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Article

LACAN ON THE CAPITALIST DISCOURSE: ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR LIBIDINAL ENJOYMENT AND SOCIAL BONDS¹

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Abstract

Drawing together Lacan's statements about capitalist discourse, the author argues that it carries anti-social effects and brings about a regime that, in the end, revolves around a lack of libidinal enjoyment. The capitalist discourse would have an anti-social nature because it does not connect subjects to other subjects but entails connecting subjects to objects of libidinal enjoyment. However, the libidinal bond with the object appears to be deceitful because, in the end, the capitalist discourse installs a regime that is characterized by lack-of-enjoyment. Moreover, the subject can no longer be considered to occupy the position of an agent. In a capitalist discourse, it is not the subject that is in charge any more, but the libidinal object. Put differently, the subject is not exploited by the capitalist anymore, but by the objects of libidinal enjoyment. This will lead Lacan to say that, in a capitalist discourse, everybody is a proletarian.

Keywords

capitalist discourse; social bonds; jouissance; libidinal enjoyment; Freud; Lacan; Marx

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(...) every individual is really a proletarian
J. Lacan

Following Lacan, this paper investigates the effect of capitalist discourse on libidinal enjoyment and social bonds.² One of the main axes around which a capitalistically structured society revolves is libidinal enjoyment. Indeed, capitalist societies are about production and consumption of objects of libidinal enjoyment.³ Along with P. Verhaeghe, we would say that the “*mot d’ordre*” of capitalist societies could be summed up in the following representative advertising slogan: “We must enjoy ourselves right here, right now” (Verhaeghe, 1999).

From this point of departure, we discuss the following items: first, this focus on libidinal enjoyment has consequences on social relationships. More specifically, we argue that capitalism actually has anti-social effects. Second, we develop the idea that a society that privileges libidinal enjoyment, or *jouissance*, is a societal form that does not fit the neurotic subject very well. Educated by his clinical practise on this matter and addressing himself to the partisans of the sexual revolution in the early 1970s, Lacan stated that in fact, “a subject, as such, doesn’t have much to do with *jouissance*” (Lacan, 1998a, p 50). What sustains the neurotic subject is love and desire, not libidinal enjoyment. Consequently, this raises the question of how capitalist discourse can work so well for a population that consists mainly of neurotic subjects. Lacan’s answer is that capitalism is in fact a regime that does not provide libidinal enjoyment. In the end, capitalism is a regime characterized by a lack of libidinal enjoyment [*manque à jouir*].

The anti-social effects of the capitalist discourse

For Lacan a society that revolves around the production and consumption of objects of libidinal enjoyment *connects subjects with objects and not with other subjects*. Therefore, a capitalistically structured discourse would have far-reaching social effects, or better, *anti-social* effects. One of the consequences of Lacan’s axiom concerning the absence of a sexual relationship is that libidinal enjoyment does not create a bond between subjects. Nor does it have group-formative effects. Rather, libidinal enjoyment *deconstructs* social relations and groups. We will first discuss this axiom in relation to a couple. No need to turn to psychoanalytic practise to assert that, in the end, libidinal enjoyment lies at the core of the most severe problems between partners. As a matter of fact, it takes a lot of love (or other “suppletions”) to counter the inherently disruptive effect of libidinal enjoyment.⁴ In his teachings, Lacan firmly and repeatedly underscores that enjoyment does not create a relationship between two subjects. Only love connects a subject to another subject; libido, however, connects a subject to an object. With regard to libidinal enjoyment, the sexual partner is

not even a subject, but an object: “(...) this divided subject [\$] never deals with anything by way of a partner but object *a* (...)” (Lacan, 1998a, p 80) From the point of view of the drive, the partner just embodies a quantum of libidinal enjoyment. As a pun, the Belgian writer A. Nothomb drew an amusing but nevertheless revealing parallel between sex and murder. Surprisingly, the same question often arises after both, namely: “what to do with the body, now” (A. Nothomb, 2002, p 170).

Focusing on the sexual act as such, Lacan develops the point that, unlike non-sexual acts, the sexual one does not generate a signifier or identity. In Lacan’s definition, the act has its anchor in the real, but it nevertheless results in a new signifier with which the subject can identify. As an example, Lacan quotes Julius Caesar as he crosses the Rubicon. The crossing has the value of an act because after having accomplished it, Caesar will never be the same person again. His act created a new signifier or identity for himself (Lacan, 1967). However, this is not the case for the sexual act. One of the fundamental difficulties of the human condition results from this very fact. After all, the ultimate core of neuroses is that libidinal enjoyment does not provide a gender identity. Indeed, having sex with a partner – whatever his/her gender – does not lead to a gender identity. For instance, the sexual act between a man and a woman does not comfort a man or a woman with heterosexual preferences that he is a man and she is a woman. Whatever the sexual preference of the protagonists may be, the sexual act does not provide the partners with a gender identity. On the other hand, be it an advantage or a disadvantage, one consequence of the sexual act’s inability to generate a gender identity is that it has to be performed over and over again. So much for libidinal enjoyment apprehended on the level of the couple.

Along with Freud, Lacan also highlights that libidinal enjoyment does not create bonds on a broader social level, either. Indeed, with *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* Freud reveals that the formation of groups leans on the mechanism of identification. And the affect that accompanies identification is not libidinal enjoyment, but, again, love. As we know, the signifiers with which the subject identifies are taken up through Freud’s concept of the Ego-Ideal; this identification sets up an internalized model upon which the subject endeavors to mould his own ego. In short, the Ego-Ideal stands for what the individual wants to be. But that is not all. Freud’s *Group Psychology* brings in yet another central idea. His analysis of group phenomena and hypnosis leads him to conclude that the Ego-Ideal is an agency that also accumulates narcissism (Freud, 1974a, b, 28, pp. 69–143). This convergence of narcissism and the idealized model has far-reaching consequences. One of them is that the individual needs the ideals or signifiers of another – at first these are usually the parents or caretakers – in order to find himself likeable. Or, with the optical metaphor Lacan introduced to that effect, the Ego-ideal is the eye through which the subject sees himself. The focal point of the Ego-Ideal is the position

from which the subject sees himself as his parents or other significant others desire him to be. Seeing himself through the eyes of significant others – the eye stands for the Ego-Ideal – the subject appears loveable to them and then and only then to himself as well (Lacan, 1966, pp 679–680; 1998b, pp 256–257). In short, the Ego-Ideal means that, whenever a subject finds himself loveable, he is considering himself or his ego from the perspective of the ideals of his significant others. So if Freud's meta-analysis is adequate, then the cohesion-factor of groups is not libidinal enjoyment but (narcissistic) love. On the level of groups, libidinal enjoyment has the same deconstructing consequences as it has for couples. Discussing libidinal enjoyment in the seventh seminar, Lacan comments on Kant's apologue of the beautiful woman in a bedroom: "Suppose, says Kant, that in order to control the excesses of a sensualist, the following situation is produced. The woman he currently lusts after is in a bedroom. He's granted the freedom to enter that room to satisfy his drives, but next to the door through which he will leave there stands the gallows on which he will be hanged. As far as Kant is concerned, it goes without saying that the gallows will be a sufficient deterrent; there's no question of an individual going to screw a woman when he knows he's to be hanged on the way out" (Lacan, 1999, pp 108–109). Lacan objects and argues that "it is not impossible for a man to sleep with a woman knowing full well that he is to be bumped off on his way out, by the gallows or anything else (all this, of course, is located under the rubric of passionate excesses, a rubric that raises a lot of other questions); it is not impossible that this man coolly accepts such an eventuality on his leaving – for the pleasure of cutting up the lady concerned in small pieces for example" (Lacan, 1999, pp 108–109). One of the lessons that can be drawn from Lacan's apologue is that when it comes to libidinal enjoyment, rationality, morality, rules, agreements, social bonds and subjective identities give way. This is also what some types of sexual crimes and recidivism teach us: the drive doesn't ask permission – it just authorizes itself.

Based on Freud's and mainly Lacan's elaborations of love and libidinal enjoyment, we have argued that the latter has anti-social effects. Coupling subjects to objects of libidinal enjoyment, the capitalist discourse does not install symbolically structured social bonds. Lacan's opinion is that, unlike the other discourses (master–slave; teacher–student; hysteric–master; analyst–analysand), the capitalist discourse does not program the relation capitalist–proletarian. With regard to the modern capitalist discourse, there would not be any distinctive symbolically structured classes of capitalists and proletarians. With regard to the logic of capitalism *everybody would be a proletarian*. We will return to this.

Perhaps this connection of subjects to objects induced by the capitalist discourse helps to explain the existential loneliness that seems to characterize the contemporary subject. It appears that depression is one of the major diseases of our time. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one hundred

million people suffer from some form of depression. The clinical entity of depression has been known in all times but, depending on the reigning discourse, its accents have varied throughout the ages. In the beginning of the Romantic 19th century, for instance, depression, or melancholia as it was called then, had other accents than it has now. And a shift in its meaning can already be noticed in the midst of the 19th century with the Baudelairian *spleen* and so on. In other words, it is probably not a coincidence if, according to the WHO, nowadays, the clinical entity of depression essentially refers to loneliness and the difficulty in relating to others.

Another original or specific contemporary phenomenon that links up with this anti-social effect of the capitalist discourse is the apparent need for individuals to *create* their own social bonds. And the most obvious *casu quo* natural bond a subject can create by himself is a family. Sociologists noticed this need when investigating the mentality of youth. It appears that a very large majority of youngsters and pre-adults have the profound intention of creating a family. Of course, after having obtained their degree and before entering a career they want to enjoy life first. They want to see the world, as they frequently say. But afterwards, they definitely want to settle down and create a family. This is a strange paradox given that this is the generation that was raised by the exponents of the so-called sexual revolution of the 1970s. Our idea is that this paradox might be one of the results of a capitalistically structured society. If this kind of society only prescribes connections between subjects and objects, then everyone has to create relations and solidarities with others by him/herself. This obligation is really a new phenomenon that accompanies the capitalist discourse. Indeed, within the non-capitalist societies, the problem was quite the opposite. Then the social networks were all prescribed in advance by ideologies, religions, culture, etc. Consequently, the preoccupation then was not with creating bonds, but on the contrary, escaping them.

The capitalist discourse and the neurotic

The capitalist discourse induces loneliness by coupling subjects to objects. This leaves us with the question of whether the libidinal enjoyment that this discourse supposedly entails counterbalances this loneliness? Apparently this is not the case. Indeed, the human's relation to its libidinal enjoyment is quite complicated.⁵ Coining neuroses as the negative of perversion, Freud already noticed that the neurotic subject only enjoys up to a certain degree (Freud, 1974a, b, 7, p 165). As a matter of fact, the neurotic never goes very far with libidinal enjoyment – the neurotic mainly fantasizes about things a pervert would effectively enact. Unlike the pervert, the neurotic's universe is mainly ruled by desire and love rather than by libidinal enjoyment. The hysteric subject sustains himself with an unsatisfied desire, the obsessive with an impossible one,

and the phobic with an anxious one. For the hysteric, the encountered libidinal enjoyment will always appear not to be the one longed for. And if it is, his unconscious will push him to flight [dérobade] or to produce symptoms that will typically obstruct the encounter of two bodies: frigidity, impotence, ejaculation praecox, anorexia/bulimia, etc.⁶ The unconscious of the obsessive subject, on the other hand, will create inextricable labyrinth-like constructions between itself and its object so that libidinal enjoyment is impossible to reach. Last but not least, the unconscious of the phobic will produce anxiety every time this subject comes too close to its object (Lacan, 1977, p 321). Concerning the human condition as such, for example, apart from the pathology or the clinical structure, Lacan draws attention to the fact that the paroxysm of libidinal enjoyment, namely the orgasm, precisely coincides with the collapse of the erection. Apparently the “disactivation” of the penis after the orgasm is the “natural” defence against libidinal enjoyment (Lacan, 2004, p 197).

In terms of the neurotic subject’s relation to libidinal enjoyment, the result of an analysis obviously could not be an unbridled subject, turning a neurotic into some kind of a pervert. Besides, it would not succeed anyway. An analyst who would take that option would drive his neurotic analysands straight into anxiety or other symptoms. Within this context, we think the aim of analysis is to overcome the barriers or symptoms created by the unconscious. Laying bare the neurotic subject’s unconscious defences against libidinal enjoyment, analysis offers the analysand the chance of making conscious choices on how far he wants to go in the field of libidinal enjoyment. And it cannot be the analyst’s task to interfere with these choices.

Everybody’s a proletarian

If the (neurotic) subject has little to do with libidinal enjoyment, then the capitalist discourse is not really its cup of tea. This leaves us to question how the neurotic manages to survive in it. Or, put differently, how can a capitalist society work for this population. One of the reasons is fairly obvious and easy to grasp. As neurotic subjects we can handle a society centered on libidinal enjoyment because the libidinal enjoyment the objects provide is strongly diluted. Indeed, when objects proliferate, their value almost automatically decreases. When an object is accessible to everybody at any moment, it loses its worth. Consequently, the objects generate boredom rather than libidinal enjoyment. And apparently this checks, for we do live in an era where boredom is very much present. Set in San Francisco during the 1970s – the paradise of liberated sex – a passage from A. Maupin’s (1979, p 182) charming *Tales of the City* amusingly illustrates this. After years of free sex (homo and/or hetero), with a multitude of partners, the characters in the novel are getting bored and are starting to long for things they ran away from, like the conservative agrarian life, the corny china cabinet of their grandparents, etc.

After years of liberated sex, one of the protagonists says to another: “(...) Maybe we should all go back to Cleveland. Yeah, or go live in a farm-town in Utah. Get back to basics”.

Another reason why capitalist discourse manages to work for neurotic subjects is less self-evident and all the more interesting. According to Lacan, the neurotic subject is able to cope with this type of society because the latter is driven by hidden and highly paradoxical dynamics. Indeed, his thesis is that, in the end, capitalism is a regime that hinges on a lack of libidinal enjoyment [manque-à-jouir] (Lacan, 2001, p 435).⁷ And this already fits the neurotic better. Lacan develops this point by means of (his own reading of) Marx’s concept of “surplus-value” [Mehrwert]. The explicit objective of capitalism, of course, is generating surplus value. To put it simply and very schematically, capitalism comes down to selling an object for a price that is more than the cost of its production. The profit made is called surplus value. Marx’s merit is to have revealed how in capitalist systems the surplus value is stolen from the worker/proletarian and appropriated by the capitalist. Of course, we must take into account that contemporary capitalism with its multinationals and vast scientific achievements is no longer the same as that described and analyzed by Marx. And one of the major differences between both has to do precisely with the vicissitudes of surplus value. Very schematically speaking, the surplus value that was stolen from the proletariat in the early capitalism of the 19th century was used for the capitalist’s enjoyment. In that sense, early capitalism could be considered as a variant of the master–slave discourse, the master making profit off the slaves’ work. However, Lacan argues that contemporary capitalism can no longer be considered as a variant of the discourse of the master because the surplus value is not consumed by the capitalist anymore. On the contrary, the surplus-value needs to be re-invested in the production process. And this seems to be one of the fundamental differences between current and former capitalist systems. In early capitalism, the surplus-value could be enjoyed or capitalized for later libidinal enjoyment. Nowadays, the surplus value must be re-invested in the production process; otherwise production lags behind and finally collapses. Put differently we must produce to consume, but we must consume in order to be able to produce again. Hence, Lacan’s opinion is that the actual capitalist discourse is a highly vicious circle.

This idea of a closed circle between the subject and his objects has a very important consequence, namely that the subject can no longer be considered to occupy the position of an agent. Ultimately, it is the object of libidinal enjoyment that is in the position of an agent. Hence, Lacan’s statement that the subject is not exploited by the capitalist or master anymore, but by the objects of libidinal enjoyment (Lacan, 2001, p 415).⁸ This is also what leads him to say that in the contemporary capitalist discourse, *everyone*, thus the capitalist as well, is a proletariat (Lacan, 1974).⁹ Indeed, the capitalist

is not less subjected or subordinated to the capitalist discourse, but just as equally exploited by the objects of libidinal enjoyment as the proletarian. That's probably why "the law of quantity" and the "never enough" principle dominate capitalist societies with such ferocity. In former societies, the different classes corresponded to different identities that were programmed by the discourse (master–slave, hysteric—master, etc.). With the disappearance of distinct identities – "all proletarians" – only quantity can make a difference.

To conclude, Lacan believes that the Marxist movement thus has led to an unforeseen and unintended point: "(...) the ideal worker, the one Marx made the flower of economy in the hope of seeing him take over the discourse of the master; which, in effect, is what happened, although in an unexpected form" (Lacan, 1990, p 14). If the consumption of objects of libidinal enjoyment used to characterize the typical libidinal enjoyment of the capitalist, then it seems that this now extends to the proletariat as well. Lacan observes that in contemporary capitalism, the proletarians are animated by the same libidinal enjoyment as the capitalists. Apparently the Marxist movement did not subvert capitalism as Marx wished, but, surprisingly and astonishingly, ended up in the proletariat collaborating with the capitalist discourse.¹⁰ Being a psychoanalyst, in 1973 Lacan utters that the analytic discourse might create a way out of the capitalist discourse (Lacan, 1990, p 14). Using the expression "way out", it is clear that Lacan did not advocate revolutionary or subversive action. Apparently, Lacan's wish was that psychoanalysis would help to bring the analyzed individual to a mode of libidinal enjoyment different from the one that marks the contemporary proletarian.

Conclusion

Drawing together Lacan's statements about capitalist discourse, we argued that it carries anti-social effects and promotes a regime that revolves around a lack of libidinal enjoyment. Capitalist discourse has an anti-social nature because it consists of connecting subjects to objects of libidinal enjoyment. Programming relations to objects instead of subjects, the contemporary capitalist discourse requires that the subject create social bonds by itself. As for the enjoyment of the drives, Lacan defends the hypothesis that the capitalist discourse installs a regime characterized by a lack-of-enjoyment. Coupled with objects whose libidinal enjoyment is diluted and caught in a vicious circle and exploited by them, the modern subject does not experience much libidinal enjoyment. Making the subject believe he is enjoying when he is not might also be the reason why the capitalist discourse works so well among neurotics. Maybe this hidden mechanism of capitalism also helps to explain why some Westerners often feel guilty about *not* enjoying life *enough*.

About the author

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Notes

- 1 This paper is tributary to C. Soler's course held at the "Collège Clinique de Paris" (2000–2001)bib>.
- 2 We translated "jouissance" to libidinal enjoyment.
- 3 In this paper the term jouissance refers to phallic or symbolized jouissance. In his 17th seminar, Lacan reformulates phallic jouissance by integrating it within his discourse formulas. Within the discourse formulas, phallic jouissance is understood as the "plus-de-jouir" as it is condensed in the object *a*. While this renaming aims to stress the symbolic nature of jouissance by assigning it a place within discourses, it highlights something else too. The matheme of the object presupposes that phallic jouissance is not synonymous with the genital jouissance but refers to the four libidinal objects as well. When the term jouissance is used in this paper, it is to be understood in the broadest sense. Jouissance refers to the four partial objects: the oral, anal, scotophilic and invocative.
- 4 Seul l'amour permet à la jouissance de condéscendre au désir (only love allows jouissance to condescend to desire) (Lacan, 2004, p 209). See also P. Verhaeghe (1999).
- 5 For a more extensive discussion of this topic we refer to F. Declercq (2004).
- 6 Anorexia and bulimia are symptoms that short circuit the encounter between two bodies because the jouissance at stake is fundamentally auto-erotic. By auto-erotic we mean that the (oral) jouissance is not invested into a sexual relation with a partner.
- 7 "(...) la plus-value, c'est la cause du désir dont une économie fait son principe: celui de la production extensive, donc insatiable, du manque-à-jouir."
- 8 "Les produits, par exemple à la qualité desquels, dans la perspective marxiste de la plus-value, les producteurs, plutôt qu'au maître, pourraient demander compte de l'exploitation qu'ils subissent."
- 9 (...) chaque individu est réellement un prolétaire.
- 10 "[...] le marxisme a eu son résultat, un résultat étonnant: de faire collaborer les ouvriers à l'ordre capitaliste en leur redonnant le sentiment de leur dignité...", J. Lacan, Conference held at the French Cultural Centre on 30 March 1974, unpublished.

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