

A Jouissance Beyond Capitalism: Lacan, the Feminist Critique, and the Libidinal Economy of Capitalism

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Whether something actually exists or not,
this is of little importance.

It can perfectly well exist in the full sense
of the term, even if it doesn't really exist.

– Jacques Lacan¹

“Jouissance is the substance of everything we speak about in psychoanalysis,”² Lacan said. This statement highlighted the structuring role of the concept of jouissance within Lacan's thought and clinic. However, it appears relatively late. We can even say that the term “jouissance,” one of the most important concepts within Lacanian metapsychology and praxis, will have to wait for *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (*Seminar 7*) to be systematically presented. Its (re)appearance responds to a displacement, increasingly visible in Lacanian thought, towards thematising the clinical use of dynamics linked to the dimension of the Real – that is, dynamics that are not an object of symbolisation, verbalisation and remembrance within the clinic.

But let us note a significant bibliographical fact. After its presentation in *Seminar 7*, the concept of jouissance will return to be the central object of analysis, mainly in *From An Other to the other* (*Seminar 16*), *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (*Seminar 17*), and *Encore* (*Seminar 20*). There is a significant fact in this distribution. The thematisation of jouissance returns to Lacan's central concerns immediately after the events of May 1968, since *Seminar 16* begins at the end of 1968. It is evident, in this context, how Lacan makes jouissance a fundamental concept within psychoanalytically oriented so-

1 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 229. Translation altered. Most translations from French in this chapter are mine. Future references are to the original French.

2 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 45. For a comprehensive analysis of the concept of jouissance in Lacan, see Christian Dunker, *O cálculo neurótico do gozo* (São Paulo: Escuta, 1998).

cial critique: reprising *jouissance* is, in a sense, his response to what occurred in May 1968. Lacan reads capitalism not via political economy but a libidinal economy constructed through certain significant homologues with Marxist critique. This means that capitalism and its forms of subjection will be described from the impacts they produce in the field of desire. But it is not a matter of recovering the theme, so dear to authors such as Reich and Marcuse, of capitalism as an economic system producing modes of existence based on repression and conformation to disciplinary patterns of conduct. In fact, in Lacan's eyes, capitalism is a system of *jouissance*'s "spoliation"³ – of plunder, of integrating *jouissance* into the logic of mercantile production. Understanding such dynamics of spoliation would be a fundamental condition for effectively transformative political struggles.

Lacan could make such a statement because he knew capitalism was abandoning its repressive hegemonic matrix in favour of a form of subjection by continuous incitement. Strengthening the discourse of autonomous individual decisions tends to create social bonds linked to the discourse that "everyone has the right to his form of *jouissance*" (or even "everyone *must* find his form of *jouissance*"⁴), which will eventually be realised in the pluralist liberation of the multiplicity of possible forms of sexuality in our liberal democracies. In this way, the *incitement of jouissance* has become the true driving force of the libidinal economy of consumer society. This represents a challenge to social criticism, for if the concept of *jouissance* ultimately fills two distinct functions (it will establish the critique *and* normal modes of functioning of capitalist societies), every revolt must deal with the subjective structures of libidinal investment in the prevailing social order.

The possibilities of transformative social action are thus linked to the advent of a *jouissance* capable of opening the experience beyond the social inscription of desire within the symbolic structure. But to do so, it will be necessary to understand the extent of this *jouissance* inscribed in the modalities of social reproduction and fundamental to preserving capitalism. Lacan will call it "phallic *jouissance*." This is the Lacanian way of discussing the patriarchal matrix of capitalism: the dependence between its socialisation regimes and perpetuating a form of desire proper to a libidinal organisation thought from within a masculine horizon, with its regimes of homogeneity, phantasm, and identification. To discuss *jouissance* within capitalism means discussing how desire is socialised via a fundamental reference to a masculine mode of libido, hence the horizon for both masculine and feminine positions.

3 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 92.

4 The superego in Lacan does not function exactly as an apparatus of internal repression but as a distressing incitement to *jouissance*. Hence, he reminds us that the true imperative of the superego in contemporary times is "Enjoy!" – *jouissance* transformed into an obligation. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 10.

In this sense, if Lacan says, in one of his best-known propositions, that “Woman does not exist,” it is because there is not exactly a gender “binarism” in our societies. There is, in fact, something much more brutal, namely, a gender “monism.” Only man exists; only the masculine mode of libido organisation defines the integrity of the field of social inscription of jouissance within our societies. But this non-existence suggested by Lacan is not a mere limit to experience.⁵ Modifying the libidinal economy of capitalism will be connected to assuming something understood as impossible and non-existent in our social situation – namely, a non-phallic form of jouissance. There is a dialectic here that critical thinking will need to know how to handle.

Taking this into account, we can approach jouissance by showing how it is a fundamental political concept. It allows an understanding of the dynamics of capitalism’s integration and opens the space for thematising the subjective processes of rupture with such forms of integration. Its origin, which cannot escape us, is not found in Freudian texts, although Lacan strives to make Freudian incidences of the term “*Genuss*” indications of a concept. But if we want to find the true reference to the Lacanian use of the concept of jouissance, we should look to Georges Bataille.⁶ So let us begin by remembering the context in which Bataille develops his concept. Even the obvious differences between Lacan and Bataille regarding jouissance require recomposing the initial space of problems understood by Bataille.

Bataille and the critique of labour society

Bataille uses the concept of jouissance as the fundamental axis of a social critique based on the capitalist society of labour. That is, in his hands, the concept will be, from the beginning, linked to a specific social theory in which the critique of capitalism is inserted in a broader horizon regarding the advent of labour as a fundamental mode of human activity. Let us remember, for example, statements such as:

Labour requires conduct in which the calculation of effort, related to productive efficiency, is constant. It demands rational behaviour, where the tumultuous move-

5 It could not be otherwise for someone who says, “From one instant to the next, because the unconscious exists, you are carrying out the demonstration by which inexistence is grounded as what is preliminary to what is necessary. ... Inexistence is not nothingness” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XIX: ...ou pire* [Paris: Seuil, 2011], 52).

6 Lacan’s examples of jouissance, such as potlatch and Sade (Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VII: L’éthique de la psychanalyse* [Paris: Seuil], 1986), or Saint Teresa of Avila (Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore* [Paris: Seuil], 1973), come directly from Bataille. On the relation between Bataille and Lacan, see Carolyn Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan and the History of the De-centered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

ments unleashed at feasts and usually in games are frowned upon. If we could not restrain these movements, we could not work, but labour introduces the very reason to restrain them.⁷

In this passage, we see Bataille insisting upon a model of calculation, measurement and quantification derived from the logic of labour and foreign to the “unproductivity” of these modes of social relationship like parties and games, in which the experience of *jouissance* is lodged. Such a model is inseparable from the notion of “utility,” as well as from a time in which activities are measured to calculate efforts and investments, with regard to “productive efficiency,” with its refusal of waste as the supreme horizon of the morality of our actions. There is a capacity for control based on the possibility of predicting results proper to labour as a mode of appropriation of my strength and objects – control embodied in the primacy of utility. About the notion of “utility,” Bataille writes:

Theoretically, utility has pleasure as its goal – but only in a moderate form, for violent pleasure is regarded as *pathological* – and is limited, on the one hand, to the acquisition (practically production) and conservation of goods and, on the other hand, to the reproduction and conservation of human lives ... On the whole, any general judgment about social activity implies the principle that every particular effort must be reducible, to be valid, to the fundamental needs of production and conservation.⁸

Utility appears not only as a description of the rationality proper to the capitalist socioeconomic system but crucially as the fundamental principle of the moral subjects proper to such a system. The rational subjects within capitalism are those who organise their actions with a view to self-preservation, the conservation of their goods, the economic calculation of their efforts, and enjoying moderate forms of pleasure, that is, forms of pleasure that do not place us outside our domain. They are rational because they always submit their affectivity to reflection on utility and measure.

Against this labour society, Bataille wants to appeal to everything excessive, everything capable of mobilising a *jouissance* that is not confused with maximising pleasure and displeasure and, above all, every social action that appears unproductive. Every society is crossed by the need for experiences of excess, expenditure, and destruction that, from the point of view of the economic demands of production and maximisation, are simply irrational. This leads Bataille to affirm that the utilitarianism of capitalist society – its logic linked to constituting agents maximising their interests – could only be broken by the circulation of *jouissance* and its fundamental

7 Georges Bataille, “L’Érotisme,” in *Œuvres complètes X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 44.

8 Georges Bataille, “La notion de dépense,” in *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 303.

manifestations – eroticism and the sacred – as if jouissance were the foundation of the social criticism of capitalism. Having the same idea in mind, Lacan says, “jouissance is that which serves no purpose,”⁹ that which has no “utility.” Or, even that “the pleasure principle is this barrier to jouissance, and nothing else.”¹⁰

Eating fresh brains

How could such concept of jouissance operate within the analytic clinic? Refusing the defence of a naturalistic liberation of desire, rejecting even the possibility of a self-care that would lead to affirming the “man of pleasure” (as argued by Foucault),¹¹ Lacan brings jouissance to the clinic. His clinic should lead the subjects to relate with a jouissance that crosses them and takes them out of the domain of the self, without submitting them to the domain of some fabricated lost naturalness of impulses and passions.

In this sense, Lacan increasingly insists that human experience is not a field of behaviours guided only by ordering images (Imaginary), by socio-symbolic structures (Symbolic) that aim to guarantee and secure identities, but also by a disruptive force whose correct name is Real. Here. The Real is not to be understood as a horizon of concrete experiences accessible to immediate consciousness. The Real is not linked to a problem of objectively describing states of affairs. It concerns a *field of experiences* that cannot be adequately symbolised or colonised by ideal images of strong social circulation. This explains why the Real is always described negatively and dismissively, as if it were a matter of showing that there are things that only offer themselves to the subject in the form of negations. Hence propositions like “The Real is the impossible.” The Real indicates an experience of exteriority concerning the processes of material reproduction of life. It preserves its negativity as a way of preventing experiences of difference from being crushed by the possible determinations of the present.

If we ask ourselves how such a perspective works clinically, we have a prime example through Lacan’s commentary on one of Ernst Kris’ clinical cases.¹² This is a clinical vignette presented by Kris about a young scientist unable to publish his research. Such impossibility is derived from a compulsion, which he believes he has, to plagiarise. Thus, we find a patient who organises his subjective position based on the

9 Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 10.

10 Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI*, 277.

11 On the relations between Lacan and Foucault, see Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel, eds., *Lacan Against Foucault: Subjectivity, Sex and Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

12 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 393–398, 598–602. The case is in Ernst Kris, “Ego Psychology and Interpretation in Psychoanalytic Therapy,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1951).

proposition, “I cannot publish what I write, because deep down I am a plagiarist.” It resonates with his behaviour, in his youth, of petty theft of books and candy. It also brings into play a mode of intersubjective relation by comparison that refers back to his relations with his father and his grandfather, a “great father” (*grandfather*), a renowned scientist, who achieved the success that his father could not.

One day, the patient comes to the analytic session claiming to have found a book that contains the ideas of texts he had written, even though he had not published them. Kris intervenes by asking to read the book, concluding that there is nothing of what the patient fears. On the contrary, Kris says, the patient was projecting onto the other ideas that he would like to have. Kris thus intervenes at the level of “reality appreciation,” trying to get the patient to accept that “we always deal with other people’s ideas, it’s a question of knowing how to deal with them.” When presenting his interpretation, Kris hears the following response from the patient: “Always when my analysis session ends, just before lunch, I like to walk down a street where I find a restaurant that offers one of my favourite dishes: fresh brains.”

Lacan will say that such a response exposes the failure of Kris’ intervention. For even if Kris’ analysis were not incorrect, the desire to “eat fresh brains” remains to be analysed. It matters little whether he is a plagiarist, but a confusing mix of a desire for authorship and plagiarism seems structuring and insurmountable. This leads us to insist that a primordial and raw oral jouissance (expressed in the desire to eat fresh brains or, again, in an Oedipal dream of a battle with the father in which books were weapons and conquered books were swallowed during combat) appears to block an essential dimension of linguistically structured recognition – namely, the dimension of “publication,” of becoming public, of assuming for the Other the form of one’s ideas. For such an oral relation has something that cannot be inscribed in a recognised form, something deeply fusional, something of a confused field in which distinctions of identity no longer hold. This jouissance breaks the possibility of the subject “having a name,” “being in a place that is his own.” The I “wants to know nothing” about it because such jouissance has been expelled as radically beyond the limits of the pleasure principle.

Therefore, the only possible form of recognition appears through “a totally incomprehensible act of the subject.”¹³ An *acting out* that he repeats, as if translating into imaginary form what he should be able to apprehend in symbolic form. But the patient’s “no,” in saying, “I can’t publish, I am not someone who can publish his ideas,” is inverted by the analyst into a statement like “you can publish; our ideas always come from others.” This means a blockage in the more careful listening to this “no.” It was not possible to hear how such a denial was more brutal because it called for developing an experience with language in which the confusion of deeply oral relations could find a form. This was impossible within a language marked by the

13 Lacan, *Écrits*, 398.

individualised boundaries of one who feels, at every moment, unduly entering the domain of another, being unmasked as a plagiarist. The analysis should, therefore, lead the subject to reconstitute his mode of existence based on this jouissance, even at the price of not knowing who he is and what the “limits,” what “determinations,” clearly define his presence in the world.¹⁴ For this jouissance is a form affirming de-centring and dispossession. It is the collapse of the subject’s illusions of identity and the libidinal basis for openness to what does not bear his image.

How to enjoy capitalism

However, the critical function of the concept of jouissance will become more complex as Lacan tries to provide a theory of the libidinal structure of capitalism.¹⁵ Lacan will understand that capitalism could never be a mode of existence based on the simple renunciation of jouissance. In fact, no mode of social existence builds its dynamics of adhesion through simple repression. Capitalism is based on what Lacan calls the spoliation of jouissance – in the inscription of its excess and lack of measure within the dynamics of social reproduction.

We must speak of “spoliation” because it is not a simple negation. Jouissance becomes what the dynamics of Capital’s self-valorisation seeks to produce, as if the libidinal axis of the subject’s adherence to capitalism passed through the belief that the jouissance that drives us could be realised within the dynamics immanent to Capital; as if the logic of this dynamic of production were the immanent expression of “our nature.” That is, as if our desire naturally sought capitalism, its form of production, and its existence.

Let us underline this point to better understand the kind of contribution psychoanalysis can make to the critique of capitalism. It will not explain its historical formation, the transformation of the social forms of production, nor will it seek to “psychologise” the political struggles against its social structures of subjection. There is not and cannot be a “psychoanalysis of the social,” as if we could treat social life as a field of symptoms, even if social life produces symptoms. It is important to say this to remember that social struggles are not symptoms, with their logic of a ciphered

14 This cannot be otherwise for someone who so strongly links “impossible” and “real” as a clinical horizon, as we see when Lacan defines the unconscious as “a metaphorical term to designate the knowledge that only sustains itself by presenting itself as impossible so that, from this, it is confirmed as real (understand, real discourse)” (Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, [Paris: Seuil, 2001], 425).

15 On such a libidinal theory of capitalism, see Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015); Cláudio Oliveira, “Capitalismo e gozo: Marx e Lacan,” *Tempo Social* 11, no. 22 (2004).

message directed to an Other. They are social struggles, with their immanent force of dismissal of authority and realisation of demands for justice.

However, psychoanalysis will be able to accurately expose the “rhetoric” of Capital, its strategies for justifying the demands of production and labour from an alleged rooting of economics in our psychology. For economics is the continuation of psychology by other means. It is part of the rhetorical strategies of adhering to capitalism to define the form of production of wealth and goods as expressing the satisfaction of interests and the maximisation of pleasure, to define the imperatives of competition and enterprise as an expression of naturalised traits of human behaviour. Our social servitude is founded on naturalising a certain psychology that serves as the basis of the reigning economy. The psychoanalytic critique of capitalism is embedded in decomposing such a psychological foundation of the economy. It reminds us how capitalism colonises our *jouissance*, and our only alternative is to withdraw this *jouissance* out of the mode of production that colonises it.

Let us note, for example, a precise and fundamental point of Lacanian libidinal economy, namely, the way Lacan will read the Marxist proposition that the entire rationality of the productive process in capitalism is subjected to the extraction of surplus-value, whether in its absolute or relative form. The fact that the horizon of labour is organised not from the production of use-values rooted in our alleged systems of needs, but from the exponential valorisation of value itself, express a certain form of social determination of our desire.

Lacan’s greatest influence on this point is the critique of *homo œconomicus* made by Louis Althusser in his “The Object of Capital” (part four of *Reading Capital*). In this classic text, Althusser recalls how Marx seeks to describe a mutation in the very concept of value, separating it from the current notions of profit and income. We know the importance, for Marx, of labour’s capacity to create value. This value, however, is not based on a normative anthropology in which value itself would find its foundation as an immediate expression of a system of needs it can satisfy.¹⁶ As if the “need” of the human subject defined, by itself, the very nature of economic activity and was confirmed by it.

Althusser insists that the concept of surplus-value breaks this underlying and “happy” anthropology, since behind the economy we will no longer find the naturalness of the subject of needs in search of the best satisfaction. We will find an “automatic” dynamic of self-valorisation of value, of the transformation of Capital itself

16 “Classical economics can only think economic facts as belonging to the homogeneous space of their positivity and measurability, under the condition of a ‘naive’ anthropology that founds, in the economic subjects and their needs, all the acts by which economic objects are produced, distributed, received and consumed”: Louis Althusser, ed., *Lire Le Capital* (Paris: PUF, 1996), 368.

into the true subject of the economic process. We will not find the subject's expression through labour but the production of the subject through the dynamics of value production itself. As Marx wrote, "production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object."¹⁷

Lacan tries to define what would be the libidinal basis of such a form of subjection, of the subject's production by the object of Capital. This is because the political reflection made by psychoanalysis has never been content to explain processes of social subjection by coercion and direct violence, although it has never denied their existence. The political problem that psychoanalysis inherits from modern political philosophy is: how do subjects desire their own servitude? Lacan's answer is: capitalism has changed our form of jouissance, by producing a mutation in the rationality of economic production.¹⁸ Capitalism subjected jouissance to the rhythm of indifference towards sensible objects, of the interchangeability of what has its mode of existence in a generic axiomatic, of the self-referential process that has an end in itself, whose only purpose is its quantitative measure. Thus, it made us desire just like workers submitted to Capital as an automatic subject.

Let us better understand this point. Capitalism imposes on all spheres of social reproduction of life ideals of behaviour based on rationalising actions from a dynamic of maximising performances and intensities. Actions that aim at the pure maximisation of performances must be organised in a manner homologous to economic activities based on extracting surplus-value and, consequently, on circular self-valorisation of Capital. This rationality proper to a society organised on circulating what has no other function than to valorise itself needs to socialise desire, leading it to be caused by the *pure measure of intensification*, by the pure push to amplification that establishes the objects of desire in an incessant and surplus circuit called "*plus-de-jouir*" by Lacan. Thus, it is possible to state, with Dardot and Laval, that "'accountable' subjectivation and 'financial' subjectivation ultimately define a subjectivation as an excess of the self over the self or even the indefinite surpassing of the self."¹⁹

Since it is, however, an accounting logic, at no time should the excess call into question the internal normativity of the capitalist process of accumulation and performance. For this is a quantitative excess that is not transformed into qualitative change. On the contrary, every excess is financially codifiable; it confirms the previously defined code. As Hegel would say about other phenomena, this excess is the

17 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1993), 92.

18 This is the meaning of statements such as, "Our starting point can only be to question the ideology of pleasure through what renders everything that sustained it a little out of date. It is convenient to place ourselves at the level of the means of production, insofar as, for us, these are what condition the practice of this pleasure" (Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI*, 112).

19 Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *La nouvelle ordre du monde* (Paris: la découverte, 2013), 437.

mark of a bad infinity, because it does not pass to the true infinity of what changes its own form of determination from itself, of what is infinite because it realises itself paradoxically producing the negation of itself; a negation that, when integrated, procedurally modifies the structure of the previously presupposed totality. Rather, it is the bad infinity of what is always haunted by a never-embodied beyond, a beyond whose only function is to mark reality with the seal of inadequacy, of the bitter taste of the “not yet.”²⁰ The analysis of capitalism has always needed a theory of the two infinities. Thus, when Lacan says that capitalism is driven by a “*plus-de-jouir*,” surplus-enjoyment, one must listen to what this term effectively says: this jouissance is a progression to infinity that is never actualised and that, for this reason, must mark every object consumed with the “consumption” of the object, that is, with the seal of its annulment, its erasure, its indifference. The “*plus-de-jouir*” is, at bottom, a “*pas-encore-jouir*,” or not-yet enjoyed.

So, there is a turn of the screw in this theory of the libidinal economy of capitalism. It is in propositions like, “The *plus-de-jouir* is a function of renouncing jouissance under the effect of discourse.”²¹ That is, this jouissance codified by the capitalist process of production is sympathetic to a certain “renunciation” of jouissance.²² Here, the theme of the renunciation of jouissance produced by submission to the alienated time of labour returns (a Bataillean theme par excellence that reminds us how the time of jouissance and the time of labour cannot be confused).²³ For jouissance to become *plus-de-jouir*, the homologue of surplus-value, it must lose its capacity to be the force that dispossesses me and reconfigures me through reference to what is qualitatively different from me. Lacan speaks, in this context, of “renouncing jouissance under the effect of discourse,” because discourse produces a loss through the inscription of the subject in the signifier, inscription in an ordered symbolic universe. Subjection to the signifier could not be done without a loss of jouissance coming from partial drives, those drives that do not know reference to an “I.”

20 “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”: Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 435. Roughly translated: “Surplus-value is the cause of the desire that an economy makes its principle: that of extensive, and therefore insatiable, production, of lack-in-enjoying.” This logic can produce, in turn, a subjectivity marked by the experience of debt, of continuous indebtedness. See, in this regard, Jorge Aleman, *Razón fronterisa y sujeto del inconciente: conversaciones con Eugenio Triás* (Barcelona: NED Ediciones, 2020).

21 Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI*, 19. Or again, “le plus-de-jouir est autre chose que la jouissance. Le plus-de-jouir est ce qui prend, non pas à la jouissance, mais à la perte de jouissance”: Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI*, 116. Roughly translated: “The plus-de-jouir is something other than jouissance. The plus-de-jouir is what leads, not to enjoyment, but to the loss of enjoyment.”

22 Which explains why he cannot sustain himself without suffering: “How each one suffers in his relation to jouissance, while he only inserts himself into that jouissance through the *plus-de-jouir*, that is the symptom” (Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI*, 41).

23 “Labour implies the renunciation of jouissance”: Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI*, 39.

The inherent patriarchy of Capital

With this problematic in mind, we can better understand the unique Lacanian way of associating capitalism and patriarchy. In Lacan, patriarchy is not simply a form of male domination based on the binary division of gender. Since there is no subjection without some form of satisfaction, patriarchy is a form of jouissance that implicates all subjects, regardless of their gender orientation. In this sense, capitalism needs patriarchy because of desire's power to produce other forms of social relations. Capitalism needs the primacy of its phallic jouissance to subject everyone's plastic desire to a form of fixity; it needs patriarchy to domesticate subjects under a political and phantasmatic form of domination.

At first glance, it may seem, however, that Lacan understands this patriarchal order as insurmountable. After all, he will say in several contexts that the phallus "is the fundamental signifier through which the subject's desire can make itself recognised as such, whether in the case of a man or a woman."²⁴ This demonstrates how the phallus can *construct a Universal* capable of unifying the singular experiences of desire.²⁵ There were several criticisms of this Lacanian phallic "monism," mainly from sectors of feminism.²⁶ Let us remember, for example, how Nancy Fraser synthesises this criticism, following Dorothy Leland's critique of Lacanian determinism, when she notes:

Phallocentrism, woman's disadvantaged place in the symbolic order, the encoding of cultural authority as masculine, the impossibility of describing a nonphallic sexuality – in short, any number of historically contingent trappings of male dominance – now appear as invariable features of the human condition.²⁷

In this sense, psychoanalysis appears as a technology to preserve the heteronormative and binary structure that serves as a basis for colonising bodies through normalising the positions of men and women. In Lacan's case, we would have a system

24 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 273.

25 A point well developed by Monique David-Ménard, *Les constructions de l'universel* (Paris: PUF, 2001).

26 One of the foundations of this criticism was provided by Derrida, when he insisted that the Lacanian primacy of the phallus meant "there is only one libido, therefore no difference, and even less an opposition within libido between the feminine and the masculine, indeed, it is masculine by nature" (Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale* [Paris: Flammarion, 1985], 528).

27 Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 146. We can find similar critiques in Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) and Luce Irigaray, *Speculum: de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

of differences that would not escape sexual binarism and the patriarchal genealogy of the name.²⁸

But let us note initially how there is something singular in this “for all” produced by recognising desire through the phallus. For the phallus is, at the same time, the signifier *par excellence* of desire²⁹ and the signifier that *embodies the lack proper to castration*: “the signifier of the point where the signifier lacks/fails.”³⁰ We are facing a contradiction, unless we admit the existence of something like a *castration desire* or the necessary sustaining of a radical inadequacy between desire and empirical objects.³¹ For this reason, authors like Judith Butler will accuse Lacan of a politically suspect “religious idealisation of the ‘lack,’ humility and limitation before the Law.”³² For Lacan would insist that the only possible form of desire’s recognition would pass through its symbolic inscription, hence via a signifier that embodies the failure to name desire; something akin to a negative theology disguised as a clinic of psychic suffering with paralysing political consequences; just as it would paralyse the position of someone who sustains an order that they know to be inadequate, but without being able to overcome it; it would be the most astute and perverse form of conservation of a law that should have been abandoned long ago.

Indeed, Lacan argues for the phallus as a general process of socialising desire because he wants to insist on the generality of castration. That is, the phallus is not a generalised norm but a generalised inadequacy. If castration were not a generic process that extends to everyone, then we would have to admit that social life preserves some people from the violence of its modes of determination and limitation. That is, we would have to accept that there are subjects who would preserve an immanent relation to *jouissance*, subjects who would enter the social order without being marked by alienation’s violence. This would be, perhaps, the worst of all the fantasies of compensation to social violence: the fantasy that there is some point at which this social order allows subjects not to subject themselves. In other words, to generalise castration is to affirm that no existence is preserved from alienation, even those that,

28 As charged in Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021). See also Tania Rivera, “Subversões Da Lógica Fálica – Freud, Lacan, Preciado” [“Subversions of Phallic Logic: Freud, Lacan, Preciado”], *Psicanalistas pela Democracia*, December 24, 2019, <https://psicanalisedemocracia.com.br/2019/12/subversoes-da-logica-falica-freud-lacan-precियो-por-tania-rivera/>.

29 “It is not simply sign and signifier, but presence of desire. *It is the real presence*”: Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII: Le transfert* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 294. A presence that transforms the phallus into “the signifier of power, the sceptre and also that thanks to which virility can be assumed”: Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V*, 274.

30 Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII*, 277.

31 Since the phallus is only “a general symbol of this margin that always separates me from my desire”: Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V*, 243.

32 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (NY: Routledge, 1999), 72.

in our current societies, are placed as non-binary, as monstrous (cp. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*). No existence can speak in the name of a present difference amid the society of capitalist (patriarchal) violence still in force. This will only be a form of imposture.

However, there are at least two distinct types of effects resulting from this passage through castration: one produces the regimes of existence, the other makes room for the experience of the non-existent. The first case leads us to phallic jouissance, the other leads us to discussions about feminine jouissance. These two effects – it is always worth remembering this – take place *in the same bodies*. Human bodies are crossed by these two effects. There is no human body subjected to the forms of phallic jouissance without producing inadequacies. One reason for the extreme violence of those who struggle to recognise themselves within the logic of phallic jouissance is that they do not know what to do with another experience of jouissance that haunts them. Once again, there is no binarism in Lacan. There is monism, but there is no position without a presupposition that negates it. Therefore, there is no position that is not unstable and open to becoming.

In this sense, Lacan's insistence in speaking about the irreducibility of sexual difference does not simply express its dependence on a heteronormative mode of existence. This would mean confusing oppositional-representational difference with self-referential difference, which only happens in antidialectical positions. Sexual difference, in Lacan, is the expression of an irreducible distance that separates me from myself; it expresses the mode of relation that I have regarding my own "sexuality." The difference is internal to me, not an external relation to another. That is, it is a self-referential difference, not the expression of oppositions characterised by material incompatibilities. It is not the difference between man and woman, as two specific sets of persons. And how could it be if woman is a non-existent? Sexual difference is an internal difference between existence, and what such existence denies as non-existent to exist.³³ To assert such an internal distance to oneself has a strong political and transformative rationale.

Each form of individual and consciousness is determined by the very structure that makes us exist and oppresses us. Yet Monique Wittig says about the notion of sexual difference as Lacan uses it:

The concept of difference between the sexes ontologically constitutes women into different/others.... But for us there is no such thing as being-woman or being-man.... The concept of difference has nothing ontological about it. It is only the way that the masters interpret a historical situation of domination. The function

33 It could not be otherwise for someone who says, "Sexuality is precisely the domain, if I can put it that way, where no one knows what to do about what is true" (Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching* [London: Verso, 2008], 21).

of difference is to mask at every level conflicts of interest, including ideological ones.³⁴

“Different” is that which is always placed in a relation of subalternity. This criticism tries to break down the naturalisation of the obligatory social relationship between “man” and “woman,” taking such categories to their point of exhaustion. In fact, it is not a matter of ontologising difference, as if it were possible to leave the current historical situation to give timeless validity to that which is the fruit of precise historical-social coordinates. But it is necessary to speak of an “ontology for us” – that is, for us, such experience has an ontological irreducibility. This is said with a view to preventing us from speaking of an existence that does not yet have a figure, and should not have one. For it is not exactly difference that appears as an ontological weight here, but non-existence. Understanding the political function of such a strategy would prevent us from regressing to the situation of criticising Lacan for placing us before needs that “escape the control of consciousness and therefore the responsibility of individuals.”³⁵ For to imagine that some effective form of political action will be produced by consciousness and individual agents is to ignore where emancipated agency can really come from. It certainly will not come from what is conformed to as the property and attribute of an individual. An ontology of the non-existent is politically necessary.

Genre trouble

Let us try to better understand Lacan's strategy. To understand what phallic jouissance is, we need to define how castration works within it. This appears initially as affirming a “for all” – its dimension of norm that determines the totality of existents is clearly assumed. But such an assumption requires a complement. Castration's implied experience of lack necessarily demands a phantasmatic complement, as if it were a lack that simply perpetuates our dependence on expecting completeness. Castration is thus reduced to a lack that is only a return to the fantasy that *someone* has not gone through the experience of castration, keeping for himself the sovereignty of the immediate identity between will and action, between wanting and doing.³⁶

34 Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 29.

35 Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 30.

36 This is what is meant by the formula of male sexuation ($\forall x \ x\Phi / x \rightarrow \Phi x$), namely, “everyone goes through castration” and “there is at least one who does not go through castration.” The contradiction between the two propositions is the axis of the organisation of phallic jouissance. See Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 73.

The subject may try to occupy this place in a passage to the act of his perverse fantasies, or it may be occupied by an Other who will appear as uncastrated, an Other who lacks nothing and to whom the subject will devote a relation of subjection. This Other can be incarnated in another subject or the Law, the Mission, the Ideal, the Leader, the Father, the Company, the State, the Woman, etc. Thus, if it is true that “man sustains his jouissance through something that is his own anxiety,”³⁷ one must remember that such anxiety normally leads him to feed the phantasmatic representation of a sovereign place of exception. Under the primacy of phallic jouissance, the subject will thus always be open to superegoic investment in authoritarian figures that recover the structure of the *primal father*, whose will seems to hover above all restrictions. He will enjoy lack (with the relative depreciation of the objects that present themselves to him) and the search for completeness (with the idealisation immanent to such a search). It will be a jouissance based on the continuous play between frustration and idealisation. This desire as lack and restriction has thus, necessarily, a catastrophic return in the political field (because it is libidinally realised in the investment of authoritarian figures and institutions) and subjective (because it makes the subject depend on their own frustration).

But there is more to Lacan than phallic jouissance,³⁸ and it is at this point that we can understand the political nature of feminine jouissance. What feminine jouissance shows is how it is possible to start, not exactly from affirming castration as a function of a “for all” that constitutes a normative and restrictive universality, but from castration as an *impasse of existence*, as a pressure from a non-existent towards another existence.³⁹ This refusal to link castration to the advent of a totality shows how, in this context, “lack” functions differently, producing other effects. In the case of the feminine position, assuming the lack of desire, in fact, expresses the refusal of a false totality in the name of another totality, which Lacan calls the “universal not all.” This is radically distinct from the act of acknowledging lack to sustain the phantasmatic completeness of an uncastrated Other.

Thus, if this feminine jouissance is proper to a position that “does not exist” (since the Woman does not exist), this is not simply a cult of aporia or negative theology. Non-existence should be understood here as an active process that aims to break the limits of the current modes of existence, the limits of the forms of jouissance endorsed by capitalism and its patriarchy. This non-existence is active because it seeks to produce another order. The impossibility of describing a non-phallic sexuality, to which Nancy Fraser points, is, on the contrary, a pressure that seeks to give

37 Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Book X*, session of March 20, 1963.

38 As we see, among many other references, in Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 26.

39 Therefore, the feminine position does not have as its basic proposition $\forall x \Phi x$ but $\neg x \neg \Phi x$. That is, its foundation is the impossibility of the existence of someone who has not gone through castration.

body to the impossible. This is a strategy of dialectical negativity, not a mere passive contemplation of the impasse.

In this context, universal not-all is the expression of the possibility of a relation between what denies false totality (what is not-all) and what seeks to produce a common field (what still sustains expectations of universality). It is a way for lack to use the impasse, a way for jouissance to use the unmeasured to realise itself as an experience of infinitude.⁴⁰ And it is not an accident that, at this moment, we find Lacan recover the same examples that Bataille used to talk about eroticism and the sacred. It is enough to remember his reading on the jouissance of the ecstatic Saint Teresa of Ávila.

Some may see this as an insidious way to push the feminine into an ethereal, inapprehensible mysticism; a last colonial strategy towards the feminine by male ghosts (a rather common mix of saint and whore that would only make sense within male ghosts). But that would be to miss the central axis of Lacan's strategy – namely, to insist that power (in this case religious power) tries to colonise a jouissance that can surpass it, forcing social life to deal with what breaks its regimes of existence, hierarchy, and production. And for making this jouissance emerge, it is necessary to confront itself at its extreme point of contradiction; it is necessary that language finds its twisting point, until it is forced to say, “*If there were another.*” But Lacan continues,

there is no other than phallic jouissance – except the one concerning which woman doesn't breathe a word, perhaps because she doesn't know it, the one that makes her not-whole. It is false that there is another one, but that doesn't stop what follows from being true, namely, that it shouldn't be / could never fail to be that one.⁴¹

This language that says this – there is no other jouissance except the one concerning which woman does not breathe a word, except that which, if there were, would be another, and language that claims it is false that there is another one, which does not prevent us from saying that it should not be this one – is the photograph of an emergent process taking language to its twisting point; a process that refuses identification, that refuses naming and identity, collapsing the order from within,

40 “As soon as you deal with an infinite set, you cannot posit that the not-whole implies the existence of something produced based on negation or contradiction. You can, at a pinch, posit it as an indeterminate existence. But, as we know from the extension of mathematical logic, mathematical logic qualified as intuitionist, to posit a ‘there exists,’ one must also be able to construct it, that is, know how to find where that existence is”: Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 94.

41 Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 56.

as something indescribable born out of what seemed the most familiar. This is a political strategy of producing difference that could not, under any circumstances, be confused with restoration.

Lacan can be criticised for placing the woman in a position in which she does not talk – breathily – about her jouissance, in which she knows nothing of her jouissance. But it would be necessary to remember that this ignorance is, for Lacan, constitutive of our general modes of alienation. The masculine position believes to speak and finds itself at every moment in an empty speech that is nothing but the simple repetition of the code. In this context, saying nothing is the beginning of a real transformation.

On the other hand, we could say that Lacanian psychoanalysis is indifferent to the problem of gender performativity. It has no problem at all in assuming multiple gender inscriptions. For its central issue lies elsewhere, namely, in the structures of relationality (which, of course, cannot be abstracted from gender determinations).⁴² It seeks to bring bodies to assume a form of relationality in which a jouissance can circulate that disaccustoms us from capitalism's regime of identity, accumulation, and accounting. This form can occur in multiple regimes of relationality, even between a woman and a man.⁴³

Does capitalism conclude castration?

It is at this point that perhaps Lacan's central statement becomes clearer:

What distinguishes the capitalist discourse is this: *Verwerfung*, the rejection outside all fields of the symbolic ... the rejection of what? Of castration. Any order, any discourse that resembles capitalism leaves out what we will simply call the things of love.⁴⁴

An incorrect reading of this statement would lead us to believe that Lacan accuses capitalism of being unaware of the impossibility of satisfying desire, its constitutive lack, through proliferating means of incitement and pleasures, as if we were seeing

42 See, in this regard, Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 131, in which Lacan speaks of a relation of recognition within which the sexual relation ceases not to be inscribed.

43 Therefore, another dimension of Monique Wittig's critique of Lacan seems inadequate to us. The accusation that Lacanian psychoanalysis naturalises the heterosexual contract – preventing any other form of categorical production beyond that horizon – fails to understand how the analytic process must break this “contract” and how the experience of oppression it entails is by no means neglected. Only the social injunction “you-will-be-straight-or-not-be” is to be taken in the dialectical sense described above. The not-being is not nothing.

44 Jacques Lacan, “La troisième” (unpublished manuscript).

yet another version of a moral critique of supposed capitalist *hedonism*. Capitalism would thus disregard castration because it would impose on us endless substitutive satisfactions.

We could also ask if Lacan is unaware of a phenomenon well described by Deleuze and Guattari, regarding the mode of desire's operation under capitalism. For, in this reading, capitalism would reduce desire to the register of possession and, consequently, of lack. This reduction of desire to the register of lack would make castration the experience *par excellence* of socialised desire.⁴⁵ Under capitalism, subjects would see in desire the expression of what only manifests itself as incompleteness and inadequacy. As if capitalism were a society of managed dissatisfaction. This thought leads Deleuze to state:

It's all very well to say to us: you understand nothing, Oedipus, it's not daddy-mummy, it's the symbolic, the law, the arrival at culture, it's the effect of the signifier, it's the finitude of the subject, it has the "lack-to-be which is life." And if it's not Oedipus, it will be castration, and the supposed death drives. Psychoanalysts teach infinite resignation, they are the last priests (no, there will be others after them).⁴⁶

That is, castration appears here as the emblem of an infinite resignation before the impossibility of *jouissance* and the finitude of the subject. It would impose a pragmatics of inadequacy that could only have deleterious moral and political consequences.

However, the phenomenon that Lacan has in view is another, almost inverse one. Namely, how such inadequacy is not a resignation but the path of a production. In this sense, let us remember how the problem of castration will eventually fit into discussions regarding the performance of sexual intercourse:

the subject realises that he does not have the organ of what I would call the unique, unary, unifying *jouissance*. This is exactly what makes *jouissance* *one* in the conjunction of subjects of the opposite sex. Namely, what I insisted on last year, by highlighting the fact that there is no possible subjective realisation of the subject as element, as sexed partner in what is imagined as unification in the sexual act.⁴⁷

Castration appears to realise the absence of what could ensure the fusional achievement of a unitary *jouissance*. If this unitary *jouissance* existed, it would ensure a

45 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 98.

46 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (NY: Columbia UP, 2007), 81–82.

47 Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire. Livre XV: L'acte psychanalytique" (unpublished manuscript), session of January 17, 1968.

kind of univocity of being capable of allowing the subjects a conjunction that would be a return to the submission of experience to an identifying thought. There is no possible univocity, that is what castration says. Therefore, there is no possible realisation of the subject as a sexual partner in the unity of the sexual act. Here it may become clearer why Lacan said, famously, there is no sexual relationship. For it is the case that jouissance does not inhabit spaces of fusion or complementarity. No, we do not complement ourselves; we are too mutilated to want to complement ourselves, or even for the act of complementing to have any meaning. Not having a sexual relationship, realising that it does not exist, is a certain cunning. The cunning of those who say, “we are too mutilated to have the right to exist”; there is something in us that reminds us that we could be someone else, and that ends up leading us to love non-existence.

This is what led Lacan to state that castration marks “the subject being unequal to any possible subjectification of sexual reality.”⁴⁸ This point is decisive. If there is an inequality between the procedures of subjectivation and the sexual, if it is not possible to subjectivise the sexual in its integrity – as we can do, for example, when we say “my sexuality,” submitting the sexual to the condition of a predicative attribute of a subject – it is because the sexual is the very space in which something placed as an irreducible difference emerges. The inscription of this difference will be a fundamental political operation because it will provide the matrix for the general relations to difference within social life. As if the problem of difference in the field of the sexual would provide the basis for the multiple forms of relation to difference in other fields of social experience.

This explains why perhaps the most important proposition here is: “castration, which is the sign with which an avowal dresses itself up, the avowal that jouissance of the Other – of the body of the Other – is promoted only on the basis of infinity.”⁴⁹ That is, as counterintuitive as this may seem, castration appears as a condition for realising a certain infinitude linked to jouissance. Because, in this context, castration indicates that the sexual relation, this form of relation between incarnated subjects mediated by desire and language, this relation between bodies that are also speaking bodies, that are libido and signifier articulated, cannot be realised as unity, as an affirmation of the primacy of the One, as the constitution of relations of complementarity, of symmetry. It is realised as a relation in disjunction: the only way, in Lacan’s eyes, to emerge with a relation to difference is the fundamental area of the ethical and political contribution of psychoanalysis. But this is a way to open experience to the possibility of another jouissance.

In this sense, affirming that capitalism forecloses castration means to insist that, inside it, there is no space for an infinitude that does not take place under the

48 Lacan, “Le Séminaire. Livre XV,” session of February 7, 1968.

49 Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX*, 13.

infinitely bad form of the *plus-de-jouir* and its maximisation of performance. This is an infinitude that reminds us that its actualisation can only take place under the condition of dissolving the modes of relation as they have so far constituted and so far allowed the material reproduction of our social life. Therefore, capitalism knows nothing about the things of love. Like eroticism in Bataille, love would not know what to do within an accounting infinity. On the other hand, the idea of foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) here appeals to a notion of expulsion from the symbolic order and return in the Real under the multiple forms of social delirium. The jouissance expelled from the symbolic order is not simply eliminated; it returns as that which seems at every moment to put such order in check from the outside, and it haunts it with all the paranoid forms of delirium (persecution, grandeur, destruction, and so on).

What Lacanian psychoanalysis shows us, then, is that the direction of treatment, the modalities of clinical intervention, are inseparable from the deepening of critique in relation to the libidinal economy of a social order that is entangled with capitalism and its forms of existence. It leads us to break our bonds with such an order in the name of a jouissance that capitalism seeks – by all means – to destroy.

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