

A-sexual Violence and Systemic Enjoyment

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There is a proverb, attributed to Oscar Wilde, which is increasingly relevant lately: “Everything is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.” Perhaps this shouldn’t be taken as an eternal wisdom, but more as a very poignant description of the present historical—and *political*—moment.

That sex is about power can of course mean several different things. It can mean – and this is a more traditional understanding – that sex and sexuality are all about power games; for example, about women seducing men and making them do whatever they want, or vice versa. We can change “men” and “women” to different sexual partners, but the point remains that sexuality, as also implied in desire, enjoyment, love, gives you certain power over the other person, and that this is actually what it is all about. In other words, in this understanding sex is used *for*, and *as*, power, by means of using and turning *something in the other* (say, their desire) against them. In this constellation, power (position of power) is not so much the starting point as it is a result, even an “honestly earned” outcome. “Honestly earned” in the sense that the game—which is basically the game of seduction—obeys certain rules, the fundamental one being that one can obtain this power only by inciting the other to hand it to us. One only uses against the other what one has succeeded provoking in them. It is by responding to my seduction that the other hands me the weapon, the power.

In classical literature one of the most prominent and interesting examples of the exploration of sexuality and desire as power-relation is of course Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*).¹

¹ This famous eighteenth-century epistolary novel has also seen many screen adaptations, the most well-known of which is probably Stephen Frears’s film *Dangerous Liaisons* from 1988,

People's lives, and particularly the lives of women, can be ruined by their desire, since the social setting of the eighteenth century did not allow for a woman's desire not to be fully covered by wedlock. But in the novel these two levels of power are distinguished: as a result of Valmont's manipulating seduction and subsequent abandonment, Tourvel dies not of social shame and exclusion, but of the injury inflicted, via her love, to her being. We can say of course that this casting of women as beings who can "die from love" is itself deeply ideological, and it could be read this way, but this is not what is primarily at stake in the novel.

What is at stake is, *first*, a more general proposition that lies at the origin of Valmont's and Marquise's (de Merteuil) pact, and which constitutes an important theme in eighteenth-century literature, namely that even the most authentic feelings, such as love, can be "mechanically produced" by appropriate machinations.² Valmont decides to make Madame de Tourvel fall in love with him, so he forms a strategy and systematically carries it out step by step, leaving nothing to chance. And Madame de Tourvel does in fact fall in love with him. We'll return to this mechanical aspect later.

The other crucial aspect of Valmont's seduction is the (over)emphasis on Tourvel's surrendering willingly. Not only willingly, but in full and sober awareness of the drastic consequences of her actions: he does not want her to give in to his seduction in a moment of passion and confusion.

Valmont thus makes his project doubly complicated. Firstly because of the state of mind of Tourvel when he meets her. Not only is she known for her genuine (rather than moralizing) virtue, but also for her being genuinely happy in her marriage. And secondly because, as he keeps repeating, her surrender must be a result of reflection and sober decision,

with Glenn Close, John Malkovich and Michelle Pfeiffer in the leading roles. The novel is constructed as an exchange of letters from which we can reconstruct the story. The two main characters, Marquise de Merteuil and Vicomte de Valmont, have broken up their carnal relationship in order to better stay true to the pact which binds them at the level of their principles and ideas. This pact and the "duty" following from it basically consist in seducing and manipulating other people (as many as possible) into doing whatever they want them to do. The main storyline involves Valmont's seduction of a particularly difficult target, Madame de Tourvel. I discuss Laclos' novel in much more detail in *Ethics of the Real* (London: Verso, 2012).

² Julien Offray de La Mettrie's famous work *L'homme machine* (1747) constitutes the obvious background of this plot.

not based on her giving in to his seductive efforts in a moment of confused passion. He emphasizes this again and again, and this also constitutes the reason for which he twice refuses to take advantage of the opportunities (to score a quick “victory”) offered to him. Each time with the explanation that this would be too easy, and not worthy of a true and capable hunter that he is. “Leave the humble poacher to kill the stag where he has surprised it in its hiding place; the true hunter will bring it to bay.”³ He also explains:

My plan is (...) to make her perfectly aware of the value and extent of each one of the sacrifices she makes me; not to proceed so fast with her that the remorse is unable to catch up; it is to show her virtue breathing its last breath in long-protracted agonies; to keep that somber spectacle ceaselessly before her eyes.⁴

At stake here is clearly his own fantasy and the way in which the latter frames his enjoyment for him—a classic example of what Lacanian psychoanalysis puts under the clinical heading of perversion: forcing the other to subjectivize herself. Perversion, and particularly its sadistic version, is not about treating the other as an object, but about treating her in such a way that would trigger, demand, “extract” a subjectivation; it is about forcing the other to become fully subject (to “decide,” consciously accept, etc.).⁵ A sadist pervert wants the other to subjectivize (split) herself in response to the surplus object he makes appear for her, and to supplement her lack (division) by that same object. The pervert wants the Other to become a complete Other, a “complet(ed)” subject. Ultimately, he posits himself as the *instrument* of the impossible enjoyment of the Other.

In the case of Valmont it is very clear that none of his seductive machinations with Tourvel are simply about sex — the whole thing is indeed about power (making her do what he wants, and proving his point). But of course power itself gets sexualized in this process of its “purification”: the very proving of his point is for him the ultimate source of enjoyment. (There

³ Choderlos de Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1961), 63 (Letter 23).

⁴ Ibid, 150 (Letter 70).

⁵ Another example would be William Styron’s novel *Sophie’s Choice*, and the Alan J. Pakula film (with Meryl Streep) based on it. I refer of course to the story’s traumatic kernel: Meryl Streep arriving at Auschwitz with her two kids, a boy and a girl, and the sadistic German officer forcing her to choose one that will survive (or else both would be killed).

is also a suggestion in the novel that at some point he has genuinely fallen in love with Tourvel, but this is another matter, and another layer of the story, which we will not pursue here.)

Independently of this specific setting (of perversion), and looked at from Madame de Tourvel's perspective, it is clear that a certain subjectivation and exposure – (via) desire – can *always* be at stake in “sexual relations”; there is a possible dimension of power (and its abuse) that always surrounds the very event of our desire. The fact is that we risk to be, and sometimes are, hanged by the ropes of *our own desire*.

It seems that this dimension has been strongly repressed or erased in today's predominant debates concerning power and sexual violence, because any hint at a possible subjective participation (by the victim) in the configuration of abuse is perceived as an outrageous insult. This is because it appears to lend itself directly to claims such as: she was raped because she (more or less secretly) desired it. But this outraged dismissal of the question of desire misses the point, and it does little service to the victims.

Desire is in itself a complex, dialectical thing; it is not one-dimensional and it cannot be reduced to its supposed last instance. Nor are we as subjects simply reducible to our desire (or enjoyment), but are split by it. This is to say that if I don't want something, and I say so, this “no” cannot be dismissed by pointing to the desire that (perhaps) nevertheless exists. And this holds even more true in the case of enjoyment: I can be forced to enjoy what I don't want to enjoy. As Slavoj Žižek emphasized some time ago, this configuration does not constitute any kind of vector or revealer of truth (of what I *really* want); on the contrary, it makes the forcing even worse, it makes it *more* and not less inexcusable.⁶ Also: women (and men as well) have rape fantasies, but this does not mean that deep down they secretly want to be raped, violated. This is not how fantasy works. Fantasy, in the strong psychoanalytic meaning of the word, is not some subjective scenario waiting and wanting to get realized. It participates in reality exactly as fantasy. In terms of psychoanalysis fantasies are not the opposite of reality, but its support.

What prevents fantasy from being fulfilled is not simply our fear (“lack of nerve” or other considerations), but above all the fact that fantasy fully fulfils its role *such as it is*, as fantasy. It is as fantasy that it provides the framework which guarantees (for us) the consistency of a certain segment

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company 2007), 55.

of our reality. This is precisely why, as Žižek also insists, a “realization of fantasy” can be, and usually is, utterly devastating for the subject. Because in being “realized” as empirical content, it disappears, disintegrates as the frame that has so far held our reality together. This is also why psychoanalytic work with fantasies does not consist in making subjects finally “realize” them, carry them out, but in gradually making them useless in their role of framing some reality for us and providing its consistency. We can henceforth relate to, or be part of this reality in a different way.

To take another example: if I fantasize about suddenly dying and my unfaithful lover being devastated by it, this does not mean that deep down I want to die or kill myself. What I want is to see (through the “window” of this fantasy, that is, through the otherwise impossible *perspective* that this fantasy opens on my reality) the other suffer because of losing me, I want to see him realize via this loss how important I have actually been to him. It is a fantasy that helps me sustain the reality of my actual love life, and not something that would constitute its future accomplishment (if fulfilled). The difference between the two is crucial, and not addressing it de facto leads to what this avoidance of addressing it wants to prevent: it makes those who fantasize indeed (feel) guilty/responsible for what happens to them in an utterly independent and brutal way. You can repeat to the victim as much as you want that it was not her fault, but if you don’t provide her with means of coping and tackling with the issues of desire and enjoyment you’ve done her very little service.

As to another possible configuration, involving what we commonly describe as seduction, I may in fact quite consciously allow myself to be seduced, say yes, and stick with this subjectivation even if I end up abandoned or betrayed. To say that it has all been a manipulation and I didn’t have any choice, that is, to utterly deny one’s subjectivity, is a strange way of “affirming” oneself. The fact that I participated in a given situation as a subject (for example that I have fallen in love and willingly accepted, even encouraged certain actions of the other), does not exculpate the other with respect to their sometimes intentionally manipulative and harmful actions. Yet holding the other responsible for *their* actions should not have as its condition that I fully give up on my subjectivity (desire).

And, by the way, this problematical yet deeply ingrained conviction that a victim cannot be a subject exists also in other situations and circumstances. During the war in Yugoslavia many refugees from Bosnia came to Slovenia, and people – differently from what is going on in the

recent refugee crises – mostly welcomed them and were willing to help. But there was also some hostility which, as a rule, popped up when the refugees started appearing as subjects, and not just as devastated victims, deprived of everything. Some people were outraged, for example, when Bosnian women would go out nicely dressed, and even wear some (cheap) jewelry. In order for us to love (our) victims and help them, we need them to stay victims, and helpless.

To point this out is not to deny the *real* structural (as well as psychological) difficulty involved in seeing in the same frame the other as the subject and the other as the victim, yet this is precisely the “parallax view” that the truth demands.

In any case, this is slippery ground, and it seems to be all the more intolerable because it is slippery. And it is here that another aspect of the theme of “sexuality and power” comes in, or another way of understanding the saying that “sex is all about power.” It presents us not so much with the power of sexuality (power of desire, of seduction), as with the power that comes from being in the *position* to seduce, or in the position to more or less subtly blackmail the other into gratifying our sexual desires. The key word here is of course *position*—power is all about position (of power), and sex enters the game on a secondary level.

This second configuration (conception) itself comprises two relatively different structures. As indicated, one emphasizes that there are certain (power-) positions which facilitate seduction and even automatically engender it, and the other exposes the abuse of power in forcing, blackmailing people to cooperate with our sexual desires. Both are real, but they are not exactly the same. The first brings us back to the other briefly mentioned theme of *Dangerous Liaisons*, the theme of the “mechanical,” inexorable causality by which even such subjective sentiment as love can be produced.⁷ There are situations, configurations and “positions” which seem to engender almost automatically something like love. This phenomenon is also not foreign to psychoanalysis and its practical setting, with the transference (also called transference love) almost inevitably appearing during the treatment. To reciprocate this love is of course not what is expected from the analyst, and it would inevitably end the analysis and transform the nature of the relationship. But if, as Freud humorously describes this possible alternative path of transference, the analyst decides

⁷ For more on this, see Mladen Dolar, “La femme-machine,” *New Formations* 23 (1994).

to stop the analysis and marry the patient, this is not exactly the same as abuse.

The other structure is much more perfidious, it is a matter of – often systemic and structural—blackmail. (For example: you risk your job, or miss a promotion, or have other kinds of trouble if you do not comply with sexual desires of those in the position of power.) In this case “sex is all about power” refers to something else than power-games involved in seduction: you are in the *position of power*, and you use this position to solicit sexual favors, or simply exercise, impose your sexuality on persons who are in no position to say no (or who, if they say no, can face severe consequences). In this conceptual configuration power exists outside of sexuality, and is used to get sex. In other words, in the first configuration it is sex (desire) that is used for power, it gives you power over the other person, whereas in the second configuration it is power that is used for sex.

A large majority of the public discussions about sex and violence that we see today in the West belong to the second category. One could even say that the interrogation of the first (of the dialectics of desire, and love) has all but completely ceded its place to the interrogation of power positions and power relations, and of sexuality as their *hostage*.

I would like to suggest that there exists a possible other, very tricky side to this move in which one first entirely separates sex and power, and then reunites them in a new “sex-power” compound, defined by *abuse*. This rather overwhelmingly present link between sex and power, where sexual violence appears as a result of the abuse of power, has important consequences for both how we think about power and how we think about sex. Its particularly problematic side concerns the way in which it affects our thinking about power, how it efficiently narrows our critical scope when it comes to thinking about power.

In the conclusion to his recent text “Reflections on the MeToo Movement and Its Philosophy,” Jean-Claude Milner briefly points out the danger that the movement faces if it simply embraces this direction: it risks lending itself to a rather sinister ideological operation.

What operation? The predominant talk about sexual violence as abuse of power (supported and exploited by the media) has its other side: it implicitly suggests that power is problematic *only* where it involves sexuality. Or more precisely: it suggests that it is problematic because someone *enjoys* it—with enjoyment constituting the link to sexuality. As Milner succinctly describes the consequences of this kind of stance: brutality of power is not

contested per se, if nobody enjoys it. What is impermissible is for any individual to use their professional position to satisfy their own personal fantasies.⁸

This is a very important observation. Of course we can immediately cry out: Well, it should be impermissible! Yes, but we should nevertheless not move too quickly when reading and discussing this, and rather try to see what exactly is being said.

Power, or its abuse, can be used to “get” many things that we like to talk about, and *do* talk about a lot, like sex or personal gain. But, let us not forget, it can also be used to influence and decide some major systemic, fundamental social issues, such as, for example, distribution of social wealth, general healthcare, military interventions, prosecution (and character assassination) of people who expose serious systemic malpractices and crimes. If all that can be wrong about power is its non-professional abuse, then we have no means to even begin to address these issues.

The point would be the following: massive and systematic presentation of the link between power and sex (or personal gain/enjoyment in general) conveniently whitewashes situations where power is exercised in ways that affect our lives, all our lives, in a most fundamental and often extremely brutal ways.

The example of Julian Assange is paramount here: the (mere) allegations of sexual abuse (the prosecution of which has been recently dropped altogether) were, and still are, enough to block out in public eyes the enormous systemic and systematic crimes and abuses revealed by Assange and WikiLeaks.

Or consider this supposedly “natural” situation (“natural” particularly in the US): a professor having sex with a student is a serious and utterly inadmissible abuse of power, whereas the fact that this same student had to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to get a decent education is simply business as usual. This example is emphatically not meant to be about comparing the two, because they cannot be compared, nor about one evil being possibly excused on the grounds that the other is even bigger; it is about what we consider “evil” (or not at all) in the first place. The point is not that sexual abuse is not seriously evil, but that it *itself* often functions today in a much broader power game as a welcome decoy: it

⁸ Jean-Claude Milner, “Reflections on the MeToo Movement and Its Philosophy”, *Problemi International*, No.3 (2019): 85. (Accessible on-line at <http://problemi.si>)

functions as the stain the elimination of which whitewashes other ways in which power operates, making these look simply normal (“professional”).

In other words, I’d like to suggest that the mainstream focus on sexuality and sexual scandals is *also* a symptom, and not only a welcome indicator that sexuality and sexual abuse are finally being taken seriously (which is unambiguously a good thing). There are some extremely significant dimensions of power that we simply don’t talk about, and don’t have the means to talk about. But we are offered to talk about sex as much as we want.

Again, to make this absolutely clear: the point is not that we talk too much about sexual abuse and neglect other forms of violence; no, the point is that we talk about it mostly in a wrong way, that is in a way that allows for the concealment of systemic causes of violence in general, *including systemic causes of sexual violence*. Paradoxically, for all the talk about sex and sexuality, nobody really cares about, or talks about, *it*. The talk is indeed all about power, and—as the obverse side of this—about whitewashing of power (by ways of eliminating the allegedly “subjective stain” of sexuality). In this situation the issue of sex is not overemphasized, but rather (over)*exploited*, yet not taken seriously in itself.

An important issue at stake here is of course also the old issue of the difference between subjective and objective, or between subjective and systemic violence.

To quote Žižek on this question:

The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as perturbation of the “normal,” peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this “normal” state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something subjectively violent. (...) It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence.⁹

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador 2008), 2.

The implicit context of this this quote is political, referring to the difference between the “smooth” everyday functioning of power (with the amount of invisible repression/violence necessary for this smooth operation), and the visible outbursts of violence with people protesting on the streets, setting fire to cars and shops, attacking the police.

In relation to this one could see the ideological operation/configuration that I am trying to describe as something that casts or deploys this difference between subjective and objective violence entirely on the side of the systemic forces of power themselves, establishing this divide there. Systemic violence is perceived, as it usually is, as business as usual. However, the moment a serious and growing dissatisfaction and revolt appears on the side of the people, a revolt that threatens the stability of power and cannot be easily ignored, the “issue” is recognized and its causes quickly attributed to the subjectively corrupt usurpation of the systemic dimension of power, that is to its *abuse*. Somebody abused their power, which makes the problem appear as a result of purely subjective violence. What follows from there is this axiom: Power can only be wrong when it is abused. Or perhaps even more precisely; power can never be wrong it can only be abused.

So, if objective violence is invisible, subjective violence is visible, often very visible – also when figures and representatives of power engage in it. And I’d like to suggest that sexuality functions today not only as one of the prominent cases of visible, subjective violence, but also and perhaps in the first place as embodiment of the very *visibility/subjectivity of violence*. It seems that nowhere more than in sexual violence the subjective factor is in the foreground, and that “sexual violence” has the capacity (or characteristic) of absorbing, or subjectivizing all layers of violence. If it is sexual, it cannot be but personal – not in the sense of necessarily involving deep feelings, emotions or passions, but in the sense of someone *enjoying* it, and hence being personally/subjectively corrupt.

And here we come back to the already briefly mentioned notion of *professionalism*. You can do all kinds of violent things to people if you do it professionally, that is without (visible) personal satisfaction or gain. It seems obvious that the notion of “professionalism” also underwent an important change in this contemporary ideological operation. The more classical (and in some ways laudable) notion of professionalism has been hijacked and taken in the direction of perversion, as I briefly described it earlier. The classical notion was mostly about not getting your personal preoccupations

and views interfere with your job, *while taking full subjective responsibility* for the objective outcome of your actions, which is what the notion of “objective responsibility” is about in this case. The new notion and ideal of professionalism simply pretends to cut off any subjective dimension, and casts the professional as a *mere executor* (of higher forces and orders); the subjective dimension is reduced entirely to just a possible source of troubles. (If the execution of these orders has devastating results, it has to be because a subjective factor got in the way of their pure execution. And this is very different from taking subjective responsibility for the objective state of things that you helped to bring about. It is, more often than not, about offering a subjective *explanation* for what is objectively wrong.)

The problem is that this professionalization of power (via elimination of enjoyment) doesn't really work: as psychoanalysis keeps pointing out, you don't get rid of enjoyment so easily. Moreover, there is such a thing as *impersonal enjoyment*, and perversion is the key figure of it. Contrary to how it is often depicted in movies, the true image of perversion is not that of an old horny man observing a young girl with saliva dripping from his mouth; on the contrary, it's true image is that of a cold and composed “professional” making *others* ashamed of themselves and their enjoyment.

Important to emphasize here is that I am not trying to denounce the perverse position on the grounds that behind its “professional” posture its practitioners nevertheless enjoy, and are hence bad. This would be repeating the same argument that I am trying to dismantle here. The figure of perversion is important because it challenges the idea that all enjoyment is simply and directly subjective, personal. It testifies to the existence and dimension of *impersonal enjoyment*. It testifies to the existence of what we could call “systemic enjoyment.” Perverts know that it exists, and they certainly know how to put it to personal use, but that doesn't make the enjoyment simply subjective in its origin.

Why is this important? Because today the key question seems to be the following: Is it even possible to conceive of power without some enjoyment sticking to it? Can there be power without this libidinal stain blemishing its purity? If we accept the question in this form and let it orientate us, we end up with two possible attitudes.

- 1) One that claims that this should at least be our ideal (even if unattainable), and that the progress lies in the potentially

infinite purification of power, invention of more and more complicated rules and prescriptions that regulate it and prevent its abuse.

- 2) One that cynically gives up on these attempts, embraces enjoyment, invites us to realistically accept that there is no power without the libidinal compound, and suggests that we better get used to it, and even use it fully.

But, as we can see almost every day now, this is a deadlock, it confronts us with a wrong, and politically rather disastrous alternative. For isn't this precisely how our political space is structured today between "left progressive liberals" and the rise of the alt-right?

As Angela Nagle has pointed out,¹⁰ we have been witnessing lately a curious turn in which the new populist right is taking the side of transgression and rebellion, traditionally associated with the left: they talk about breaking the taboos (of speech, but also of conduct), they dare to speak up, say and do the forbidden things, challenge the established structures (including the media) and denounce the "elites." Even when in power, they continue with this "dissident" rhetoric of opposition and of courageous transgression (for example against European institutions and their bureaucracy, or else against the "deep State"). Transgression seems to be "sexy," even if it simply means no longer greeting your neighbor, because, "Who invented these stupid rules and why should I obey them?" In this constellation, and after giving up on the more radical ideas of social and economic justice, and on exposing the systemic causes of injustice, the left has paradoxically ended up on the conservative side: defending the rule of law, conserving what we have, and responding to contradictions, excesses and plain catastrophes generated by the present socio-economic system by means of introducing more and more new rules, regulations and adjustments that are supposed to keep the "anomalies" at bay and to prevent/punish any abuse. This growing and often impenetrable corpus of rules and sub-rules, which are usually easily disregarded by the big players, but tend to drastically complicate the lives of smaller players and individuals, includes "cultural" rules and injunctions which have become, in the past decades, the main battlefield between the "left" and the "right," particularly in the US.

¹⁰ See her book *Kill All Normies* (New York: Zero books, 2017).

So, on the one side we have people who want “power without enjoyment”, and on the other people who openly and boastingly enjoy it, who make it a matter of enjoyment. And the problem is that both sides are part of the same fundamental logic, which is why they often need and encourage each other, keep responding to each other, rather than to any social real.

To at least conceptually break out of this alternative between a-subjective power without enjoyment, and subjectively affirmed enjoyment as power, we have to first recognize that this is a false alternative, and why. The true question is simply *not* this: is it possible to have power without the subjective libidinal compound or not?

The conceptual shift to accomplish would be to conceive of the very libidinal compound of power (which we usually associate with some subjective gain) as something that is never simply or immediately subjective, but is rather generated out of the structure itself, and is *symptomatic of its contradictions*.

As I tried to develop more extensively in *What is sex?*, the libidinal compound of power (“enjoyment”), or of any symbolic/social structure, is not simply some unavoidable human factor that comes to stain its purity, but is the symptom of an inner contradiction of this structure, of a gap in it. It is this contradiction that we need to deal with, and just cutting off the enjoyment does little to help with that.

The fact that there is enjoyment always points to a “leak” or contradiction, inconsistency of the structure. If structure were a fully consistent entity, it wouldn’t produce, in its functioning, these layers and shoots of (surplus) enjoyment. The latter always occur in places of structural difficulty, interruption, discontinuity, passages from one level to the other, from the outside to the inside, and so on. We usually respond to these contradictions and shoots of enjoyment (that we can experience directly or indirectly) by subjectivizing them in different ways. A subject is not the cause of this enjoyment, but a response to it.

So the strong claim here would be that *no* enjoyment is simply personal, subjective in its outset; it is not subjective, but *subjectivizing* (inducing subjectivation), which is a different thing. It can be “subjectivized” in different ways, and the figure of the boasting, self-affirming, often authoritarian “enjoyer” doubtlessly gets a lot of thrust from the growing discontent that people experience in the face of the also growing amount of systemic enjoyment and its pressure, which is being methodically

disclaimed by the purely “professional” executors of politics.

What is “systemic enjoyment”? It is the term¹¹ with which one could perhaps address more specifically what Freud has called *das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, the discontent that grows out of different layers of our social edifice and its contradictions. Freud’s term points to an affect: discontent, discomfort, but to what exactly does this affect respond? To the growing complexity of cultural, civilizational configurations and demands, yet which cannot be reduced to symbolic regulations, prohibitions and restrictions, but also imply and generate new forms and even injunctions of enjoyment. (The “injunction” part was added by Lacan.) For Freud this basically meant that in dealing with and regulating the drives, *Kultur* itself takes on a kind of drive-life and logic, so that the two can no longer be simply opposed, but work in a singular and sometimes devastating complicity.

The logical form implied in this configuration of complicity can be easily extended to political economy, or even, and perhaps more accurately, it can be argued that it *comes from* political economy; and that psychic economy is its “extimate” prolongation.

Lacan famously claimed that “Marx invented the symptom” – that is to say the very logic and structure of what is called “symptom” – and he has coined the term “surplus enjoyment” upon the Marxian concept of “surplus value.” This is more than just an analogy. The Marxian concept has provided Lacan with a way to think of enjoyment as systemic, precisely, that is as being generated out of a certain glitch in the “system” or social/symbolic order. And I would suggest that Lacan’s theory of the four discourses is a response to this idea, a further and systematic elaboration of the fact that enjoyment is not simply a subjective category. For this theory also allows Lacan to redefine what is implied for him in the term “discourse,” Discourse is not simply synonymous with language and speech, or with the symbolic order in general, it now gets to be defined as a “social link,” *le lien social*. And while Lacan held that all symbolic structures and discourses involve a contradiction, a lapse at the point where systemic enjoyment emerges, he also suggested that they do not exactly base their entire economy on it, as is the case with capitalist economy, which “discovered” the productivity/exploitability of this lapse or glitch. In other words, whereas the glitch and the systemic enjoyment emerging at its point can function as an obstructive element of a social link, and calls for repression (or some

¹¹ I am not the only Lacanian using this term. Samo Tomšič uses it in a similar way in his recent book *The Labor of Enjoyment* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2019).

other forms its “domestication” and control), capitalist economy discovered it as a possible source of profit. Is capitalism one of the four Lacanian discourses or social link? The longer I keep thinking about this, the less I think so.

Capitalism, in the sense of capitalist economy, is not a social link, yet it affects, can affect, all social links. Perhaps some more than others. It affects them with its two fundamental inventions, which involve the *countability* of the surplus generated out of the contradiction,¹² and the systemic exploitation of this contradiction (non-relation) as the very *source* of profitable productivity (source of “growth”).¹³ This exploitation of the contradiction was made possible by the new material means of production, which involved labor force as a peculiar commodity (object) to be bought and sold: labor appeared on the market as yet another commodity for sale. This is a key point in what Marx analyzes as “the transformation of money into capital.” To put it very simply: what *makes the products* (namely, labor-power) also appears with them on the market as *one of the products*, objects for sale. This paradoxical redoubling corresponds to the point of structural negativity and its appropriation as the locus of the market’s “miraculous” productivity. The money-owner finds on the market a commodity whose use value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, and whose actual consumption is a creation of value. Labor-power *as commodity* is the point that marks the constitutive negativity, gap, of this system: the point where one thing immediately falls into another (use value into source of value). Labor is a product among other products, yet it is not exactly like other products: where other products have a use value (and hence a *substance* of value), this particular commodity “leaps over” or “lapses” to the source of value. The use value of this commodity is to be the source of value of (other) commodities. It has no “substance” of its own.

It is this peculiar commodity that gives body to the point of contradiction, and keeps *laboring the contradiction*, as it were. The surplus

¹² This is how Lacan puts it: “Something changed in the master's discourse at a certain point in history. We are not going to break our backs finding out if it was because of Luther, or Calvin, or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa, or in the Mediterranean Sea, or anywhere else, for the important point is that on a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins.” *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 177.

¹³ I develop this point concerning the discovery and the exploitation of the contradiction (non-relation) as a source of profit more extensively in *What is sex?*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

produced here gets integrated in the symbolic structure by means of being counted, by means of counting (as surplus value), which in turn implies a supposedly miraculous expansion of the given symbolic structure, implied in the perspective of “unceasing growth.”

To develop this further and in more detail would largely exceed the scope of this paper, so let me return to the starting point. What Freud has detected and called “discomfort in civilization” could be seen as him recognizing some effects of a newly established *short-circuit* between symbolic structures and (libidinal) economy of the drives, their becoming strangely *homologized* in their very heterogeneity and incompatibility. (The concept of the Superego clearly belongs to this register.) His concept of the unconscious was born not simply out of the configuration in which symbolic prohibitions and restrictions demanded repression of certain drives (and their representations), but out of a more dialectical configuration which revealed an unexpected complicity between drives and repression, between (purely) symbolic and the libidinal.

This complicity or short-circuit could be seen as a historical occurrence, yet one needs to be very precise here: the co-existence, in their very heterogeneity, of the symbolic structure and enjoyment is not historical, but belongs to the very “leaking” ontology of symbolic order. Enjoyment is generated at the points of these contradictions. On the other hand, their “homologization” (in the form of a new way of counting), and the consequent massive complicity between the libidinal and symbolic, is a historic occurrence or “invention.”

As Freud has pointed out, there can be huge amounts of repression that we simply know nothing about, because they are “successful” in the sense of not inducing any neurotic behavior, or simply not producing any symptoms, not leaving any further traces. The symptom has two sides, or levels. On the one hand it points to a contradiction, a problem. But it points to it by means of providing a solution to it – an often strange or cumbersome solution, yet a solution nevertheless. The symptom is this solution. The symptom alerts us to the fact that repression has been engaged in a further economy, and has a consequential afterlife. Neurotic behavior always involves an *economy*, it involves an economy that feeds on its own negativity, and this has far reaching consequences and implications.

If this kind of *economy* of surplus (enjoyment) which has until then remained mostly uncounted is the invention of capitalism, does this mean that the symptoms that led to the birth of psychoanalysis were also related,

connected to this historical occurrence, dependent on it? Even more brutally formulated: does this mean that people in pre-capitalist times were never neurotic, or were so in a significantly lesser degree? In a way, yes, this would be the radical implication. Which of course does not amount to saying that they were “happier.” And even less that no repression had been at work there, on the contrary. It rather means that its repressive use had by far exceeded its economic use, its exploitation as a possible source of profit or gain, on the individual as well as social scale.

A considerable amount of Foucault’s work revolves around describing and thinking this shift, which could be formulated as shift from repression to the economy of repression (for example: from brutal punishment and torture to imprisonment and surveillance). And economy of repression does not only mean “cashing in” on repression, but also involves what Freud has discovered as the vicious spiral of repression and its “gain” or profit, a spiral in which they mutually reinforce, amplify each other. Yet even from the purely economic point of view, this complicity is not a fairy tale, as Foucault tends to suggest. For Foucault, and to put it very simply, this economy is so vicious because it is utterly unassailable; it turns everything to its profit, it capitalizes on its own contradictions, rather than being threatened and endangered by them. And of course, Foucault’s criticism of Freud and psychoanalysis in general is related to this point: psychoanalysis participates fully in this economy, and encourages it with its own means. This is what it’s supposed “invention of sexuality,” as Foucault phrases it, means: with sexuality and its repression psychoanalysis discovered something that could be infinitely exploited and put to use in this modern economy.¹⁴

But there is another possible, and far more critical perspective on this: Freud discovered sexuality as the privileged territory of symptoms, that is precisely of everything which, in this allegedly “perfect” economy, *does not work*. More precisely, he discovered it as the symptom of everything which, in this perfect economy, produces an *additional*, further, second degree “surplus” which cannot be put back to profitable use, but constitutes disruption, a break-down, a serious crisis. In other words, what Freud saw so well in relation to the “libidinal economy,” and what he has named *das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, was not only how this economy feeds on the profits of repression, but also that it comes with accumulating costs, and that the

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume one: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

latter were about to burst. They did burst eventually, although in a rather unexpected, global “political” way: in the form of a world war, no less. The latter was the catastrophe that had, among other things, the effect of stabilizing the economy for a while.

Everything can be put to use, or made to count, yes. The problem – a possible crisis of capitalist order—does not come from the fact that some things, however, cannot be put to use, and resist this use; the threatening, critical point is not resistance, but the fact that another kind of useless surplus gets produced/constituted *while* everything is put to use; it is being produced as the other side of this expanding inclusion. The more inclusive capitalist economy becomes, the more exclusion it generates. This is paradoxical only if we don’t recognize the difference between the two levels on which this operates. Absolute uselessness is not something that resists being put to use, it is what remains or is generated out of things being put to use. This accumulating, unbound, useless surplus – what I refer to as “systemic enjoyment”—is not what offers resistance to the capitalist economy; rather, it is something that threatens to make it explode.¹⁵ But it can be put to use on another level, at least temporarily; more precisely, it can be *bound* by means of politics and ideas, rather than directly by economy (although some economic use or benefit can also result from this bounding). This, for example, is what we call today populism. What is wrong with populism is not that it engages the masses, not even that it advances by gross simplifications, but that while leaving the economy of repression intact (and growing), it bounds the real and growing dissatisfaction of people in all kinds of imaginary ways, which nevertheless can have very palpable material consequences.

¹⁵ We can recognize the same logic in the case of the climate crisis, global warming and its core cause: the emissions. The latter are essentially *by-products* of capitalist economy and its use of resources. The climate has not been changed simply by our direct efforts, by what we created and built, but mostly because of what has accumulated in this process: pure waste. The ecological crisis is not simply a problem of the world’s finitude, a problem regarding the fact that natural resources will run out. This obviously can (and will) cause shortage, wars, etc., but the problem of climate change comes from elsewhere: namely from what *comes into existence* when we burn these resources. If we were able to just use up these resources with no remains or surplus, we wouldn’t be talking today of climate change. We talk about it because of the emissions, which are a kind of useless “surplus” of industrial exploitation of natural resources. In other words, the problem is not only natural resources are running out (which obviously *is* a problem), but that while running out they seem to be returning, reentering our space from another side, from a “beyond,” from the real – in the form of another kind of surplus, a menacing disaster.

The rise of populism that we talk about a lot these days is emphatically not simply about the personal style of populist leaders: their bet on enjoyment as political factor may be a good match for their personal affinities, but the libidinal compound that they so aptly and amply use is not generated there, by them and their personalities. It is generated by the contradictions and impasses of the social space in which these leaders manage to prevail and thrill.

Let me conclude with a brief remark, very much related to this, concerning the terminological shift that has taken place in the last decades in academic debates, the shift from the possibly controversial notion of *politics* to the (also academically) more glamorous notion *power*. This terminological shift is quite significant, because the two notions allow for very different sets of distinctions, implying very different levels of reflection, critique and action.

“Politics” can be (judged) good or bad, right or wrong, and it can be judged bad or wrong even if there is no direct personal gain or abuse involved. A morally good person can lead very bad politics (and vice versa). Politics allows for discussion, controversy, rebellion, militancy, (counter)organization.

“Power”, as the term is mostly used today, is something else. As suggested earlier, power can never be wrong, it can only be abused. Of course we can say that it is *always* bad (or wrong), but then we haven’t said much. Yet the moment we introduce some distinctions and criticism, we usually end up somewhere along the following two divides: professionalism/abuse (corruption), or else benevolence/wickedness. And these are all subjective, not social categories. Of course people can organize and protest against wicked leaders publicly, but the structuring of this protest is very different. Abuse/corruption (if manifest or proved) is directly accused (and subjected to outrage) and demands elimination. Which is fine. But we should not forget that this has a clear limit: the bottom line is that if we eliminate the abuser, or cut out the corruption, everything will be well and sound (again).

Just think about the situation that surrounded Trump’s presidency. Very few people questioned the fundamental political and economic contradictions, and their endless prolongation in the form of a status quo, that have produced the incredible amount of systemic surplus enjoyment, which people felt so strongly about as to elect someone like Trump in the first place. Of course he was despicable as president, but many of his critics

all too eagerly succumbed, and still succumb, to one of *his* favorite slogans. They seem to believe that because Trump has been eliminated as president, or eliminated from the political space, America will become great again.

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