

‘Capitalist Realism’ and the Psychoanalytic Critique

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Abstract

The term ‘capitalist realism’ refers to the way in which capitalism has come to assume the status of the ‘end of history’ and thus to constitute a kind of ultimate horizon of all possible thought and action. Critics of capitalist realism tend to focus on undermining its purported inevitability by exposing its historical contingency and utility, a genealogical strategy which, in its appeal to knowledge and education, is grounded in an old Enlightenment faith in the suzerainty of consciousness and the power of reason. Such an emphasis on consciousness, however, is precisely what psychoanalysis rejects in and as its founding gesture. Insofar as psychoanalysis takes up the problem of capitalist realism, then, it is with the much different aim of accounting for capitalism’s staying power in virtue of its deep resonance with the basic structure and dynamics of *unconscious* mental life. More specifically, a psychoanalytic critique of capitalist realism reveals how the logic of desire finds its most perfect outward expression in a politico-economic system premised on the paradox of an ever-expanding but always and contingently unavailable or withheld abundance. This implies, in turn, and provocatively, that the transition to a post-capitalist world may be far more arduous and uncertain than the critics of capitalist realism have yet grasped.

Keywords: capitalist realism, desire, symbolic castration, big Other, lost object, the Thing, communism, death-drive

1. The need for a psychoanalytic critique of capitalist realism

The concept of ‘capitalist realism’ (CR)—as coined by Mark Fisher in his 2009 book of the same name—takes aim at the problem of the apparent finality of capitalism. Summed up both in Francis Fukuyama’s infamous ‘end of history’ thesis and in the well-known dictum (attributed, at minimum, to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson) that ‘it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’, CR draws attention not merely to the fact that capitalism has grown ‘too big to fail’ in some strictly empirical sense, but to the much deeper and more insidious ways in which capitalism has come to colonise the most far-flung corners of the mind, such that it now ‘seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable’.¹ In the years since the book was written, humanity, so far from getting a grip on its addiction to endless profits and growth, has seemingly fallen off the wagon altogether, making the topic of CR more urgent than ever before. That said, it is possible to point to a tension within Fisher’s text that severely blunts the force of its critique, if not undermines it

1 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 8.

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entirely. To say this is not to claim that CR, or Fisher's warnings about it, should not be taken seriously. Precisely to the contrary, it is to suggest that working through this tension reveals that the critique in fact does not go far enough, and thus that the 'reality' of capitalism is perhaps much more deeply entrenched than the theorists of CR have yet fully grasped.

To state this tension outright, theorists like Fisher cannot seem to decide whether CR is ultimately a critique of capitalist *ideology* à la Žižek (following Lacan) or of capitalist ideological *interpellation* or *subjectivisation* à la Althusser or Foucault. On the one hand, Fisher favourably cites Žižek's characterisation of ideology as a kind of soft, disingenuous cynicism, a fetishistic disavowal of the 'big Other', the anonymous socio-symbolic authority, in thought and language which belies and conceals its unconscious avowal at the level of behaviour and action, as in Žižek's well-known joke about the madman who, despite insisting that he knows he is not a grain of corn himself, is nevertheless terrified that the chicken doesn't know it. This is a critique which is best understood when we take it to be levelled, in the main, at the progressive left—not so much at the 'milquetoast liberals' who think that shopping at Whole Foods, driving a Prius, and voting for Joe Biden are the answer to the world's problems as at the open critics of capital who know full well that such actions are frivolous and futile and yet keep doing them anyway, superstitiously, as it were, as though the consequences of carrying on with business as usual, despite being perfectly well known, might nevertheless somehow miraculously fail to materialise. As Fisher puts it, as long as 'we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange' with our wallets and our votes.²

There is, however, another, harder form of cynicism that Fisher addresses in his discussions of both accelerationism à la Nick Land and the (in his experience) political jadedness and inertia endemic to Gen Z culture. If progressive pseudo-cynicism can be summed up in the comic absurdity of the subject's knowing that the big Other doesn't exist while continuing to act as though the big Other itself didn't know this, then this latter, more conservative form of cynicism entails a wholesale refusal to be duped by the fiction of the big Other. There is nothing remotely funny about such conservative cynicism, which manifests itself either, in the case of Land, in a secular faith in a 'pure' capitalism without contradictions³ or, in the case of Fisher's students, in a self-reinforcing death-spiral of passive nihilism and 'depressive hedonia', that is, an inability to unplug from 'the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix' and thus 'to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand'.⁴ If the truth of ideology is epitomised in Octave Mannoni's 'Je sais bien, mais quand même...' ('I know very well that..., and yet...'), the truth of cynicism proper is found in a *circulus vitiosus* of apathy and defeatism that Fisher dubs 'reflexive impotence': those in its grip 'know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it' ('I know very well that..., so why bother?', as it were).⁵

Despite drawing on many of the conceptual resources of Žižekian/Lacanian ideology critique, it

2 Ibid., 13.

3 Ibid., 46.

4 Ibid., 24.

5 Ibid., 21. The fact that Fisher explicitly distinguishes reflexive impotence from cynicism means only that it is not the sort of soft cynicism characteristic of ideology. The genuinely cynical subject's actions are perfectly consistent with what it knows.

seems clear that what Fisher is really taking aim at with the idea of CR is something more like the reflexive impotence of disillusioned, hedonically depressed university students than the fetishistic disavowal of their 'enlightened', hyper-critical professors. And there is a perfectly good reason for this, namely, that it allows CR to be construed as a consequence of our interpellation as capitalist subjects—the political upshot of this being that it opens up a relatively straightforward 'discursive-transcendentalist' praxis that ties the possibility and meaning of social activism to the orchestration of a genealogical scandal. That is to say, for the discursive transcendentalist, laying bare the 'historical *a priori*'—the matrix of truth games and power relations—underpinning any social configuration of 'reality' is itself a politically subversive act. 'As any number of radical theorists from Brecht to Foucault and Badiou have maintained', Fisher writes, 'emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a "natural order", must reveal what is presented as what is necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable'.⁶ Such a scandalous unmasking of reality is precisely the point of education: the goal is to expose the so-called 'knowledge' of the futility of action in the face of the relentless onslaught of global capitalism to be in bad faith, a mere 'self-fulfilling prophecy' perpetrated by capital itself.⁷

The critique of ideology qua fetishistic disavowal, on the other hand, calls into question this whole Enlightenment-based appeal to consciousness, one which assumes a fundamentally rational subject for whom the piercing of illusions and the resulting clarity of mind are themselves sufficient motives for transformative action. If ideology operates rather at the level of the *unconscious*, it is for the most part impervious to genealogical exposure. As Freud discovered early on (and as we see confirmed everywhere today), simply informing patients about the underlying causes of their neuroses is about as effective as, to paraphrase Freud, handing out menus to famine victims.⁸ In the first instance, then, what is needed is a supplemental psychoanalytic critique of CR which does not simply uncover its historical *a priori* but, beyond that, maps out what we might call its 'psychical *a priori*', the ways in which our inability to see beyond the horizon of capitalism is conditioned by the very structure and inner dynamics, the 'libidinal economy', of subjectivity as such. It goes without saying that such an approach—the best recent example being Todd McGowan's *Capitalism and Desire*⁹—is doomed to marginality almost from the outset. For one thing, it challenges the longstanding dominance of discursive transcendentalism itself as the still-reigning intellectual vogue. So far from exposing the necessary as contingent, psychoanalysis does exactly the opposite, namely, interrogates whether, where, and to what extent, in the never-ending flux and flow of contingent cultural-historical production, some kind and measure of naturalness and universality, some form and degree of inevitability, might be said to be at work (in this respect, ironically, psychoanalysis is more, not less, Kantian than discursive transcendentalism insofar as the natural or

6 Ibid., 16–17.

7 Ibid., 21.

8 See, e.g., Sigmund Freud, James Strachey (tr.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XI (1910): Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works* (London: Vintage Classics, 2001), 225.

9 Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

‘pathological’ is not the death-blow to freedom so much as the very occasion and highest test of freedom). But what is even worse, such an itinerary seriously complicates any breezy attempt to link the theory of CR to a politics of mass resistance—not because psychoanalysis is naively or inherently pro-capitalist, but because the questions it raises in the course of its critique have ambiguous, even troublesome, political implications. Indeed, against all theorists who would argue that any analysis that subordinates social repression to psychical repression is automatically susceptible to the charge that it merely shores up the status quo, psychoanalysis can respond that the whole discursive-transcendentalist approach itself might be construed as a kind of fetishistic disavowal: ‘Of course I know very well that simply pointing out the historical contingency of capitalist realism is pointless—and yet...’

2. Outline of the psychoanalytic critique

The psychoanalytic critique of capitalism deals with essentially the same problem. Although framed as a debate with an older generation of psychoanalytic thinkers (Wilhelm Reich, Otto Gross, and Herbert Marcuse, among others) who denounced capitalism as repressive, the counter-argument put forward by psychoanalysis—in brief, that capitalism catalyses and sustains rather than crimps and stems the flow of desire—is, in the end, an argument about capitalism’s staying power, its psychical seductiveness. An argument, in other words, about capitalist realism. The first order of business, then, is to set out this argument as clearly and schematically as possible. In doing so, I will take McGowan’s text as a roadmap, although it should always be kept in mind that the goal is the explication and evaluation not of a single work but of a general approach and line of thought.

Let us begin, then, simply by sketching a rough outline of the argument in order to make the more detailed analysis below somewhat easier to follow. We can summarise it in five main points:

1. There is a deep homology between the logic of capitalism and the logic of desire, such that capitalism almost seems ‘custom fitted’, as it were, to the inner structure and dynamics of desiring-subjectivity.
2. Subjectivity is not a thing or an object but rather a ‘wound’ in the sense of an opening which is equiprimordially the movement of its own self-closing or healing. More precisely, subjectivity entails the loss of the love and recognition of the ‘big Other’ (*le grand Autre*), the socio-symbolic authority—or conversely, the appearance of the Other as necessarily withdrawn in its withholding of its love and recognition. At the most originary level, then, subjectivity is *desire*, that is, an insatiable yearning to recapture and master the fickle, wandering desire of the constitutively absent Other—or what is sometimes called, after Lacan, ‘the Thing’ (*das Ding*). This ‘Thing’ is what lies at the root of every phantasy; it signifies a plenitude to which the subject can never accede insofar as its loss is the *a priori* condition of its very existence as a wound, namely, the Other as fully realised and attentive, or as fully realised in its undivided attentiveness.
3. Objects of desire are those objects that appear to hold, in whole or in part, the secret to the

riddle of the Other's desire. Such objects are distinct from objects of mere pleasure insofar as they always seem to enfold within themselves a 'promise' to pin down the Other's errant desire and thus facilitate the recovery of the Thing. Simply put, objects of desire are whatever the Other itself desires—or better, whatever the subject imagines that the Other desires that *it* desire, and thus whatever would make the Other desire the subject if it had them.

4. As everyone knows, however, despite our being buried beneath a veritable avalanche of objects of every conceivable sort, the Thing somehow never arrives. Once again, whereas acquiring objects of pleasure can and often does leave us genuinely satisfied, at least temporarily, acquiring objects of desire never fails to disappoint us; our initial conscious satisfaction notwithstanding, unconsciously we remain empty, frustrated, and restless. As long as the object we desire remains out of reach, it lures us with the promise that it might be 'It'..., but from the moment the object is in our possession, we realise we were wrong and are forced to admit: *'that's not "It"'*. The reason for this is simple enough: the Other whose missing desire we fret and fantasise about is a structure of subjectivity and therefore *does not exist* in any actual or substantial sense. Thus we will never know what the Other desires because the Other itself does not know what it desires—insofar as there is no 'Other itself' in the first place that *could* know what it desires.
5. From this it follows that getting what we want—what we imagine to be 'It'—is always somewhat traumatic insofar as it exposes the truth of the Other's non-existence and thus of the necessity of loss and the ineliminability of desire. Capitalism's apparently insuperable staying power is a function of the way in which its ceaseless production of the new and different makes it possible to defer such a confrontation indefinitely. In other words, capitalism seduces us by making our frustration bearable; by seemingly tying the possibility of satisfaction to the endless dissemination of novelty, capitalism allows us, despite all evidence to the contrary, to continue believing in the promise that 'It' lies ever just around the corner—the suffocating insipidness of the object *du jour* constantly giving way to the buzz surrounding the next 'big new thing' *à venir*.

3. Symbolic castration: language, the Other, and desire

Let us now proceed to unpack this story in more detail. If subjectivity is understood as a 'wound' in the sense of an originary estrangement vis-à-vis a retroactively constituted and constitutively lost Other, as psychoanalysis teaches, then the 'cut' that slices open this wound is language. Broadly speaking, this is what Lacan intends with the term 'symbolic castration', namely, that language is the root cause of the desire that conjures and sustains the subject and the Other in their equiprimordial unity and reciprocity. The first order of business, then, is to get clear on this *a priori* relation between the subject, the Other, language, and desire, such that it can be shown how there can be no such thing as a 'speaking being' that is not also a desiring being, and vice versa.

There are three such relations—three main interpretations of the concept of symbolic castration—we might consider here, all intimately related and mutually reinforcing, but each nevertheless bearing a particular valence or inflection. In the first place, it is possible to understand

the wound with respect to the way in which the subject is always already ‘thrown’ (*geworfen* in the idiom of existential phenomenology) into a socio-symbolic order that precedes it and thus shapes and determines it long before it is born. From this perspective, that which the subject is ‘cut off’—or to use a less dramatic Lacanian term, ‘barred’—from is *itself*. For it is not as though there were *first* a subject that, *later on*, at a given point in its ontogenetic history, began to deploy the resources of language as a tool of self-expression (of its ownmost inner thoughts, desires, etc.); it is rather that the possibilities of the subject’s being are pre-programmed by this socio-symbolic order itself. However, if this explains why the subject always desires *what* the Other desires, it does little to account for the origin and logic of desire itself, namely, as the desire *of or for* the Other.

Second, we might interpret the wound as the corollary of the logic of signification, i.e., of the way in which language, as a complex nexus of interrelated differential relations as opposed to a system of one-to-one correspondences between words and things, introduces a layer of mediation into the world which serves to cut the subject off from the *object*. For a ‘speaking being’, the manifold objects of the world appear, never as they are ‘in themselves’, in the purity of their undivided being, but only ever as ensembles of relations behind which this ‘pure being’ is permanently sequestered, ‘lost’. At first glance, this understanding of the subject vis-à-vis the ‘lost object’ appears to bring us closer to an adequate account of the logic of desire, but in truth it merely suffers from the inverse defect of the first account. For if we now have a clearer picture of how desire is elicited by loss or lack, we have, by the same token, also lost any sense of what it is that sets the entire circuitry of desire in motion in the first place. What we are left with is a quasi-phenomenological account that simply *posits* the movement of desire *ex decreto*, i.e., as a function of the mere *distance* between the subject and the object, and moreover in such a way as to broaden the practico-empirical scope of desire to the point where it is rendered useless as a tool for diagnosing the problems of modern life (as in this case there would be no object that is not an object of desire).

Third and finally, we might take the wound in terms of an originary severance from the linguistic community as a whole, i.e., from the ‘Other’ or ‘big Other’, and it is here that the important distinction between the lost object and the Lacanian ‘Thing’ comes into play. But here we must be precise. The Other is not merely an abstraction on the order of ‘society’, ‘community’, or ‘the people’. However imprecise, the latter are all *ontic* entities, i.e., all objects which are necessarily punctuated by loss in virtue of their subjection to the logic of the signifier. The Other, in contrast, belongs to a different order altogether; it is not ontic but *ontological*—not something that appears but an *a priori* condition of appearance (more akin to Heidegger’s ‘*das Man*’, the anonymous ‘They’ or ‘Public’). In one sense, of course, the Other is a function of the presence of actual others in the world, but as a *structure of subjectivity* it infinitely transcends any and every particular other(s).

In truth, we will never understand desire—and thus the seemingly natural fit between the subject and capitalism—so long as we regard the Other as just another object in the world on the order of ‘society’, for in that case, as with every lost object, it remains an open question as to how the inert ‘not’ of a mere distance gives rise to the dynamic negativity of desire. This is why psychoanalysis, strictly speaking, does not *derive* desire from prior conditions at all, but rather *defines* subjectivity in such a way that it implicates the movement of desire *a priori*. More precisely,

psychoanalysis begins from the axiom that subjectivity just *is* a kind of avulsion or dehiscence, a renting or ripping open that takes the form of a lack, and indeed a lack of a very particular and special sort, namely, of love. From this standpoint, 'the Other' is simply the logical corollary of this lack; it is the anonymous 'That', retroactively constituted in and through the avulsion itself, from which this absent attention is always sought but never forthcoming. The Other, then, is also lost, but not in the manner of an object. It is not as though the Other's essence remains withdrawn behind its manifold differential relations, but rather that the Other is, from the beginning and fundamentally, an *enigma*. If the Other isn't paying attention, this is because it already knows what it wants, and what it wants is something other than the subject; the Other is privy to a secret enjoyment that renders the subject superfluous. Symbolic castration in this sense refers not to a neutral distance from which a movement would have to be drawn out, but instead to an originary *alienation*, a kind of abandonment, which in its very concept implicates the '*ur*-movement', so to speak, of a *being-drawn-toward* whatever would annul or repair it. And it is precisely *this* movement that psychoanalysis calls *desire*.

Along with the thesis that 'the unconscious is structured like a language', the thesis that 'man's desire is the desire of the Other'¹⁰—the desire for desire itself—is perhaps the most elementary axiom of (Lacanian) psychoanalytic theory. To say that the subject is a subject of desire is to say that the subject is, in its essence, the *ur*-movement of a yearning to solve the riddle of the Other's own unruly and wandering desire, or of what Lacan calls 'the Thing' (*das Ding*). It is only and precisely as such a 'being-toward-the-Thing' (if we may) that the subject is a wound and not a passive distance. The logic of the signifier ensures that all objects are lost objects, but the wound runs far deeper: it is the yearning for restoration immanent to a whole which does not exist prior to its initial severing. There is no question as to *why* it heals, insofar as there is no 'it' to begin with prior to the inauguration of the *ur*-movement of healing itself.

4. Desire and capitalism

Having established this much, the psychoanalytic critique of capitalism falls neatly into place. As a symbolically castrated or desiring being, the subject is originally and irremediably oriented, not toward the necessarily absent kernel of full meaning, being, etc. of the object (which would make *every* object desirable qua 'lost'), but rather toward the ever-missing Thing qua the constitutively inaccessible and fundamentally mysterious desire of the Other. To repeat: it is not as though there is first a subject which then, after conducting a thorough examination of the world and its place within it, comes to the conclusion that it has lost the Other's attention and thus resolves to win it back; rather the subject just *is* the rupturing of an originary alienation vis-à-vis an Other that was never there to begin with.¹¹ To call the subject a 'wound' is thus no empty rhetorical flourish

10 Jacques Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Alan Sheridan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 235.

11 This is why McGowan can write that the subject is an originary 'failure to belong' and 'lack of place and identity'. See *Capitalism and Desire*, 20–1.

but serves to distinguish it from the abstract ‘not’ of every mere distance. Ever tending toward its own self-healing closure, the subject is always on the lookout for the objects that would solve the riddle of the Other’s wandering desire—objects that would be ‘It’—and thereby fulfil the phantasy of a restoration of ‘authentic belonging’. No object, however, could ever be ‘It’, and for the obvious reason that neither the subject nor the Other can exist *except* under the condition of their mutual estrangement. A fully attentive Other is a *contradictio in terminis*, a ‘negation of the negation’ that would destroy both the subject and the Other by compressing them into a smothering One-All.

Thus objects loom up and tempt us with the *promise* that they might be ‘It’—only and inevitably to let us down the moment we finally manage to get our hands on them: the magic dissipates, the promise dissolves, whatever it was about them in which the ‘It-ness’ was supposed to have resided slips away. To distinguish between the absent Thing and the lost object in this way is to distinguish between, first, that which slices open the dehiscence of subjectivity as a ‘being-toward-the-Thing’, and second, that which ‘catalyses’ desire by facilitating a ‘metonymical’ sliding from one object of desire to another. An object becomes an object of desire just to the extent that it promises to satisfy the riddle of the Other’s desire, but it is the dual revealing-concealing nature of the object as such that, when the object fails (as it must) to fulfil this promise, drives the subject onward to the next..., and the next..., and the next..., *ad infinitum* (the failure can always be accounted for and excused by this lostness or ontological non-coincidence). The psychical staying power of capitalism thus resides in the way in which its ‘concept’, its defining logic of production, precisely mirrors the inner structure and dynamics of the subject’s libidinal economy. Capitalism’s ceaseless production of novelty and difference yields an ever-expanding realm of objects that the ‘floating’ promise can latch onto and ride out. At this level, ‘accumulation’ has no meaning, at least in the sense of hoarding as many objects as possible. People may hoard, of course, but this is not what is at issue; the point is that capital’s seductiveness stems from the way in which it creates a symbolico-material body as the medium in which the promise is able to keep itself in constant circulation.

5. Capitalist realism and communism

At first glance, the psychoanalytic account sketched above seems to provide an adequate theoretical explanation of the problem of capitalist realism. Why can’t we envision a life beyond capitalism? Why does capitalism seem like the final horizon of all thought and action and the ‘end of history’? Answer: because capitalism plugs into psychical subjectivity in the most profound way, at the level of the very being of the subject itself as a subject of desire. In place of a world of things, capitalism substitutes a world of currents and pathways, an infinitely complex and tangled circuitry to house the promise, with things being little more than fungible nodes whose sole function is to charge desire by giving it something to surge through on its way to something else. No sooner has one candidate for ‘It’ failed to deliver on the promise than another rises up to take its place. Psychoanalysis therefore posits *not* that capitalism is merely something we are ontologically *susceptible* to—something we stumbled into by historical accident and thus might have avoided under different circumstances—but instead, and more problematically, that capitalism is something

we are (to use a fashionable idiom) ontologically 'hard-wired' for. Capitalism, in other words, is what Heidegger would call our *destiny*, not in the sense that it was sent from on high or written in the stars (destiny is not *fate*), but in the sense that for beings ontologically constituted such as we are—i.e., for *subjects*—an eventual reckoning with desire, and with the consequences of our reconfiguring the world in accordance with desire, was inevitable from the beginning.

Against all appearances, however, this account is precisely what *challenges* the thesis of capitalist realism from the ground up. Why? For the simple reason that the political 'impossible' which we are supposed to be able just barely to glimpse through the cracks and fissures in the monolithic edifice of CR is invariably described as a form of *communism* that, in its main features, is not only *formally identical* to capitalism but indeed nothing more than *the phantasy of capitalism*, a kind of utopic 'capitalism without contradictions'. I think McGowan is correct in his analysis here, and all one has to do is consult texts such as Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*¹² to understand why. The political premise of such texts is the promotion of a form of social and politico-economic organisation which in point of fact is not really so hard to glimpse at all (as evidenced by the numerous mainstream publications that endorsed Bastani's central 'FALC' thesis), namely, a kind of hyper-technological, ultra-efficient, and maximally sustainable AI-managed capitalism on steroids. Put in other words, while CR takes issue with capitalism in, to use a Bataille distinction, a 'restricted' sense, i.e., as an historically given and contingent politico-economic system characterised by certain concrete relations, tendencies, contradictions, dangers, etc., psychoanalysis in contrast focuses on capitalism in a more 'general' sense, i.e., as a logic of productive life *überhaupt* which is independent of any particular politico-economic configuration. And it is the insights of the latter approach that seriously call into question those of the former. For if the psychoanalytic critique holds true at the level of the logic of production of capitalist society generally—namely, the ever-expanding and self-valorising production of what we might call 'surplus-difference'—then there is no obvious reason why we should remain trapped in one historically specific politico-economic form in which this logic gets expressed (e.g., that of a *bellum omnium contra omnes* waged between private owners of production to exploit labour, maximise profit, capture state power, etc.).

To be clear, this is *not* intended as a critique of 'communism', whatever that may be, as an ideal; such a critique may or may not be called for, but it is not what is at stake here. The broader point is this: that *insofar as this is true*—insofar as what is called 'communism' (as the hitherto impossible but now glimpsable future beyond the cracked horizon of capitalism) is *in essence* indistinguishable from the fulfilment of the promise of capitalism itself—the thesis of capitalist realism is immediately thrown into doubt. For if CR in a more fundamental sense refers not merely to the way in which certain contingent factors (such as ideology) prevent us from realising the transformation of historical capitalism into a system in which the productive forces are channelled toward the more emancipatory end of universal and unlimited abundance (via mechanisms of communal ownership, socialised profit, etc.), but rather to the way in which the ever-growing production of surplus-

¹² See, for example, Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (London: Verso, 2020); Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Penguin, 2016); and Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).

difference feeds into the most basic structural dynamics of desiring subjectivity—if this is true, then what we see is not only that communism, so far from being the inversion or antithesis of capitalism, is merely the phantasy of its fulfilment and full actualisation, but also, and for that very reason, that there is *no compelling reason for our utter failure to transition away from historical capitalism into this purportedly more humane and sustainable form of life*. In other words, if the psychoanalytic critique makes us sceptical of the kind of Enlightenment-based, pedagogically oriented utopianism of CR (one whereby popular mobilisation is predicated on a scandalising genealogical exposure of the base origins of our current epidemic of apathy, depressive hedonia, hard cynicism...), this is in part because the more general account it offers of the deeper ontological resonances between political economy and libidinal economy effectively makes CR, as a restricted thesis about the intransigence of a given form of capitalism, incoherent. For even if CR is correct about this intransigence, as it certainly is—i.e., we really do seem to be at the ‘end of history’ in the sense that there are no universally shared alternatives to capitalist democracy on the horizon—it remains incomprehensible why our deeper psychological attachment to the *concept* of capital does not *override* our ideological interpellation as capitalist subjects in the narrower sense—why, in short, we do not see through capital’s shenanigans and work together to start realising a world that is *even more in tune with the structural workings of desiring subjectivity than the present one*. Simply put: if capitalism is so seductive precisely because it keeps desire in a state of perpetual motion due to its seemingly infinite capacity for the production of novelty and difference, and if what is called ‘communism’ merely takes this to its logico-historical conclusion (qua utopia of difference without contradiction via a techno-politics that secures safe, limitless abundance for all), then *whence capitalist realism?* Why aren’t we all chomping at the bit to realise this ‘communism’ which—we are told—would exceed the capitalism of our wildest dreams? If the alternative is so psychically enticing, why aren’t we already there?

6. Capitalism as death-drive

Here is where the psychoanalytic critique is at its most profound. The staying power of historical capitalism—the reason why capitalist realism is likely to remain confined to historical capitalism and not pass over into historical communism, or better still, the reason why we are unlikely to pass over to historical communism anytime soon (even, and indeed especially, to ‘fully automated luxury communism’), despite the fact that it might seal the deal for CR insofar as it would be the most perfect actualisation of the ‘will to difference’ that is so neatly aligned with the structure of desiring subjectivity—is explained less by the way in which capitalism maximises the possibilities for success and far more by the way in which it *manages failure*. If we accept that the existence of the Other as an *a priori* structure of subjectivity is constituted by its inscrutability, inattentiveness, errancy, etc., and correlatively that there can never be any question of fully and finally solving the riddle of the Other’s wandering and fickle desire, it follows that the only form of enjoyment fully open to the subject is *the enjoyment of the promise itself*—that desire, as investment in a promise that can never be kept, is its own form of enjoyment. From this we can conclude that

the main problem around which the organisation of social life turns under capitalism is not one of realising the impossible so much as one of *maintaining the promise as such as continually worthy of libidinal investment*. In getting what we want, in acquiring the objects of desire, we invariably fail to get 'It', whatever brings us in proximity to 'the Thing'; what is called 'communism' is predicated on the wager that the trauma of this failure is always more than offset by the promise embodied in the thing-to-come, that the flow of desire can always be sustained by the ceaseless production of the new *tout court*. In truth, however, there is no warrant for this. Constant failure is painful and debilitating. To acquire an object only to discover that it was not what it seemed, that its allure was concealing a void, that whatever was sought within it had already slipped away, that the whole business was a fool's errand—to repeat this farce time and again exacts a heavy psychical toll on the subject, one that far outstrips the power of the promise itself. To sustain the promise, then, requires that objects of desire be *put out of reach* even while they are never rendered totally and permanently inaccessible. In other words, objects of desire must be made *contingently* inaccessible, in such a way that we can *fail to get them*, but always for non-essential reasons. This is what McGowan is getting at when he says that we 'enjoy our failure'; the point is not that failure as such is enjoyable, but rather that failure is the *a priori* condition of the only kind of enjoyment possible for us, namely, the anticipatory, purely virtual enjoyment of libidinally investing ourselves in a future, final enjoyment that can never arrive.

Capitalism, of course, has any number of such obstacles or 'contradictions' that make our failure to get the Thing seem at once inevitable and accidental. Capitalism does not simply give us what we desire, what lures us on with the promise that it will be 'It'—for then the promise would quickly be exposed as a cruel lie and desire would have its legs cut out from under it. But neither does capitalism simply deny, constrict, or repress desire as Marcuse et al. maintained. Instead, and in perfect accordance with its 'concept', capitalism erects one barrier after another to our appropriating the inexhaustible cornucopia of objects it dangles out in front of us and, in so doing, *sustains* desire by keeping the promise in constant circulation. It is not *merely* that there is always something new coming around the bend, but that our inability to tap and exploit this inexhaustible wellspring of novelty is always somehow the fault of the system itself. We love *and* hate the system in equal measure—or more precisely, the fact that the system gives us a reason to hate it is essential to why we love it. Nothing more perfectly dovetails with the contradictory status of the subject as ontologically oriented vis-à-vis something it can never have than the irrationality of capitalism as a regime of production which is doomed to withhold from the vast majority of workers the abundant fruits of their own labour. It is precisely this irrationality that *comforts* us by allowing us to keep indulging in the phantasy that 'It' must be out there somewhere, in that vast ocean of difference—*if only...* ("True, I don't have "It" yet, but that's because the system is so broken, rigged, unfair...") So far from being internal limits that threaten to bring the whole system crashing to the ground, capitalism's contradictions are in fact the secret to its longevity.

The persistence of CR at the level of historical capitalism is thus a manifestation of the Freudian death-drive. This, of course, has nothing to do with any will to perish but rather points to an unconscious propensity to self-destruction, even when the alternative is demonstrably preferable

(for no one could deny that, in terms of certain objectively measurable indicators, we would all be better off under FALC as compared with the mess we're dealing with at present). By absolving us of any need or responsibility to 'traverse the phantasy' and face the hard truth that there is no 'It' to get in the first place, capitalism traps us in cycle of compulsive behaviour that now threatens to destroy the very conditions of civilised existence, if not life itself. The problem is that, despite this fact, nothing would be more psychically traumatic for the subject than the phantasy-world of 'everything, everywhere, all at once' (and for everyone) that FALC represents, because nothing else would so violently and mercilessly destroy the world, built on the foundation of the promise, in which the subject is most libidinally at home.

7. Conclusion: the best of all possible worlds?

All of this forces us to take the problem of CR much more seriously and literally than Fisher et al. are wont to do. Far beyond every effort that would seek to combat ideological interpellation with a politics of genealogical denaturalisation, the psychoanalytic critique raises—problematically and provocatively—the terrifying possibility that capitalism is, after all, *the best of all possible worlds for desiring subjects*. 'Best' here is of course meant in a strictly formal and non-normative, or at any rate non-moral, sense. That is, it is not a matter of capitalism being the optimal system in terms of what we owe each other and ourselves as autonomous, self-determining beings, but rather of its being precisely the kind of system that an impartial observer, armed with only the findings of psychoanalysis to go on, would expect such beings to create for themselves over time.

In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, capitalist modernity, now global, finds itself at a curious crossroads. On the one hand, the waning of neoliberal ideology, the growing preference for some form of socialism, and the rapid emergence of new technologies that seem able to bring it within reach are all conspiring to sublimate the kind of 'winner-take-all' capitalism that has held sway throughout most of its history into a more humane, 'prosperity-for-all' capitalism which, though by no means the same thing, is nevertheless a diffident adumbration of the kind of techno-communist utopia envisioned by Bastani et al. On the other hand, such 'progress' remains perpetually stalled due to a collective failure to confront—and often, it seems, a collective commitment to exacerbate—large-scale, epoch-defining existential crises (inequality, global warming, nuclear war...) that, being as predictable as it is egregious, all but compels us to conclude that its causes lie far deeper than the endless machinations that play out daily on the plane of politics (or rather these machinations are themselves part of the way in which the failure is enacted). All of this puts the capitalist subject in an equally precarious position: the obstacles that serve to sustain the promise and keep the Thing at bay now threaten to swallow up the system itself, while their removal, increasingly within reach, threatens to provoke a traumatic confrontation with the hard fact of Thing's irremediable absence. Given this state of affairs, one might reasonably ask whether the ongoing pandemic of depressive hedonia (which is hardly restricted to university students) translates to apathetic resignation to the futility of confronting the former or, on the contrary, to anxiety stemming from incipient awareness of the latter. Do we retreat into our digital bubbles because capitalism has interpellated us as lone

individuals powerless to resist the inexorable, zombie-like march into the abyss? Or is that we have already glimpsed the abyss in these bubbles themselves, in the nauseating monotony of their endless 'creativity'—on terrifyingly stupid display in, for example, Mark Zuckerberg's DOA 'metaverse'¹³ or in the disturbing growth of billionaire-backed, Elysium-like planned cities, from 'California Forever'¹⁴ (Silicon Valley) to 'The Line'¹⁵ (Saudi Arabia), which, despite promising everything under the sun, are about as inspiring as the ersatz heaven cooked up by Ted Danson's demonic architect in *The Good Place*? Indeed, even if one scrolled through the marketing material for 'The Line' and mistook it for the quixotic brainchild of some precocious Gen-Z utopian communo-futurists, there would still be little to alleviate the suspicion that, having bleached life of everything dangerous, dirty, and unpredictable, the city wouldn't quickly drive one to despair—if not suicide.

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