

Book Review

“Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets” by Todd McGowan

Reviewed by Alenka Zupančič

In *Capitalism and Desire* Todd McGowan explores both the nature and logic of the capitalist hold over us as subjects. Understanding the logic of this hold, he argues, is the first step towards making the hold itself inoperative. Further, making it inoperative would amount to the end of capitalism as McGowan suggests: “Problems of political organization and struggle are difficult, but they pale in comparison to the problem of capitalism’s psychic appeal.”¹

His exclusive emphasis on the libidinal economy of capitalist economy is both a deliberate and, one should add, courageous choice of perspective. Capitalist economy, argues McGowan, is an ingenious solution to the traumatic kernel of libidinal (subjective) economy brought forward by the advent of modernity. This is why our libidinal economy adopts it so willingly, and this is why capitalism has such powerful psychic appeal. The traumatic kernel is that of the death of God as a substantial form of the big Other, and of the abyss of freedom implied in His demise. Capitalism offers us a way to continue to believe in the existence of the Other because it offers us to trade in the difficult, traumatic abyss of freedom in exchange for our consumerist “freedom of choice”. But there is also a more fundamental level at which the affinity between capitalism and our psychic economy appears, and this concerns the fact that we are speaking beings. More precisely it relates to the structure of signification. Relying on some fundamental theses of psychoanalytic (Freudian and Lacanian) theory, McGowan proposes the following argument: the signifying structure is consubstantial with a loss/lack which induces and forms the logic of desire: no

object can fully satisfy the latter, because they all function as stand-ins for the impossible lost object. This loss is not a loss of an empirical object that we once had but rather it is the perspective of the lost *object* is a retroactive effect of signification and of the gap implied in it. While other systems have integrated loss/lack into social life in different ways – basically by way of its symbolization, which allocated to it a special (often “holy”) place within the social structure – capitalism does something very different. It incorporates the lack within the very notion of commodity: commodity is an object touched by the mysterious power of lack. Each commodity can function as the embodiment of the ultimate object of desire, and when the subject realizes (as she always and necessarily does) that “this is not it” and as the object loses its allure, the light switches on, so to speak, in the next commodity. There is always *one more thing* that we need in order to be satisfied. This metonymy, oriented towards the future, also relies on a *promise* of a future fulfillment: “With the onset of capitalism, the speaking being enters a system that promises relief from the absence that inheres within the basic structure of signification.”² According to McGowan this promise (which is also the promise of a better future) is an essential feature of capitalism. It is also what makes critique of it very difficult: for how are we to criticize capitalism without (at least implicitly) proposing a better (alternative) future? Yet the moment we do this, we get entrapped into the logic of capital: “The task is thus that of freeing critique from the promise of a better future.”³

Interestingly, German philosopher Frank Ruda dedicates his recently published book *Abolishing Freedom* almost entirely to a very similar task, formulated by Ruda in slightly different terms, namely as an attack on the concept of freedom as *potentiality* (to be realized).⁴ Freedom as possibility, as potentiality, as capacity to do something (exemplified in the liberal capitalist freedom of choice), argues Ruda, has become a signifier of oppression and functions as the best antidote to actual freedom.

Once the mode of possibility enters the game and structures it, one should resist understanding or presenting the stakes simply in terms of possibility *versus* actuality (actual action), that is, in terms of the opposition between a possibility and its realization. For this is precisely how freedom as oppression works in practice. It works following the logic of the superego, most concisely defined by Žižek as the reversal of the Kantian “you must, therefore you can” into “you can, therefore you must.” Possibilities are here to be taken, realized, by all means and at any price: *You can do it, therefore you must!* The culture (and economy) of possibilities is not suffocating simply because there are so many possibilities, but because we are supposed not to miss out on any of them. A person who just sits at home, relishing in the idea of all the possibilities and opportunities capitalism has to offer and doing nothing to realize them is not the kind of person this system needs. What we are expected to do is to realize as many possibilities as possible (to act), but never to question the framework

of these possibilities as possibilities. Which is precisely where “actual” freedom has to be situated: not simply in the actual realisation of possibilities, but in “unscrewing” the very framework which is based on the idea of freedom as possibility to be (yet) realized.

Ruda proposes to do this by advocating what calls “comic fatalism.” He formulates several slogans of such fatalism: they suggest that a way out of this freedom-as-oppression is to act as if there were no future (“Act as if the apocalypse has already happened!” “Act as if you were dead!” “Act as if everything were always already lost!”). There is thus an interesting connection between the way in which both McGowan and Ruda see the dismantling of the promise/potentiality (set in the future) as a crucial step in undermining the ideological and libidinal power of capitalism. This proximity goes very far, for the way in which McGowan proposes to go about this undermining could actually be formulated in a single maxim coined upon Ruda’s examples: “Act as if you were already satisfied!”

As he notes explicitly, McGowan sees the most important novelty of his approach to the critique of capitalism in conceiving the core of the problem not in terms of the injustice or inequality (following Marx), nor in terms of repression (following the Frankfurt school) – including the Foucauldian reversal of the “repressive hypothesis” – , but in terms of *satisfaction*. The promise of a better future is the promise of a future (full) satisfaction which drives our desire. Yet what we don’t see is that the repetition of the failure to find full satisfaction is precisely the real source of satisfaction. This real source of satisfaction is traumatic in its nature, and capitalism – with both its economic and ideological structuring – allows this traumatic source to remain unconscious. It provides a gigantic armature for the metonymy of our desire, and hence protects us against confronting the trauma of loss as constitutive (and not empirical). The ultimate commodity sold (to us) by capitalism is not this or that commodity, but its dissatisfaction as such: “No matter how attractive it appears, there is no commodity that holds the appeal of a lasting dissatisfaction.” Dissatisfaction, and the repetition of the failure to find full satisfaction is the very source of satisfaction that accompanies capitalism. It is the reason what we cling to it so tightly. McGowan also exposes other psychical gains (or libidinal profits) offered to us by capitalism and its functioning, insisting on how these gains may have an even stronger hold on us than any material (financial) gains. One should point out the already mentioned discussion of modernity that confronts us with the issue of freedom in a radically unsettling way (here McGowan introduces Kant and his revolution in ethics). Capitalism protects us from this unsettling dimension of freedom, yet there is a high (psychic and other) cost that we are paying for this protection. McGowan also engages in an inspiring discussion of Hegel and his distinction between good and bad infinity; he discusses the trendy preference of romance over love and many other important questions. His

using of many examples from popular culture (especially cinema) gives a great vivacity to his arguments.

The alternative to (or a “way out” of) the libidinal blackmail of capitalism is set by McGowan very much in terms of a Kantian ethical choice as a deliberate choice against our (“pathological”) satisfaction, based on the recognition of the true source of our satisfaction as itself non-satisfactory. This is both the difficulty and the power of McGowan’s principal argument. McGowan concludes with a sentence from the second volume of Marx’s *Capital*, which he deems absolutely essential:

‘For capitalism is already essentially abolished once we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself.’ Here Marx understands that capitalism depends on a psychic investment in the promise of the future and that a sense of one’s satisfaction is incompatible with the continued survival of capitalism. This is his most profound statement and his most important legacy. Until we accept that the satisfaction of loss is our driving motive, we will remain the hostages of an economy of enrichment.⁵

There seems to be an implicit suggestion at work here which distinguishes between true and false satisfaction, that is between “a sense of one’s satisfaction” and the “satisfaction of loss”. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the satisfaction of loss, as intricate as it is, is nevertheless a genuine satisfaction. And as psychoanalysis teaches us, it may take more than just *recognition* of its paradoxical nature to dismantle it.

Rather than focusing on the material conditions of its reproduction, McGowan focuses on capitalism’s psychic conditions, and proposes a strong case for taking these very seriously. As said at the beginning this is a deliberate and utterly valid choice of perspective, and it would make little sense to raise objections as to this choice. By accepting the psychic or psychoanalytic perspective adopted by McGowan there nevertheless remains one question that concerns what we may call “material conditions of the reproduction of our psyche”. This question is intrinsic to the psychoanalytic theory itself. Lacan is famous for his statement that “the unconscious is out there”, which implies that we can perhaps also change it only out there. Commodity functions as it does because of our attitude to it, but such an attitude is already part of the commodity as its *objective* functioning, and this functioning continues pretty much independently of what we think and know about the object in the first instance. This problem is, of course, far from easy and McGowan is aware of this. *Capitalism and Desire* confronts us with this problem in a powerful and engaging way. Most of all, it forcefully keeps reminding us that despite how we see the problem of capitalism, we are very much (an active) part of this problem, and

also of its perpetuation.

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- 1 McGowan, p. 14.
 - 2 McGowan, p. 26.
 - 3 McGowan, p.7.
 - 4 Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom. A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism*, University of Nebraska 2016.
 - 5 McGowan, p. 244.