In capitalist culture the command to enjoy is paramount because the divided subject is continually searching for a better *jouissance*. However for each commodity consumed the divided subject experiences disappointment and is thus compelled to pursue yet another commodity in order to fulfil the super-ego's continuing imperative to enjoy. Moreover, the more we obey the super-ego's imperative, the more guilt we feel for obedience to something which we know will give us only momentary pleasure. This guilt and anxiety is relied upon by capitalism for its continuation and is where, for Lacan, Marxist theory engages capitalism as a praxis of repetition and surplus. Jan Völker (2018) takes this further in relation to whatever is problematic to value, that when theory engages praxis, all it too produces is repetition.¹⁷

Because of its reliance on repetition the Capitalist discourse perfectly situates compulsive symptoms of capitalism such as hoarding and endless buying, which clearly suggest a subject who is accumulating for its own sake rather than

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¹⁵ In Seminar XVII, when discussing the discourse of the Master, Lacan says that we are seeing Masters less and less, which is rather like saying that the universe of Oedipus is disappearing.

¹⁶ Vanheule, S. (2016). Capitalist Discourse, Subjectivity and Lacanian Psychoanalysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, pp. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5145885/> <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01948>

¹⁷ Jan Völker (2018). Marx' Affirmation. *Vortrag im Rahmen der Ringvorlesung Warum nicht Marx?*. Freie Universität Berlin, July 21. Unpublished, untranslated manuscript.

for any use-value. Perhaps the compulsive symptoms of anorexia and bulimia also fit in here, with the qualification that, unlike the hoarder, the anorexic/bulimic subjects' refusal of the command to enjoy is nevertheless a desperate attempt to maintain a place for desire.

In the universe of mastery, the discourse of the Hysteric is organized around identification with a master signifier (S₁) in the form of a leader, for example a country, a political movement, a God and so on, the movement here being from the divided subject to the subject of mastery (($\$ \rightarrow S_1$). These symbolic identifications pass through the intermediary of the Other who is always imagined. Under capitalism the subject is inevitably an addict who furthers symbolic identification through attempting to put a substance/consumerable in the place of the master-signifier as a way of overcoming constitutive lack, by making the lack's illusive object into something tangible. Here the addict is the perfect capitalist subject ($\$ \ll S_1$), one that in attempting to assume self-mastery presumes there is no need to pass through the mediation of the Other in reaching for *jouissance*. Indeed through this particular relation with the object of addiction, the addict is sated in a *jouissance* that is attempting to escape the castrating effects of the signifier (S₂).

Whereas in the universe of mastery, desire and deferral as a defense against *jouissance* predominate, the universe of capitalism is awash in individual *jouissance*. Perhaps this accounts for the attention we today give to certain depressive disorders, for as Lacan and Freud argued, the closer the subject is to the *jouissance* of the Other (that is, the objet a) the greater is subjective anxiety. Similarly, melancholia arises when desire is erased and the subject fades into the *jouissance* of the Other.¹⁸ Although the universe of mastery is characterized by the questioning Hysteric, this relation is increasingly absent in the universe of capitalism where the Other, through which enjoyment must be mediated, increasingly disappears, to be replaced by the subject's direct relationship to the object. Because under capitalism this relationship is inevitably confused by sur-

¹⁸ Freud points this out in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917, p. 205) when he says, "the object may not have really died, for example, but may instead have been lost as a love-object... Indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost." [Emphasis in original]

plus-value,¹⁹ fetishism emerges as a symptom which actively forecloses social relations. Because there is here no direct relation between the master signifier and the battery of signifiers, symptoms no longer signify because they are attempting to short circuit the Other. We have instead subjects immersed in a *jouissance* which signifies nothing beyond itself. This suggests the emergence of a new structure of subjectivity, one organized around *jouissance* rather than signification of the Other, one in which the subjective pursuit of enjoyment takes the place of signification. For example we might sometimes, when discussing a topic we know little about, say in veiled negation 'oh, what would I know...!'. This acting outwardly as if one's knowledge is woefully inadequate, this framing of subjective deficit as modesty, represents enjoyment without invalidating one's position in so far as it attributes to knowledge a status whose value is shared. What is going on here? Unlike the subject in the universe of mastery, in that of Capitalist's discourse the relation of the subject is no longer a relation with an Other to which the symptom is addressed (in this case, as veiled negation). Rather, the subject's symptom is now organized around masturbatory *jouissance* which, in the quest for instant *jouissance*, functions to foreclose the Other. In this scenario the focus of treatment of, for example addiction, would be how to establish, in place of forgetfulness of *jouissance*, a relation to the Other where (a different) demand (for a different object) might be articulated.

So powerful is the signifier of knowledge that rituals enacted to maintain belief in signifiers of for example, particular Gods, political creeds and so on, is upheld even by today's atheists and cynics. The impetus to present as a fair minded and upright person is metonymized within notions of an ultimate sacred Other which in turn signify subjective authenticity. For example, the separation of church from state is a divide which although not as straightforward as humanism contends, nevertheless for many people provides an alternative Other which, in banishing the spectre of division, affords a mode of *jouissance* preferable to that engendered by the irreconcilable fallback position of essen-

¹⁹ In his reading of Marx, Lacan is guided by the fetish *signifiant* he finds there in the form of an object which, being divested from its value in use, takes on a different value, that of surplus-enjoyment. This is all there is to Lacan's involvement with Marx, surplus-value as surplus-enjoyment produced during consumption through the subtraction of value in use. Indeed, the more surplus-enjoyment is subtracted from value in use, for example through renunciation, the more overall value increases.

tialized subjectivity: *you can't know me because I can't know you.*²⁰ Although a product of division this alternative Other nevertheless embodies a reliable ideological principle that guarantees the subject's belief as ethical. In this way subjects from both sides of a divide are enabled to enunciate shared sovereign convictions which in turn structure the network or community. Here the modern Master is renouncing *jouissance* in exchange for sovereign ethical belief, a disavowal which props up community in the face of capitalism's alienation of the contemporary subject. In reconciling division through short-circuiting the Other, subjectivity is simultaneously, unwittingly short-circuited.

Of this Freud was already well aware.²¹ In its traversing of human experience, psychoanalysis and in particular the Analyst's discourse can easily be overwhelmed by conformist pressures that regulate social bonds. This is why the Analyst's discourse should be prioritised; it posits the realm of what Lacan calls the Real, which is the kernel of analytical discourse where the speaking being's subjectivity is determined through the unconscious discourse of the Other. This is the symbolic linguistic system which precludes the possibility of a metalanguage through which to establish the truth about anything, including truth itself. In the eruption of Lacan's Real, all social and political orders in the Symbolic contradict one another, all discourses collide in hostile confrontation and any authority about knowledge is confined to the Imaginary.

Lacan clearly had little time for the state, mainly because for him it struggles to accommodate potential divergence from it in so far as being driven by *jouissance*, its desire becomes irrelevant. He perceives the function of the state to be supported by *jouissance* afforded in obeying the law, which is today enshrined in capitalism. Perhaps Lacan would have liked to see the state decline and eventually to become extinct. Neither has he much patience with liberalism, as we know from his provocation to the May '68 students. The liberal participation in choice is somewhat comical in its veiled aspiration towards an imaginary power and its repressed need for a 'stupid' Master. For Lacan, liberalism is an unconvincing discourse of this Master because despite claiming to be progressive it fails to gain

²⁰ That *jouissance* can be essentialised and particularised in a subject is testament to how capitalism commands the subject to be taken up as one whose *jouissance* is essential to subjectivity.

²¹ *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1920), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

forward momentum, instead moving in stationary circles whilst everything “continues to go all too damn well.”²² Better, he contends, to attend to the Analyst’s discourse and to the notion of an individual liberal subjectivity which, in pursuing desire, nevertheless retains a Kantian conscience and rationality.

This practical liberty, asserts Lacan, is what enables a cut in the metonymic machine of the social bond, from which social ties must then emerge. For the libertine subject the kernel of morality is freedom to indulge in repetitive compulsions, wherever these lead. However, as Lacan reminds us in *Kant avec Sade*, even freedom has limits and a cost, certainly where desire is not merely for satiation via the object, but rather for release from being compelled towards satiation by the object. This can be difficult and as Kant reminds us, a painful freedom for the subject especially in so far as it confronts subjective compulsion engrained through the processes of consumption and production. Here, as Lacan observes, obedience to the law goes against the pleasure principle.

This kind of freedom with limits can have a tragic dimension for the subject. At the end of his lengthy commentary on *Antigone*, Lacan suggests a correspondence between the context in which the tragic hero exists and the one experienced in psychoanalysis. Given that in both cases the sole moral fault with which one can tarnish oneself and for which sooner or later one will have to answer, is that of compromising one’s desire, of betraying it in favour of ‘the good’, then the hero who stands by desire is the one who can with impunity, be betrayed. If Lacan’s ethics appear tragic it is because the analysand is required to tolerate the contradiction inherent in desire: in order not to betray it, the subject must tolerate betrayal and by accepting solitude become one with the singularity of the Other. No wonder that here the subject tries to short circuit desire.

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Politically, freedom has less to do with democracy than is sometimes claimed. Rather as Lacan knew, democracy more closely resembles its caricature in Plato’s *Republic*, where everyone does just as they like, every principle of social order is subverted, constitutions are bought and sold and people are impotent witnesses to the advent of tyranny. What counts in this caricature is that in no case should the State, which ostensibly acts in the name of the good of its subjects, even

²² Lacan, J. (1969-70 [2007]). *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. R. Grigg [Trans.]. New York: WW Norton, p. 259.

when killing them, dictate to the individual what his values and actions should be. Today the function of the democratic state is simply to ensure that every individual has access to possibilities, even if these are tragic. For Lacan, this is the price paid for pursuing desire which inevitably requires sacrifice of some sort. Here Lacan's thesis on the relationship of Marx's surplus-value to psychoanalysis' surplus-enjoyment, is more than just an analogy: surplus-value is surplus-enjoyment. Because of this, desire and the state cannot together comprise one ethical form, but are rather two categories which must remain distinct. Just as the alchemist's dream is the only way in which gold might be derived from base metal, so capitalism is the only economic system capable of producing a surplus of such symbolic, pure enjoyment and value.

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