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Book Review

The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy

Samo Tomšič

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Reviewed by Todd McGowan

If Samo Tomšič's first book, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, depicts the marriage of Marx and Freud, his follow-up, *The Labour of Enjoyment*, enacts the consummation of that marriage. As such, the book provides a heretofore untraveled path through the political possibilities present in psychoanalysis that neither Freud nor Lacan nor any of their epigones ever developed to their fullest extent. Although many psychoanalytic theorists marshal psychoanalysis to aid in the critique of capitalism, few view it as providing itself an absolute alternative. The key virtue of Tomšič's book is that it does so. Tomšič unapologetically sees Freud as a political thinker on a par with, if not surpassing, Marx.

Far from figuring Freud as a doctor curing patients or therapist working to help integrate damaged individuals into their proper social roles, Tomšič sees him as a sort of anti-therapist – someone who identifies the surplus suffering that social roles enact on his neurotic patients. Instead of curing them of their inability to fit in, Freud aims at helping them not to fit in and to change the social order along with themselves. This radical vision of the psychoanalytic project that Tomšič presents conceives of the project as political from beginning to end. All attempts to turn

psychoanalysis into a form of therapeutic wellness represent fundamental betrayals of this project that Tomšič lays out with incredible precision.

It is entirely appropriate that Tomšič titles his introduction “The Clinical Is Political.” One might say that this is the basic thesis of the book, the idea that it keeps returning to in its quest to consider how psychoanalysis aims at the critique and destruction of capitalism. Tomšič starts the project with the helpful (and undoubtedly correct) contrast between subjects and identities. Subjects are the personifications of contradictions. Identity is the attempt to resolve this contradiction. Capitalism attempts to turn subjects into identities. It is the promulgator of self-identity, which psychoanalysis shows to be purely imaginary.

The primary contribution that psychoanalysis has to make in the critique of capitalism concerns the role of enjoyment. As Tomšič shows, Aristotle identified enjoyment with being itself. Lack is what bars enjoyment for Aristotle, that which renders enjoyment lesser or even eliminates it altogether. This is the point at which psychoanalysis intervenes by seeing the necessary role that lack plays in our enjoyment. According to psychoanalysis, there is no pleasure without unpleasure, whereas for Aristotle God is capable of pleasure without qualification. This Aristotelian image of pleasure without unpleasure becomes the center of capitalist ideology, which takes unbridled happiness as its aim. Happiness works in the capitalist system by disregarding the possible forms of actual enjoyment.

Freud's discovery of the unconscious is the ground for his anti-capitalist politics. He recognizes that the unconscious is not just thought but labor. The unconscious labors. And the subject of the unconscious exists in contrast with the *homo economicus*. Due to his insight into the unconscious and its labor, Freud's distinctiveness is that he creates disequilibrium as a system. He sees the presence of a logic of instability, which is precisely what capitalist ideology cannot tolerate. Freud and Marx both insist on a damaged life that capitalism attempts to repress (thus creating neuroses).

Capital stands for self-identical value, which is why it produces the societal response of identity politics. Identity politics is capitalist politics. Identity politics involves the fantasy of a whole subjectivity and thus enacts a retreat from the confrontation with contradiction. Tomšič takes a strong stand in *The Labour of Enjoyment* against contemporary identity politics, seeing it not only as ineffectual against capitalism but as foundationally in league with it. The political task is one of troubling identity with the insistence on subjectivity.

Freud does this by taking up where the scientific revolution left off. The scientific revolution failed to extend into the socioeconomic realm. Freud offers a corrective, discovering that the social reality itself is ill. To make this diagnosis, he must redefine the way that we conceive subjectivity and redefine the subject's narcissism. He identifies a narcissism of the drive and libido, which is not at all excessive egoism. In this sense, Freud breaks from the commonsensical understanding of narcissism. The disequilibrium of the drive is primary to all egoism. Tomšič insists that there is a narcissism of the drive that trumps any egoistic attempts at narcissism.

Joining Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, and other psychoanalytic theorists, Tomšič insists that the political struggle cannot include an end to alienation. Our drive leaves us forever alienated. We do not need to overcome alienation, as some Marxists wrongly believe. Stalin is the worst in this regard because he went so far as to criminalize alienation, but Marx, like Freud, saw the good side of alienation. Believing in a possible end to alienation is believing in the big Other.

Descartes was the first to see our necessary alienation, but he missed the radicality of his own point. Descartes' error consists in conceiving thinking and being prior to their non-relation. They do not exist outside of this non-relation. Hegel corrects this error. Hegel's *Geist* is simultaneously continuity and discontinuity of inside and outside, thus a conception of necessary alienation. According to Tomšič, in this way, Hegel (along with Marx and Freud later) overcome Descartes' normalization of his own position.

By seeing the necessity of alienation, we can reconceptualize the nature of revolt. It does not aim at a concrete possibility but at a necessary impossibility. Financial capitalism today, Tomšič claims, leaves us all indebted subjects. Indebted subjects aren't in a position to revolt because they have no clear collective opponent. As Marx sees, primitive accumulation works through the systematic indebting, which leaves us impotent. Psychoanalysis works as a counter to it, attempting to move the subject from impotence to impossibility.

This move entails a transformation in how we enjoy. Enjoyment is essential for capitalist labor, the fuel that allows it to function. The master's discourse uses therapy to normalize the subject but constantly fails. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, sees the conflict between the subject and structural resistance. It joins the fight against this resistance. This is a clearly political act because the cure demands not just that the subject change but that societal structures change as well. There are two competing

universalities – the commodity form and emancipatory politics. We must counter the former with the latter if we are to effect the psychoanalytic cure.

Tomšič sees the capitalist system and the commodity form as producing a culture of the death drive. Capitalism uses the death drive to advance itself. It is not an accident, according to Tomšič, that both Freud and Marx use the word *Trieb* to describe the drive that is in the structure more than the structure. Capitalism's drive has a unique ability to take advantage of the subject's drive, which takes unpleasure for pleasure or finding pleasure in unpleasure. Capitalism is the culture of the death drive.

According to Tomšič, what defines humanity is its hypocrisy. Capitalism is the ultimate form of this hypocrisy, as it legalizes criminality. Psychoanalysis acts as a counter. Analysis ends with counteracting the resistance to structural change. It is never just an individual change that analysis enacts but a structural one as well. This is its most important legacy, for Tomšič, and the important idea he develops throughout *The Labour of Enjoyment*.