

Affective economies of capitalism: Shifting the focus of the psychoanalytical debate

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1. My aim today is to offer a critical appreciation some of the basic insights of the critical theory and the psychoanalytical tradition that pertain to the affective economies of capitalism. It seems necessary for me to study the role of affect not only in capitalism but also in all the different forms of social organization of economic surplus, because the libidinal investments and the ethico-political complicity of the subjects with the particular forms in which the surplus is socially organized becomes visible only when we lay bare the affective dimensions of the regimes of social maintenance that *animate* the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor—whether this takes the form of slavery, feudalism, or capitalism.
2. Before embarking upon the survey, I will briefly outline some of the presuppositions that will underpin my intervention. I organize them under four nodal points: the relation between the economic and the cultural; the relation between the signifier and the affect; the status of difference; and the politics of research. Through a discussion of these presuppositions, I will be able to create the context for my intervention into the growing literature on the affective regimes of capitalism. After this self-positioning, I will outline the basic contours of the psychoanalytical critique of capitalism. “Enjoyment as an economic factor,” adopted from the subtitle of Žižek’s *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991), efficiently summarizes the essence of this psychoanalytical critique. While enthusiastically welcoming the introduction of the psychoanalytical concept of enjoyment (or “affect”) into the analysis of capitalism, I lament the repeated deployment of the concept in understanding the final moment of the circuit of capital, namely the moment of the sale of the commodities to consumers or the moment of realization of surplus value. In particular, I argue that this particular psychoanalytical critique, to the extent that it reifies the other moments of

the circuit of capital (and even at certain moments anthropomorphizes the capital), fails to articulate difference in its critique of capitalism.¹ In other words, in this manner, the psychoanalytical critique blocks to possibility of theorizing true difference in economy. I will end this talk with suggesting to shift our critical focus from the sphere of exchange to the sphere of production where we found true economic difference: Communism of non-all.

3. *Economy/Culture*. Let us quickly distinguish between commodity and capitalism. Capitalism is a form of performance, appropriation and distribution of economic surplus. Commodity, on the other hand, is a use-value that is produced for “exchange.” It is impossible to deduce from the presence of commodity trade the presence of capitalism. At some level, capitalism, feudalism, slavery and other exploitative forms of appropriation of surplus labor are indistinguishable from each other. At another level, they are all different from each other with respect to their cultural, political, and economic conditions of existence. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that it is impossible to even begin to differentiate between forms of surplus extraction without taking into account the questions pertaining to formations of subjectivity (i.e., the modes of subjection and subjectivation). This is perhaps an insight which has been strongly endorsed, if not pioneered, by the Birmingham School of cultural studies.
4. But when we consider the broader Marxian tradition, the relation between the economy and the cultural has never been on an equal footing. In fact, economic determinism continued to be felt even in those efforts that tried to break from it. Without doubt, the “surplus does not exist” debates within the field of economic anthropology as well as the infamous attempts at developing a Marxist anthropology made it a commonplace to study the cultural conditions of existence of the so-called “pre-capitalist” modes of production. Similarly, the recent analyses of the transformation of the cultural in the context of (late) capitalism is a product of the

¹ In fact, Žižek is fond of reminding us that communism conceived as the “final overcoming of scarcity” and “the end of surplus” is essentially a capitalist fantasy. This critique is also welcome—to the extent that we make sure to acknowledge that these utopian definitions of communism are not the only possible definitions.

incisive analyses of Frankfurt School. Adorno's now well-known concept of "culture industry" made it possible to make sense of how the "merely" cultural became the "infrastructural". Nevertheless, a close study of both of these debates will reveal that they were both premised upon the implicit presupposition that, in the final analysis, the economic is the determinant moment in a social formation. The culturalism of the anthropology of pre-capitalisms presupposes that with the advent of capitalism the economic moment has asserted its naked force. Similarly, for the culturalism of the "culture industry," the cultural moment figures in as an element functional/subordinated to the logic of capital accumulation and appears only in the late capitalist period as a distinct industry. In an unexpected twist, both analyses presuppose that at some point in time, after pre-capitalism and before late capitalism, capitalism became "disembedded" and the economic has asserted its "icy logic." In this sense, when rethinking the economic through the cultural, it is important to be vigilant about not to re-introduce economic determinism from the back door. In this sense, it is necessary to conceptualize the economy in all its forms (including capitalism) as a cultural formation.

5. *Signifier/Affect*. I argued that it is necessary to study the formations of subjectivity to make sense of the social organization of surplus. In turn, it is necessary to study both the process of signification (signifier/representation) as well as the regimes of affect (jouissance), to make sense of the formations of subjectivity. Joan Copjec warns us not to treat affect "as a local element that can simply be added to the chain of signifiers" (2006: 92). Rather than treating the signifier and affect as antinomic to each other, we should treat the latter as that which gives "movement" to the chain of signifiers. Or, more precisely, affect qua "movement of thought" chains the signifiers to one another (Copjec, 2006: 95).
6. Without doubt, the psychoanalytical tradition is not the only tradition of critical thought that sought to theorize the affective regimes of capitalism. Nevertheless, one important contribution of psychoanalysis is the way it takes affect into account not as another dimension or yet another condition of existence of capitalism but as the locus of the libidinal investments and hence the ethical complicity of the subjects in the

continued reproduction and maintenance of capitalism as a heterogeneous, differentiated, and fragile, yet at the same time, articulated formation. In other words, I find it important to take affect (or enjoyment in Lacan) into account for it brings forth the dimension of the responsibility of the subject by demonstrating “how contemporary subjectivity is ethically implicated, rather than the mere plaything of an inevitable and inexorable expansion of the capitalist discourse” (Glynos, 2001: 79).

7. *The status of difference.* The capitalist production is said to be “a constant production of otherness” (Zupancic, 2006: 174). Deleuze and Guattari are well known for their conceptualization of capitalism as a “difference engine.” More recently, Karatani argues that the logic of capitalism resembles the logic of deconstruction. Capitalism, or the circuit of capital, does indeed expand through a parasitic relationship to its outside. To begin with, it does not have a unique form: There are different capitalisms: Anglo-Saxon capitalism, European capitalism, Nordic capitalism, Japanese capitalism, private capitalism, state capitalism and so on. Second, there is the question of “product differentiation.” Today, the production of new commodities through the means of new meanings is *the* single most important competitive strategy of a corporation. In other words, the production and/or the appropriation of “life style” differences is a business strategy.

8. But we have to reassess the status of difference here. In this sense, this paper takes off from the premise that sexual difference qua Lacan’s formalization of Kantian dynamical and mathematical antinomies is difference as such. Here, it is necessary to distinguish between the kind of difference within the delimited frame of the masculine logic of exception and the difference between the masculine logic of exception and the feminine logic of non-all. The logic of exception defines a whole, an all, through positing a constitutive exception. Within the bounds of this set, all kinds of differences are permitted—with the proviso that the constitutive exception remains untouched. Elsewhere we argued that under capitalism, the exception takes the form of the exclusive appropriative rights of the Board of Directors. The logic of non-all, on the other hand, refuses to posit an exception at the expense of failing to constitute a coherent whole. Contra capitalism or contra any other exploitative form of

appropriation of surplus, the communist logic of non-all refuses to assign exclusive appropriative rights to any set of social agency (including those who were exploited under the *ancien regime*, such as the direct laborers).²

9. *The politics of research.* Let me try to elucidate the logic of sexual difference through applying the concept to the field of epistemology. The epistemological position of non-all that I subscribe to compels me to acknowledge the partisan and partial position of enunciation of this paper, its aspirations, its intentions. Those who subscribe to an epistemology of exception may also be compelled to acknowledge their position of enunciation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish the underlying motivations for these two pronouncements. Whereas the latter perspective wishes to correct the inevitable subjective distortions to a discourse that should in the limit be objective (hence the logic of exception), the former (materialist) perspective asserts its necessarily subjective perspective, unashamedly, as a vector in an inconsistent, a non-all field, namely the field of knowledge production. The responsibility of the researcher is not to some ultimately unsatisfiable epistemic criteria of objectivity but to ethically insert and incorporate one's position of enunciation to the enunciated content. In this particular sense, in developing an understanding of the affective regimes that sustain the circuit of capital, my intention is to produce a knowledge of capitalism that can conceptualize not only capitalism but the possibility of a different social organization of economic surplus. In other words, I

² But I would like to remind that the sexual difference is not a positive difference but a difference that corresponds to two different paths to failure: The logic of exception constitutes a consistent "all" but it is, in the final analysis, incomplete because there is always an exception for it is impossible to constitute an all without positing an exception; the logic of non-all refuses to posit an exception but precisely for this reason can not form a consistent all: "Where the mathematical field was defined by the homogeneity of its elements (which were all phenomena, objects of experience) and the inconsistency of its statements (since none could be counted false), the dynamical field is defined by the heterogeneity of its elements (the result of the *separation* of the two types of causality, sensuous and intelligible, into different realms) and – what? What is it that corresponds on this side to the inconsistency on the other? Incompleteness. That is, the all forms on the dynamical side, but it is missing an element: freedom. The initial cause cannot be tolerated by, or disappears from, the mechanical field that it finds. Which means that on this side, it will always be a matter of saying *too little*" (Copjec, 1994: 38).

wish to theorize not only difference within capitalism but also difference from capitalism.

- 10.** *The psychoanalysis of capital.* Let us now turn our attention to the psychoanalytical critique of capitalism. Almost all recent psychoanalytical analyses of capitalism, starting with Slavoj Žižek (1989; 1991; 1999), Yannis Stavrakakis (1997; 2000; 2003), Jason Glynos (2001), Todd McGowan (2003; 2004), and most recently, Alenka Zupancic (2006), focuses on a particular moment within the circuit of capital. As it is well-known circuit of capital has three distinct moments: The purchase of the means of production and labor power, the production of commodities, and the sale of commodities. The circuit of capital begins when the industrial capitalist raises the funds to buy the commodities and the labor power; continues when the industrial capitalist puts the capital in the form of commodity into production of commodities; and ends (only momentarily) when the surplus labor of the direct laborers is realized in the value-form when the commodities produced are sold in the markets. In this particular sense, the industrial capitalists (1) need to raise funds (which makes them dependent upon the financial capitalists); (2) need to make sure that the workers work hard and produce a lot of commodities (which makes them dependent upon trade unions, the government, the schooling system, the gender division of labor, the dissolution of gender division of labor, etc.); (3) need to make sure that the commodities are sold in the markets and the capital does not remain in commodity-form but turn back to its original money-form. The psychoanalytical intervention is to this third moment.
- 11.** *New commodities.* Along with Lacan's formulations in Seminar XVII, Adorno's concept of "cultural industry" and Guy Debord concept of "society of spectacle" are essential reference points that frame the psychoanalytical critique of capitalism. The idea here is the very transformation of the kinds of commodities that are being circulated in contemporary economies. Ultimately, the commodity is and has always been an abstraction. In this sense, there is nothing new. Yet at the same time there is an undeniable expansion of the commodity space. One important aspect of this accelerated commodification is the commodification of care and affect. Here again

the examples range from flight attendants to health care to sex industry. Nevertheless we should carefully distinguish the concept of affect found here in the various types of new “affective” commodities that are being created through the engineering of “lifestyle” difference and the psychoanalytical concept of “affect” (or enjoyment). While the two feed upon each other— affective commodities make it easier to facilitate the administration of affect/enjoyment and the “hijacking, diversifying and exploiting” the affect/enjoyment, “by valorizing it or recognizing it as a potentially infinite source of surplus value” (Zupancic, 2006: 175) leads to the further expansion of the commodity space through the invention of new “affective” commodities.

12. *Enjoyment as an economic factor.* How is it that then the affect a “potentially infinite source of surplus value”? Todd McGowan (2004) argues that we are living in an age where the super-egoic injunction is to enjoy without inhibitions and through accumulation/acquisition of goods. Zupancic claims that the fundamental slogan of the contemporary times is “Impossible is not possible”. In other words, contemporary capitalism claims that there is no taste that cannot be satisfied, no commodity that cannot be delivered to our doorsteps, no enjoyment that cannot be enjoyed. Rather than arguing, as a previous generation of psychoanalytically-inspired critics of capitalism did, that this enjoyment is false, inauthentic, alienated, manufactured, and so on, these new generation of psychoanalytical critics of capitalism argue that the problem with capitalism is much more basic—the circuit of capital complete its round again and again and begin each time anew because it has been successfully articulated with the libidinal economy of enjoyment, the structure of how we enjoy. In other words, the problem is not so much with what we enjoy but the way in which capitalism has begun to exploit how we enjoy.

13. The contemporary psychoanalytical critics remind us that “we enjoy the events leading up to the denouement...not the acquisition of the object itself. The moment of acquiring the object represents the end, not the beginning, of our enjoyment” (McGowan, 2006: 3). This means that consumption as a means of enjoyment is bound to fail. [In this sense, it is perhaps useful to distinguish shopping and consumption as two distinct economic categories.] Yet, at same time, this

dissatisfaction is not a reason to abandon shopping. As long as the subjects of capitalism continue to believe that the ultimate enjoyment is possible, the capitalism will continue to feed off the very disappointment that the act of consumption produces. In this sense, Stavrakakis argues that the problem with late capitalism is not so much that it produces false needs and desires but rather that it has become an “administration” of enjoyment. The distinction is crucial: while the former position endorses the humanist idea that there are “true” needs, the latter shifts the focus from whether or not our needs are manufactured (they always are—to a certain extent) to the way in which capitalism feeds off the very structure of enjoyment as such (regardless of the content of enjoyment).

14. What then is my disagreement with this analysis? A short answer would be the following, while it theorizes economic difference in the service of capitalist accumulation, it does not permit us to theorize economic difference from capitalism. A longer answer would include the following three, inevitably interrelated points: (1) The psychoanalytical critique of capitalism does not implicate the categories of Marxian political economy—it plugs a sophisticated analysis of *jouissance* to a very standard and unfortunately essentialist concept of (necessarily capitalist) economy; (2) The psychoanalytical critique focuses on the sphere of exchange and the moment of consumption—this is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because it offers an alternative to the neoclassical theory of demand. It is a weakness because it contributes to the ideological effacement of the sphere of production from the field of discourse; (3) The psychoanalytical critique, because it fails to theorize difference from capitalism, ends up provincializing its political role to one of exposing the libidinal economy that underpins the capitalist political economy. In what remains I will try to concretize these three points.

15. I will begin with the final point. It is not entirely correct to claim that the psychoanalytical critic fails to articulate difference from capitalism. In fact, it does gesture towards difference. To the extent that there is a different way of relating to enjoyment, there is a difference. Nevertheless, even though these critics rally a number of individual examples from literature and history, it is very difficult to articulate

what does it mean to cultivate a different way of relating to enjoyment—one that does not believe in the ultimate possibility of full enjoyment.

16. Perhaps the answer lies in the way psychoanalysis approaches Marxism in the hand of these critics. There are three ways, at least, in which Marxism and psychoanalysis are thought together: through homologies between psychoanalytical and Marxian concepts (i.e., the purported homology between the concepts of “surplus jouissance” and surplus value); through “plugging” psychoanalytical concepts to the Marxian conceptual apparatus (The enjoyment is an economic factor argument does precisely that); through rethinking the very basic categories of Marxian political economy in light of the psychoanalytical discourse. I believe the psychoanalytical critique has chosen to take the first two paths and leaving the third one unattended. My intention is to take the third path of psychoanalytically rethinking the very foundational categories of Marxian political economy.

17. When the basic categories of Marxian political economy are not rethought through psychoanalysis, economic determinism inevitably creeps back. The administration of enjoyment is indeed the regime under which surplus value is realized. But what happens to this realized surplus value. Is this surplus value allocated back to further accumulation? Or, is it paid to the government in the form of taxes? These questions cannot be asked from the perspective of the psychoanalytical critique because it’s exclusive focus (at least in this moment in history) is on the sphere of exchange. What if we shift our focus and ask what happens to the realized surplus? Who appropriates this surplus? Who distributes this surplus? And, who receives this surplus?

18. Without doubt there are no fixed answers to these questions—each social formation deals with these questions in their unique ways. Yet we could think of various forms of social organization of surplus as so many different ways in which communities handle the real of class antagonism, namely the impossibility of giving a final answer to these questions. Note that here we define the real of class antagonism not as an antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeois classes, or the serfs and the lord, or not even the antagonisms between various agencies who claim a cut from the

(realized) surplus value, but rather the very impossibility of instituting a non-antagonistic form of social organization of surplus.

19. I will end this presentation by distinguishing between two communisms. The first one I will call the communism of all. This is the communism qua capitalist fantasy. It presents itself as the overcoming of the real of class antagonism. It is this type of communism that we need to abandon. The second type of communism is the communism of non-all. This is communism qua difference, communism that refuses to posit an exception (exclusive appropriative rights) at the cost of inconsistency. It is this kind of communism that we need to turn our faces towards.