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The Vagaries of the Superego

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the distinction between “ideal ego”, “ego-ideal” and “superego” structured from the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triad made by Lacan, this study investigates how is possible to distinguish the a-sexual social space from the domain of libidinally-cathexed interactions. Through the analysis of Balibar’s, Miller’s, Schuster’s and Hägglund’s ideas, paths and strategies are defined to analyze the existing dynamics between symbolic power, law and superego. What emerges is the reconstruction of a new subjectivity which is capable, at the same time, to overcome the jouissance-superego dynamic at the basis of Lacanian reflection and face the challenges of contemporary post-humanism. Therefore, what subject stands for is the inhuman core of being-human, what Hegel called self-relating negativity, what Freud called death drive. The text proposes, in short, how the Subject is what is in a human being more than human, the immortality of the death-drive which makes it a living dead, something that insists beyond the cycle of life and death.

Keywords: ego; jouissance; Lacan; law; superego.

The big question Freud addressed in the aftermath of the Great War was: how does the a-sexual social space distinguish itself from the domain of libidinally-cathexed interactions? For Freud, the operator of this a-sexualization is superego. In his superb essay *The invention of the superego*, Etienne Balibar (Balibar, 1922) deals with the dialogue between Freud and Hans Kelsen, the leading Austrian legal philosopher, after the publication of Freud’s *Crowd psychology and the analysis of the ego* (1921). One should mention here also *The Ego and the Id* (1923) which is Freud’s reaction to Kelsen’s critique of *Crowd psychology*. The irony is that the

title *The Ego and the Id* is in some sense deceiving: the crucial new term introduced in the booklet is superego which forms a triad with ego and Id, and the main point of Freud's detailed analysis is how superego, the instance of our psychic life that acts as a self-critical conscience, internalizing social standards mostly learned from parents and teachers, draws its libidinal energy from the darkest sadist and masochist depths of the Id. However, Lacan has convincingly shown that there is a confusion in Freud: the title of the third chapter of *The Ego and the Id* is "The Ego and the Super-Ego (Ego-Ideal)", so Freud tends to use these two terms as synonyms (conceiving the ego-ideal as a forerunner of the superego), plus he also uses ego-ideal and ideal ego as interchangeable terms. The premise of Lacan's clarification is the equation between *jouissance* and superego: to enjoy is not a matter of following one's spontaneous tendencies; it is rather something we do as a kind of weird and twisted ethical duty. Based on this equation, Lacan introduces a precise distinction between the three terms: the "ideal ego" stands for the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, I would like others to see me); the ego-ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and propels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize; and the superego is this same agency in its revengeful, sadistic, punishing, aspect. The underlying structuring principle of these three terms is clearly Lacan's triad Imaginary-Symbolic-Real: ideal ego is imaginary, what Lacan calls the "small other", the idealized double-image of my ego; ego-Ideal is symbolic, the point of my symbolic identification, the point in the big Other from which I observe (and judge) myself; superego is real, the cruel and insatiable agency which bombards me with impossible demands and which mocks my failed attempts to meet them, the agency in the eyes of which I am all the more guilty, the more I try to suppress my "sinful" strivings and meet its demands. The old cynical Stalinist motto about the accused at the show trials who professed their innocence ("the more they are innocent, the more they deserve to be shot") is superego at its purest. So for Lacan superego "has nothing to do with moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned" (Lacan, Miller, & Porter, 1992, p. 310): superego is, on the contrary, the anti-ethical agency, the stigmatization of our ethical betrayal (Žižek, 2006).

In his critique of Freud's notion of the crowd, Kelsen as a neo-Kantian implicitly relies on the distinction between ego-ideal (the anonymous big Other, the symbolic order the status of which is non-psychic, i.e., which cannot be reduced to empirical psychic processes) and superego (the product of empirical psychic dynamic in an individual's interaction with

others)¹. The reproach to Freud is, to simplify it, that he only provides the empirical psychic genesis of a crowd held together by a Leader – there is no space in his theory for the big Other, for the ideal symbolic order which sustains individual subjects, for the public space of institutional state authority which makes us subjects in the double meaning of the term (autonomous subject and an individual subjected to the Law). More precisely, what Freud describes is the pathological distortion of the Law, is regression into mythic crowd-psychological level: Freud describes crowd pathology (constituted through the short-circuit of I and *a*, in Lacanese), and since he lacked the notion of the Symbolic, he misses the normal-normative big Other. (x) That's also why, from Lacan's standpoint, there is no space in Freud's triad of ego-superego-id for the "pure"/barred subject (\$), subject of the signifier, for the subject which is not psychic-empirical but equal to the Cartesian *cogito* or Kant's transcendental apperception: the Lacanian subject is not ego (which, for Lacan, is defined by imaginary identifications).

At this point, Balibar returns to Freud and defends him: superego as a psychic process is not just an accidental pathological distortion, it is the process which enables the subject to internalize the law, to integrate it into its psychic life as an agency which exerts an authority over him/her. As such, superego is a "pathological" supplement which necessarily accompanies the law, since the public law exists ONLY as internalized by subjects. What this means is that a subject is the subject of law only insofar as s/he remains caught in the unresolved Oedipal tensions which are the form of the interpersonal politics of power and subordination. These persisting tensions open up the subject to the authority of the Law – they push the subject to accept authority of the Law as the external (non-psychic) agency, the stable point of reference which can ease the inner-psychic tensions. The tensions described by Freud are, of course, not simply internal to the subject but are part of the interpersonal (family) politics, power struggle – this is why Balibar points out that, in his description of the formation of a crowd and the genesis of the superego, Freud doesn't provide a "psychoanalysis of politics" (an explanation of the political dynamic of crowds through libidinal processes which are in themselves apolitical) but rather its opposite, the politics of psychoanalysis (the explanation of the rise of the triadic

¹ There is a crucial difference here between Kant and Hegel: for Kant (and Kelsen as a neo-Kantian) empirical perversions are secondary, while for Hegel they arise from the immanent tensions of the notion itself – absolute freedom necessarily turns into terror, the honour of serving the Master who personifies a Cause into hypocritical flattery (as in the passage from Lenin to Stalin).

structure of ego-id-superego through the familial “political” power struggles) – or, as Lacan put it, the Freudian Unconscious is political.

But, as Lacan repeatedly points out, the big Other of the symbolic Law must already be here if a subject is to refer to it as the neutral external space – so we should make here one step further: how can the public authority itself, in its non-psychic status, emerge? Lacan’s answer is: the big Other cannot be reduced to a psychic agency, but it exists only if it is “externalized” by subjects – the “internalization” of the Law is effectively its externalization, its (presup)position as a non-psychic symbolic space. The Law is non-psychic, but it exists only if there are subjects who take it as existing. One has to be very precise here: Lacan is not providing the genesis of big Other from psychic dynamics, his thesis is rather that the subject is constitutively divided in itself, that its psychic intimacy exists only if there is a big Other, a space alienated from the subject to which it relates. (Only in psychosis this alienation is suspended.) The subjective correlate of the big Other is the empty “barred” subject (\$) which is more “intimate” than all the intimacy of even the deepest psychic processes. So we should turn around the usual notion that the “pure” abstract subject (the Cartesian *cogito*) is a kind of ideological illusion whose reality is the actual concrete individual caught and torn in psychic antagonisms: all the wealth of the individual’s “inner life” is a content which ultimately just fills in the void of the pure subject – in this sense, Lacan said that the ego is the “stuff of the I”.

Today, however, fathers behave more and more as ideal-egos, engaged in narcissistic competition with children – they no longer dare to assume the “authority” of a father – and, paradoxically, this process poses a serious obstacle to the emancipatory process. Let’s take the case of Chile: the difficulties in the ongoing struggle there are not the legacy of Pinochet’s oppressive dictatorship as such but the legacy of the gradual (fake) opening of his dictatorial regime: especially through the, 1990s, Chilean society underwent what we may call a fast post-modernization: an explosion of consumerist hedonism, superficial sexual permissiveness, competitive individualism, etc. Those in power realized that such atomized social space is much more effective than direct state oppression against radical Leftist projects which rely on social solidarity: classes continue to exist “in themselves” but not “for themselves”, I see others from my class more as competitors than as members of a same group with solidary interests.

Direct state oppression tends to unite opposition and promote organized forms of resistance, while in “postmodern” societies even extreme dissatisfaction assumes the form of chaotic revolts (from Occupy Wall Street to Yellow Vests) which soon run out of breath, unable to reach the “Leninist” stage of an organized force with a clear program.

At a more general level, this means that, if the symbolic Law (Name-of-the-Father) loses its authority – i.e., if there is no prohibition –, desire itself (sustained by the prospect to transgress it) vanishes – this is why permissiveness kills desire. Along these lines, Pierre Legendre and some other Lacanians claim that the problem today is the decline of the Name-of-the-Father, of the paternal symbolic authority: in its absence, pathological Narcissism explodes, evoking the specter of the primordial Real Father. Consequently, we should try to restore some kind of Law as the agent of prohibition.

Although this idea is to be rejected, it correctly points out how the decline of the Master in no way automatically guarantees emancipation but can well engender much more oppressive figures of domination. Is, however, the return to Prohibition sustained by Law the only way out? It seems that the very last Lacan, aware of this problem, proposed another solution which Miller, in his reading of Lacan, calls “cynical” – we cannot return to the authority of the Law, but what we can do is act as if we sustain the Law, we should maintain its authority as necessary although we know it is not true. Adrian Johnston (Johnston, n.d.) brought out the intricacies and ambiguities of this solution:

Passage through a concluding experience of “subjective destitution”, in which ego-level identifications as well as points of reference such as big Others and subjects supposed to know vacillate or vanish altogether, indeed is an essential, punctuating moment of the Lacanian analytic process. Nevertheless, Lacan does not consider it possible or desirable to dwell permanently in such an analysis-terminating destitute state. He sees it as both appropriate and inevitable that egos, big Others, subjects supposed to know, and the like will reconstitute themselves for the analysand in the aftermath of his/her analysis. Hopefully, the versions of these reconstituted in the wake of and in response to analysis will be better, more livable versions for the analysand.

What we get here is some kind of “postmodern” Lacan: we can confront the Real only in rare moments of lucidity, but this extreme experience cannot last, we have to return to our ordinary life of dwelling in semblances, in symbolic fictions... So instead of erasing god out of the picture, the only way is learn to how “‘make use of’ *Dieu comme le Nom-du-Père*”. In what precise sense, then, *les non-dupes errent*, i.e., those who pretend not to be duped by the religious illusion err, are in the wrong? Johnston indicates the way:

Lacan’s paraphrase of Dostoyevsky, according to which “if God is dead, then nothing is permitted”, seems to convey the sense that permanent radical atheism is undesirable as per the strict Lacanian definition of desire. De Kesel claims that, for Lacan, religion enjoys the virtue of sustaining desire. If

so, does Lacan's version of analysis really seek to do away with theism, religiosity, and the like? [...] The libidinal economy of the unconscious, centered on desire with its fundamental fantasies involving *objet petit a*, is sustained by the Law of God as the dead father and/or Name of-the-Father. If this God dies, then the entire economy He supports collapses (i.e., "nothing is permitted"). In *Télévision*, Lacan, speaking of matters Oedipal, remarks, "Even if the memories of familial suppression weren't true, they would have to be invented, and that is certainly done". Paraphrasing this remark, one might say that, by Lacan's lights, if God is dead, then, at least for libidinal reasons, he would have to be resurrected – and that has certainly been done. (Johnston, n.d.)

This is also how one can read Agamben's idea that if there is no god then reason itself disappears. Does "if god doesn't exist, then everything is prohibited" not mean that, in order to avoid the deadlock of everything being prohibited, there has to be a big Prohibition which calls for exceptions, i.e., which opens up the space for transgressions which generate *jouissance*? Or that, in order to sustain our desire, we need something like god (even if it is only in its more neutral irreligious form, as subject supposed to know)? How to combine this with Lacan's claim that atheism is the pinnacle of psychoanalytic experience? Is Lacan's line that name-of-the-Father should not be abolished but make use of the only way out? Jacques-Alain Miller has fearlessly spelt out the political implications of this stance: psychoanalysis

reveals social ideals in their nature of semblances, and we can add, of semblances with regard to a real which is the real of enjoyment. This is the cynical position, which resides in saying that enjoyment is *the only thing that is true*. (Miller, 2008, p. 109)

What this means is that a psychoanalyst:

acts so that semblances remain at their places while making sure that the subjects under his care do not take them as *real*... one should somehow bring oneself to remain *taken in by them* (fooled by them). Lacan could say that "those who are not taken in err": if one doesn't act as if semblances are real, if one doesn't leave their efficacy undisturbed, things take a turn for the worse. Those who think that all signs of power are mere semblances and rely on the arbitrariness of the discourse of the master are the bad boys: they are even more alienated. (Fleury, 2010, p. 96)

The axiom of this cynical wisdom is that

one should protect the semblances of power for the good reason that one should be able to continue to *enjoy*. The point is not to attach oneself to the semblances of the existing power, but to consider them necessary. "This

defines a cynicism in the mode of Voltaire who let it be understood that God is our invention which is necessary to maintain people in a proper decorum". Society is kept together only by semblances, "which means: there is no society without repression, without identification, and above all without routine". (Fleury, 2010, p. 95)

But is this cynical stance the only way out? It raises a series of questions.

First, what if God, the divine authority, only really functions when the believer is aware that "God is our invention which is necessary to maintain people in a proper decorum"? Baudelaire saw this well – he wrote: "God is the only being who, in order to rule, doesn't even need to exist" *Dieu est le seul être qui, pour régner, n'ait même pas besoin d'exister* (Baudelaire, 1920, p. 3). If a believer directly "really believes", we slide into fundamentalism – every authentic religion is aware that its authority is a fetishist fake: I know it is not really true, but I believe in it. The opposite of fundamentalism is the awareness that the authority we refer to has no real fundament but is self-referentially grounded on an abyss. Let's take a perhaps surprising example: the finale of Wagner's *Rhinegold* which ends with the contrast between Rhinemaidens' bemoaning the lost innocence and the majestic entrance of the Gods into Valhalla, a powerful assertion of the rule of Law. It is customary to claim that the sincere and authentic complaint of the Rhinemaidens makes it clear how the triumphant entrance of the Gods into Valhalla is a fake, a hollow spectacle; however, what if it is precisely the saddening background of the Rhinemaidens' song which gives to the entry into Valhalla its authentic greatness? Gods know they are doomed, but nonetheless they heroically perform their ceremonial act. This is why we are not dealing here with the usual fetishist disavowal but with a courageous act of taking a risk and ignoring my limitations, along the lines of Kant's *Du kannst, denn du sollst!* – I know I am too weak to do it, but I'll do nonetheless do it – a gesture which is the very opposite of cynicism.

Let's ground this conclusion from another starting point. Authority has the effect of symbolic castration on its bearer: if, say, I am a king, I have to accept that the ritual of investiture makes me a king, that my authority is embodied in the insignia I wear, so that my authority is in some sense external to me as a person in my miserable reality. As Lacan put it, only a psychotic is a king who thinks he is as king (or a father who is a father) by his nature, as he is, without the processes of symbolic investiture. This is why being-a-father is by definition a failure: no "empirical" father can live up to his symbolic function, to his title. How can I, if I am invested with such an authority, live with this gap without obfuscating it through psychotic direct identification of my symbolic status with my reality? Miller's solution is cynical distance: I am aware that symbolic titles are just

semblances, illusion, but I act AS IF they are true in order not to disturb not only the social order but also my own ability to desire. Aaron Schuster adds three modes to deal with the impossibility of acting with authority (it is because of this impossibility that Freud counted exercise of power as one of the three impossible professions): “to pretend as if there were no Other; to make oneself the mouthpiece of the Other; to identify the Other with one’s charismatic persona” (Schuster, 2016, p. 191). The example of the first option is that of a postmodern friendly boss who acts as if he is one of us, part of the team, ready to share dirty jokes with us, joining us in a drink, etc. – but while doing this, he retains his full symbolic authority and can treat us in an even more ruthless way. The second option is personified in the figure of an expert, a medium through which the authority of the impersonal science (or law) speaks; such a figure avoids the position of authority by pretending that he is not giving orders, just say what science tells it has to be done (like an economist who claims market mechanisms should not be disturbed). The third option is exemplified by an obscene charismatic leader like Donald Trump who takes himself, with all his personal quirks, as a direct embodiment of the big Other – his authority is not based on his knowledge but on his will: “It is so because I say so”. At this point, Schuster makes a crucial observation:

The leader of competence and calculation, disappearing behind and speaking in the name of the big Other, finds its uncanny counterpart in the over-present leader whose authority is based on his own will and who openly disdains knowledge – it is this rebellious, antisystemic theater that serves as the point of identification for the people. (Schuster, 2016, p. 234)

The obscene charismatic leader is thus the “return of the repressed” of the expert knowledge which pretends to act without support in a figure of the master: the repressed Master (authority which personifies the Law) returns in its (almost, not quite) psychotic form, as a lawless obscene Master. The Master is here “overpresent”: he is not reduced to his symbolic dignity, he stands for authority with all his idiosyncrasies.

So is there a way out of this deadlock? The obvious one would have been for the bearer of authority to admit openly to those subjected to him that he is not qualified to exert authority and to simply step down, leaving his subjects to confront reality as they can – Schuster quotes Hannah Arendt who outlines this gesture apropos parental authority:

Modern man could find no clearer expression for his dissatisfaction with the world, for his disgust with things as they are, than by his refusal to assume, in respect to his children, responsibility for all this. It is as though parents daily said: ‘In this world even we are not very securely at home; how to move

about in it, what to know, what skills to master, are mysteries to us too. You must try to make out as best you can; in any case you are not entitled to call us to account. We are innocent, we wash our hands of you. (Arendt, 1961, p. 191)

Although this imagined answer of the parents is factually more or less true, it is nonetheless existentially false: a parent cannot wash his/her hands in this way. (The same goes for saying: “I have no free will, my decisions are the product of my brain signals, so I wash my hands, I have no responsibility for crimes that I committed!” Even if this is factually true, it is false as my subjective stance.) This means that

the ethical lesson is that the parents should pretend (to know what to do and how the world works), for there is no way out of the problem of authority other than to assume it, in its very fictionality, with all the difficulties and discontents this entails. (Schuster, 2016, 219)

But, again, how does this differ from Miller’s cynical solution? Paradoxically, it is that that the subject, although fully aware of his/her incompetence to exert authority, assumes it not with a cynical distance but with fully sincerity, ready even to sacrifice his/her life for it if needed. To grasp this difference, one should also bring into view libidinal economy, different modes of *jouissance*. Politics does not happen primarily at the level of semblances and identifications (imaginary and symbolic), it always involves also the real of *jouissance*. Political semblances and identifications are profoundly impregnated by different modes of *jouissance* – can one even imagine a racism or anti-feminism which does not mobilize *jouissance* (*jouissance* attributed to other race or women, *jouissance* I find in attacking and humiliating them...). That’s why, in his detailed analysis of the Petainist discourse in the Vichy France, Gerard Miller (Miller, 2004) speaks of Petain’s “pushes-to-enjoy (even pushes-to-come)” – and, in a homologous way, can one even hope to understand Trump without taking into account his “pushes-to-enjoy”?

The same goes also for societies with emancipatory goals. Let’s take Lacan’s own psychoanalytic society (which he dissolved, thereby admitting it was a failure): was it also a society “kept together only by semblances”? Is the only step out of the domain of semblances only the individual moment of “traversing the fantasy” in the analytic process? It certainly wasn’t meant to be this: was Lacan’s attempt to organize a society not a “Leninist” attempt to constitute a society which is NOT kept together “only by semblances” but by the Real of a Cause. (This is why, after dissolving his school, Lacan formed a new one called *École de la Cause freudienne* – a school of the Cause itself – which, it is true, failed again.)

Does it help to introduce some order in this confusion if we turn Lacan's anti-Dostoyevsky formula around: if god DOES exist then NOTHING is prohibited? It is clear that this holds only for so-called "fundamentalists" who can do anything they want since they act as direct instruments of god, of his will. We can see how PC rigorism and religious fundamentalism are two sides of the same coin: in both cases, there is no exception – either nothing is prohibited or everything is prohibited... To bring some clarity into this picture, we should perhaps bring into the play Lacan's so-called formulas of sexualization. The two couples of universality grounded in exception and non-universality ("non-all") which implies there is no exception.

So what is the status of the postmodern permissiveness in which everything turns out to be prohibited by infinite PC regulations? Are they masculine (everything is permitted except...) or feminine (there is nothing which is not prohibited)? It looks that the second version is the right one: in a permissive society, violations of the regulations (which allegedly guarantee sexual permissiveness) are themselves really prohibited and not secretly tolerated. This means that we should transpose Lacan's claim into feminine form: if god doesn't exist then there is nothing which is not prohibited, which means that not-all is prohibited, and this not-all exists in the guise of a universal a permissiveness: in principle, everything is permitted (all different form of sexuality), but every particular case is prohibited. Recall the proverbial figure of a permissive husband who, in principle, allows his wife to have lovers, but is opposed to every particular choice ("why did you have to choose precisely THIS appalling guy? Anyone BUT him..."), or, at a political level, Chapter 15 of the Khmer Rouge constitution of Kampuchea: "Every citizen of Kampuchea has the right to worship according to any religion and the right not to worship according to any religion. / Reactionary religions which are detrimental to Democratic Kampuchea and Kampuchean people are absolutely forbidden" (Documentation Center of Cambodia, DC-Cam). So, again, any religion is permitted but every particular existing religion (Buddhism, Christianity...) is "absolutely forbidden" as reactionary.

How, then, do things stand with today's pandemic regulations? Do they also solicit transgressions (private rave and parties, even violent outbursts)? But they are not the Law, they are scientifically-grounded regulations, they belong to the university discourse. Scientists and health administrators gladly explain why they are demanded, they don't function as the abyssal law, as regulations which should not be questioned. Is thus the hedonism of *jouissance* the other side of the reign of the university discourse? But what if those who resist pandemic prohibitions and regula-

tions are confusing scientifically-grounded regulations with ungrounded arbitrary prohibitions (which solicit transgression)? Of course, one should add: but what if this confusion is already present in the thing itself? Is the “truth” of the university discourse not a Master, or, as we say today, is the (not even so) secret agenda of those who impose anti-pandemic prohibitions not to assert social control and domination?

To complicate things further, we should introduce here two other axes. First: permitted versus enjoined (ordered). Lacan’s argument was that enjoyment, once permitted, sooner or later inevitably turns into injunction – you HAVE to enjoy, hedonism is superego at its most cruel. This is the truth of today’s permissiveness: we feel guilty not when we violate prohibitions but when we cannot enjoy. That’s why psychoanalysis aims not to enable the patient to fully enjoy but to limit the power of the superego, to turn enjoyment from enjoined to permitted (you can enjoy but you are not obliged to).

The other axis is the one of possibility and impossibility. Prohibition is, as Lacan repeatedly claimed, here precisely to create the illusion that enjoyment is not in itself impossible, that we can reach it through violating the prohibition. The goal of psychoanalysis is precisely to make the move from prohibition to immanent impossibility. So a prohibition primarily prohibits something that is in itself impossible... But is this not going too far? When a poor starving man is prohibited to grab a piece of food which is not his, does this prohibition not prohibit something that is in itself quite possible? In other words, is an elementary operation of ideology also not to present as in itself impossible something that is prohibited because of economic class interests and the interests of domination? (No universal healthcare because it is impossible, it would ruin economy...)

Further paradoxes arise here. There are prohibitions one is not only permitted to violate but obliged to violate, so that the true transgression is to stick strictly to the rule of prohibition. (This is what I called inherent transgression: if you do not participate in the secret transgressive rituals of a closed community, you are excluded faster than if you violate its explicit rules.) And then there are prohibitions that are themselves prohibited (one obeys them, but one cannot announce them publicly). The big Other of appearances enters here: you obey a prohibition, but you publicly act as if this means nothing, as if it is just a chance that you don’t do that, as if, if you wanted, you could easily do it; plus the obverse, you can violate a prohibition, just not publicly, in an open way. (Trump and today’s New Right populists break this rule: they violate prohibitions openly, in public.)

A further complication: what if we enjoy oppression itself, not just its violation? Is this not the elementary form of surplus-enjoyment? For

example, with regard to the pandemic, Darian Leader pointed out how obeying the rules imposed by the authorities because of the pandemic can bring its own compulsive satisfaction. Similarly, the Politically Correct enjoyment arises through the very process of discovering how we unknowingly violated the PC rules (“now I discovered that the phrase I used has a racist dimension...”).

The worst solution here is to oppose necessary repression (renouncing the satisfaction of some of our desires as the condition of our survival) and surplus-repression done on behalf of exploitation and domination, as Herbert Marcuse did (Marcuse, 1974) – for conceptual reasons, this distinction cannot be drawn. First, domination and exploitation are as a rule operative in the very way the renunciations necessary for our survival are libidinally catexed. Second (and in an apparent contradiction to the first point), it is the surplus-oppression (the prohibition for which there is no apparent reason) which generates surplus-enjoyment – as Lacan says, enjoyment is something that serves nothing... Third, one should draw another distinction here: between oppression and repression. Oppression (brutal exercise of power) is not repression: oppression is directly experienced as such, but we are not aware of repression (in the Freudian sense). When I am oppressed, what is often repressed is the way I enjoy this oppression (with all that it involves: my complaints, etc.).

So what we get here are not just the two axes of a semiotic square: (impossible-possible, prohibited-permitted) but a complex texture which includes the axis of permitted-enjoined and even a triangle of oppression-repression-depression. Miller simplifies the image here: he claims that oppression is necessary, by which he means that there is no enjoyment without oppression (obstacles, prohibitions to our desires). The opposite of oppression is not freedom to do what one wants but *depression, the loss of desire itself*. But is oppression the only way to save our desire, the only way to avoid depression? The question we should raise at this point is: where is repression here? Lacan strictly opposes the traditional Freudo-Marxist thesis that repression is the internalization into the victim's psyche of the external oppression (I misperceive social oppression as a psychic force that sabotages my desires) – repression comes first (in the guise of what Freud called “primordial repression”), it designates an immanent impossibility that is constitutive of human subjectivity. This “primordial repression” is the other face of what we call “freedom”: it opens up the void, a crack in the chain of natural causes, which makes us free. The figure of an external symbolic Law as the agent of Prohibition already obfuscates this immanent impossibility of desire.

That's why psychoanalysis does not aim at liberating our desires so that we can freely desire what we want (what we want is not what we

desire: our innermost desire as a rule appears to us as what we don't want, what terrifies us) – more precisely, it liberates our desires only in the precise sense that we fully assume the impossibility on which our desiring capacity is grounded. Psychoanalysis endeavours to mark out in a new way this impossibility – its premise is that we cannot get rid of a constitutive impossibility, but we can re-inscribe it in a different way. An elementary example: the imaginary number (square root of -1). It is an impossible number, but while it was traditionally dismissed as simple nonsense (even Marx did it in one of his manuscripts), modern mathematics uses it in its calculations and it work – the statics of real buildings are constructed based on calculations which include the imaginary number. At a different level, modern democracy did something similar: what was for a premodern political order the moment of threat to be passed over as quickly as possible (when, after the monarch's death, the throne is empty), becomes in modern democracy a positive feature (as Claude Lefort demonstrated it): no one can legitimately make a direct claim to power, the place of power is in principle empty, it can only be temporarily occupied by democratically elected persons.

And is this also not the lesson of psychoanalysis: there is no “true” object of desire, every object is a place-holder of Nothing? This is why one should resolutely reject the idea that the goal of the psychoanalytic treatment is to enable the patient to move from internal psychic conflicts (between his conscious ego and unconscious desires and prohibitions) to external obstacles to his happiness which s/he can now approach without self-sabotaging inner conflicts. This idea was not foreign to Freud: already in his early *Studies on hysteria* (1895, co-written with Breuer), Freud wrote, addressing an imagined reader/patient, that “much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health, you will be better armed against that unhappiness” (Freud & Breuer, 1999, p. 305). Later, however, the new topics of death drive and the so-called “negative therapeutic reaction” – clearly point towards an immanent conflict constitutive of our psychic life.

The move accomplished by psychoanalysis is thus a Hegelian one: from external opposition to immanent impossibility, and this holds also for the vision of a Communist society: there is no freedom without impossibility, and this impossibility not just the limit imposed on us by external reality (the limited amount of objects that satisfy our needs) but also the immanent “self-contradiction” of our desire. There is, however, another trap that lurks here: to confuse this impossibility with our finitude, so that the impossibility that grounds our freedom is the fact of our mortal life full of risks and non-transparencies – there is no freedom in immor-

tality. Exemplary is here Martin Hägglund who, through new readings of Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Martin Luther King, deploys a coherent global vision which brings together materialism, existential finitude, and anti-capitalism (Hägglund, 2019). His starting point is the rejection of the religious ideal of eternity: the only life we have is THIS life, our social and bodily existence which is irreducibly marked by mortality and incertitude. Every faith in another world or a higher being that guarantees our fate is an illusion, so faith has to be reconceived in secular terms: it expresses our practical commitment which, due to our finitude, exposes us to contingency and always involves a risk of failure. However, precisely because we are finite beings who have to decide without any higher guarantee, we are free: freedom and mortality are the two sides of the same coin.

In the second part of his book, Hägglund turns to the socio-economic and political implications of his focus on “this world” of our finite temporal existence. Since, as finite mortal beings, we don’t have an infinite time at our disposal (and since our eventual immortality would also make our life meaningless: choosing a life project that determines our engagement can only occur in a finite lifetime), our central preoccupation is to own our time, getting as much of it as possible disposable for the free development of our creative capacities in all their diversity. This, however, by definition cannot happen in capitalism where, in order to survive, we have to spend most of our time working for a wage, “losing time” for things we intrinsically don’t care about. If we want to overcome this alienation, we should enact a new revaluation of our values, replacing the money-form of value with the value of the free time at our disposal. The only way to do this is to replace capitalist form of life with a post-capitalist democratic socialism where private ownership of the means of production as well as the alienated state apparatuses regulating our lives will disappear; in this way, we will no longer be competing with each other for the possession of money-value but spontaneously working for the common Good – the very antagonism between the common Good and my personal interests will disappear.

Hägglund doesn’t go into the specifics of how to realize this radical social change, and many critics of his work see in this vagueness the main failure of his book. One can also speculate that it is precisely this vagueness which made *This life* susceptible to being praised not only in academic circles but also by the big media. The topic of disalienation, of people directly exerting their power, is a feature that, in spite of their radical differences, unites Hägglund and Trump.

But what I find much more problematic is that, to put it in a brutally simplified way, there is simply no place for Freud in Hägglund’s universe. How can he claim that, in a post-capitalist society, people

would spontaneously tend to work for the common Good – why? Where is the envy constitutive of human desire? Where are all the basic “perversions” of human desire described by Freud and concentrated in his notion of death-drive? It is his humanist trust that all the horrors humans are capable of – all the self-sabotaging, all the complex forms of search for unhappiness, of pleasure in pain and in humiliation, etc. – can be reduced to the effect of a specific alienated social form, that makes Hägglund’s book so attractive for broad public. What I try to develop is a vision of Communism compatible with all these horrors, with the “alienation” implied by the very fact of language, with all the reflexive twists of human desire (how the repression of desire necessarily turns into a desire for repression, etc.) (Kevin Bacon said: “I’ve been told I’m more well known for being well known than for anything I’ve acted in”) – this is the reflexivity of language or, in Hegelese, the way, in a language, a genus can be one of its own species: being-well-known-for-something has many species, and one of them is being-well-known-for-being-well-known. The same holds not only for Kim Kardashian but also, in a more specific way, for love: you can well [and you always do] love somebody for love itself, not just for reasons to love (her/him/it.) This reflexivity is Hegel’s name for actual infinity (as opposed to the spurious infinity of a series without end), and, since this reflexivity is constitutive of the Freudian death-drive, we encounter here – from my Freudo-Lacanian standpoint, at least – a fateful limitation of Hägglund’s insistence on radical finitude of the human condition.

The axiom of the philosophy of finitude is that one cannot escape finitude/mortality as the unsurpassable horizon of our existence; Lacan’s axiom is that, no matter how much one tries, one cannot escape immortality. But what if this choice is false – what if finitude and immortality, like lack and excess, also form a parallax couple, what if they are the same from a different point of view? What if immortality is an object that is a remainder/excess over finitude, what if finitude is an attempt to escape from the excess of immortality? What if Kierkegaard was right here, but for the wrong reason, when he also understood the claim that we, humans, are just mortal beings who disappear after their biological death as an easy way to escape the ethical responsibility that comes with the immortal soul? He was right for the wrong reason insofar as he equated immortality with the divine and ethical part of a human being – but there is another immortality. What Cantor did for infinity, we should do for immortality, and assert the multiplicity of immortalities: the Badiouian noble immortality/infinity of the deployment of an Event (as opposed to the finitude of a human animal) comes after a more basic form of immortality which resides

in what Lacan calls the Sadean fundamental fantasy: the fantasy of another, ethereal body of the victim, which can be tortured indefinitely and nonetheless magically retains its beauty (recall the Sadean figure of the young girl sustaining endless humiliations and mutilations from her depraved torturer and somehow mysteriously surviving it all intact, in the same way Tom and Jerry and other cartoon heroes survive all their ridiculous ordeals intact). In this form, the comical and the disgustingly-terrifying (recall different versions of the “undead” – zombies, vampires, etc. – in popular culture) are inextricably connected. The same immortality underlies the intuition of something indestructible in a truly radical Evil. This blind indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called “death drive”, and one should bear in mind that “death drive” is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an ‘undead’ urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. Freud equates the death drive with the so-called “compulsion-to-repeat”, an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences which seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to insist even beyond the organism’s death.

Matthew Flisfeder noted two features that clearly distinguish the “theoretical anti-humanism” of the, 1960s from today’s post-humanism:

Whereas the anti-humanists of the, 1960s proclaimed the death of the subject, today we encounter a far more unnerving death of the human. While the anti-humanists sought merely to deconstruct the subject within discourse, the Posthumanists today are far more ambitious in realizing a return to matter and objectivity that they claim has been displaced by the verticality of humanity. (Flisfeder, n.d.)

So in the, 1960s, with Foucault and Althusser, the notion of subject (our self-perception as subjects) was “deconstructed” as a historically-specific discursive formation (although, for Althusser, it was more a universal ideological misrecognition); plus the ultimate horizon of this deconstruction was discourse, i.e., discourse was posited as a kind of transcendental a priori, as that which is always-already here in our dealings with reality. Today’s post-humanism, on the contrary, doesn’t deal with the “death of the subject” but with the “death” of humans, it asserts the falsity of our self-perception of humans as free responsible beings, demonstrating that this self-perception is based not on some ignored discursive mechanisms but on our ignoring of what we really are – the “blind” neuronal processes that go on in our brain. In contrast to the anti-humanism of the, 1960s, today’s posthumanism relies on direct materialist reductionism: our sense of freedom and personal

dignity is a “user’s illusion”, we are really just a complex network of bodily processes in their interaction with environment...

An ironic consequence of this shift from anti-humanism to post-humanism is that the remaining anti-humanists or their followers (like Miller), when confronted with the posthumanist challenge of full naturalization of human beings, all of a sudden start to talk (almost) like humanists, emphasizing the uniqueness of human self-experience (“decentered” as it is), and the impossibility to fully reduce it to “objective” neuronal processes. A further difference is that, while discursive deconstruction doesn’t directly affect our everyday life (where we continue to experience ourselves as free responsible agents), posthumanism promises (and to some extent already achieves) interventions into our reality which will radically change our self-perception: when we are submitted to total digital control and our brains will be directly wired, when our DNA can be modified, when pills can change our behaviour and affections, this basically affects the way we experience ourselves and act.

My only difference with Flisfeder is that, based on these insights, he argues for a new universal humanism that could ground the global emancipatory struggle needed today. His argumentation is ultimately a new version of transcendental reflection: when I as a neuroscientist argue that I am just a set of neuronal and biological processes, I always do this in the form of rational argumentation, trying to convince others, as a part of scientific community – the space of this community where I address others (and act as) a free rational being convinced by reasons is always-already here, operative in my activity, not as an abstract Cartesian cogito but as a human collective... So, to simplify the image a little bit, while Flisfeder is ready to sacrifice subject but not humanity, not the basic dimensions of our being-human, I am tempted to do the exact opposite: I am ready to sacrifice (what we perceived till now as) the basic features of our being-human but not subject. “Humanity” is a notion at the same level as personality, the “inner wealth” of our soul, etc. – it is ultimately a phenomenal form, a mask, which fills in the void that “is” subject. What subject stands for is the inhuman core of being-human, what Hegel called self-relating negativity, what Freud called death drive. So in the same way that Kant distinguished the subject of transcendental apperception from a person’s soul and its wealth, in the same way Freud and Lacan distinguish the subject of the unconscious from the Jungian personality full of deep passions, we should in our unique predicament stick to the inhuman core of subjectivity against the temptations of being-human. Subject is what is in a human being more than human, the immortality of the death-drive which makes it a living dead, something that insists beyond the cycle of life and death.

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RIASSUNTO

Partendo dalla distinzione fatta da Lacan tra “io ideale”, “ego-ideale” e “super-io”, strutturata dalla triade Immaginario-Simbolico-Reale, questo studio indaga come sia possibile distinguere lo spazio sociale a-sessuale dal dominio delle interazioni libidiche-cattive. Attraverso l’analisi delle idee di Balibar, Miller, Schuster e Häggglund, vengono definiti percorsi e strategie per analizzare le dinamiche esistenti tra potere simbolico, legge e super-io. Ciò che emerge è la ricostruzione di una nuova soggettività capace, allo stesso tempo, di superare la dinamica godimento-super-io alla base della riflessione

lacaniana e affrontare le sfide del post-umanesimo contemporaneo. Pertanto, ciò che il soggetto rappresenta è il nucleo inumano dell'essere-umano, ciò che Hegel chiamava negatività auto-relazionale, e ciò che Freud chiamava pulsione di morte. Il testo propone, in breve, come il Soggetto è ciò che è in un essere umano più che umano, l'immortalità della pulsione di morte che lo rende un morto vivente, qualcosa che insiste oltre il ciclo di vita e morte.

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