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LAUGHTER AND CAPITALISM

In this time of crisis, interest in Marx's economic thought has once again found its way to the core of international political-economic debates. Only a good decade ago, many voices claimed this figure's attempts to think the capitalist mode of production no longer sufficed to explain our financialised techno-capitalist societies, but he has now made a triumphal comeback from the annals of political philosophy. In the same move, another old alliance that had vanished from the political agendas, Freudo-Marxism, has now re-emerged, reformulated through its Lacanian developments. Marx and Freud, the critique of political economy and psychoanalysis (one could also write, the critique of libidinal economy) are no longer treated as ways of thinking that belong to some tamed "cultural heritage" (which is to claim that they do not need to be taken seriously). Instead, they are resuming their roles as critical and radical voices, addressing the question, in all its necessity and complexity, of how to break out of capitalist structures.

The official transcription of Lacan's seminar *D'un Autre à l'autre*, which contains his most direct contribution to the critique of political economy, was published in 2006, only a little more than a year before the outbreak of yet another fundamental crisis of capitalism. The seminar in question, too, was a crisis seminar, held in the turbulent moment of 1968-69, directly after the student and workers' protests, which had reached their well-known climax in May 68. Yet Lacan's seminar contains more than a confrontation with the political events of its time. It also performs a wide-reaching reorientation of the critical project known under the slogan of the "return to Freud." In this reorientation, which, it is true, stretches back to Lacan's "excommunication" from the International Psychoanalytic Association, Marx slowly replaced the authority of Ferdinand de Saussure, and consequently, the political implications of the theory of the signifier prevailed over the epistemological value of structural linguistics. Put differently, the science of value supplemented the science of signs, and the intricacies of discursive production¹ became the main preoccupation of Lacan's thought.

1. In its double aspect, which comprises production of subjectivity and production of enjoyment.

Despite being openly reserved toward the revolutionary slogans or the proclaimed goals of the worker-student alliance, Lacan sided with the movements by determining the sources of the structural opposition to the social rebellion. The theory of discourses, developed in the aftermath of May 68, could therefore be read both as Lacan's theory of crisis as well as his theory of revolution. Its pivotal point is the link between structure and instability. Lacan strives to think the real consequences of discursive logic by examining the contradictions, dynamics and impossibilities inherent in every structural order. It is within this perspective that his notorious response to the revolutionary students and critiques of structuralism should be read: "... if the May events demonstrate anything, then they demonstrate precisely the descent of structures into the street."² "Structure i[n] the street" intertwines the space of discursive relations with the site of political action, which, according to the agents of May 68, escapes the determinism of structural laws. Lacan's formulation, on the other hand, argues that events, be they social or subjective, political or traumatic, *are* realisations of structure; they are above all *logical* events, an assertion that does not simply suggest that they are overdetermined by a set of rigid relations. Lacan persistently argued against the dichotomy of structure and event, because this opposition depends on an oversimplified conception of both terms, a double misunderstanding. Just as structure is no stable and invariable compendium of necessary relations, event is no pure and mystic "outdoors," which would intervene out of the blue in order to bring about a sudden transformation. For psychoanalysis, there is some kind of event-character pertaining to structures as such, and one can thematise the emergence of events only by conceptually linking structure and instability. Lacan's theory of discourses thus pushes structuralism toward the *logic* of instability, whether this instability is called crisis, revolution or event. What matters is that all these cases necessitate a more sophisticated and critical notion of structure. Consequently, this reorientation brings about a fundamental reinvention of structuralism, which now begins to designate a science of the real,³ a science whose privileged epistemic object is precisely instability.

In this framework Lacan introduced and deployed his controversial thesis that there was a wide-reaching homology between Marx's deduction of surplus-value and Freud's attempts to theorise the production of enjoyment. The production of value in the social apparatus and the production of enjoyment in the mental apparatus follow the same logic and eventually depend on the same discursive structure. This move confronted Lacan's "return to Freud" in the midst of a capitalist

2. Lacan's intervention following Michel Foucault's lecture "*Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur ?* [What is an author]," in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) 848.

3. In the concrete case of Lacan's teaching, a science of the structural real. See, for instance, the following remarks: "Structure is thus real. In general, this is determined by means of convergence toward impossibility. This is why it is real." And further: "Let us say that, in principle, it is not worth speaking of anything other than of the real, in which discourse itself has consequences. Call it structuralism, or not. Last time I called it the condition of seriousness." Jacques Lacan, *D'un Autre à l'autre (Seminar XVI, 2006)* 30-31. Henceforth cited in the text as Seminar XVI.

crisis with a more general deadlock that Freud had already stumbled upon in his theoretical and clinical work: the production of *jouissance* against the background of a psychic conflict, a tension between opposing demands or heterogeneous instances in the mental apparatus. One of Freud's greatest merits consisted in the fact that he no longer conceived of enjoyment as a more or less insignificant side-effect of satisfaction, which would signal the decrease of bodily tension once the satisfaction of a need, desire or drive had taken place. Instead, he recognised in enjoyment a product emerging directly from the increase of tension. One merely needs to consult Freud's writings in metapsychology (for instance, *Repression, Instincts and their Vicissitudes* or *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) in order to become aware that Freud associates the production of enjoyment with the intensification of tension. The more the unconscious tendency demands satisfaction, the more the mental apparatus works on creating the conditions for satisfaction. However, this satisfaction does not take place at the end of this process—it is inscribed in the process itself. The unconscious tendency constantly demands more enjoyment, and consequently, more psychic labour. Already from Freud's earlier works, such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* or *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, it becomes apparent that unconscious labour performs an endless task of satisfying an insatiable demand. It is no surprise, then, that Lacan at a certain point described the unconscious with the expression "ideal worker," a worker that does not "think, judge or calculate"⁴. Yet complications emerge even in this seemingly automatic factory that is the unconscious.

For psychoanalysis, libidinal economy never follows the machine-like model. Instead, it is always articulated around a fundamental deadlock (e.g. repression), and the actual source of enjoyment should be sought precisely there. Already in Freud, this deadlock was contextualised both epistemologically and politically: it triggered the "scientific project" of psychoanalysis by becoming its privileged object, but it also provided specific insight into the mechanisms that support the social mode of production. It is not exaggerated to claim that *Das Unbehagen im Kapitalismus*, discontent in capitalism, would be the more appropriate title of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, discontent in culture, since one can hardly ignore that Freud never speaks of some abstract culture, but precisely of industrial societies marked by insatiable consumerism, intensified exploitation and recurring breakdowns, economic depressions and wars. The nexus of the epistemological and the political problematic that accompanied the Freudian theory of the unconscious suggests that capitalism belongs among the crucial problems for psychoanalysis and that clinical practice constantly confronts the pathologies of what one could call the capitalist mode of enjoyment. Lacan brought out this point in the following emphatic remark: "The more saints, the more laughter; that's my principle, to wit, the

4. Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. by Joan Copjec, trans. by Denis Hollier et al. (New York: Norton, 1990) 16. Henceforth cited in the text as *Television*.

way out of capitalist discourse—which will not constitute progress, if it happens only for some” (*Television* 16).

The relation between psychoanalysis and capitalism could hardly be situated in a more openly antagonistic way. Psychoanalysis is the *envers* of the capitalist discourse, its conflictual flipside and inversion—which means its internal border and the point where the capitalist discourse can be destabilised, sabotaged and inverted. This clearly does not mean that psychoanalysis already stands outside capitalism, or that it possesses positive knowledge of how to break out of its forms of domination. But it does suggest that the imperative of psychoanalysis, as it was invented by Freud and reinvented by Lacan, consists in not shying away from direct confrontation with capitalism and in pursuing the line initiated precisely by Marx’s critique of political economy: to destabilise the appearances that sustain the capitalist mode of production and to mark the point, from which the capitalist social link can be envisaged in its irreducible contradiction. In Lacan’s words, “Without any doubt, the worker is the sacred place of this conflictual element, which is the truth of the system” (*Seminar XVI* 39). To mobilise this conflictual element—namely the subject that both Marx and Freud encountered in productive social labour and in unconscious labour—*against* the capitalist strategies of exploitation is the shared effort of psychoanalysis and the critique of political economy, which is why no psychoanalyst can be indifferent to the question: How can the exit from the capitalist discourse be brought about *for all*?

This *for all* is indeed crucial, since it demands that psychoanalysis *force* the juncture of the singular with the universal, rather than remaining in the apparent autonomy and self-sufficiency of clinical experience. The impossibility of the psychoanalytic profession, which Freud had already spoken about seems to redouble and intensify when confronted with this challenging political task.⁵ On the other hand, Lacan’s remark contains a sobering moment for everyone else: there is no such thing as an easy way out, an exit from capitalism for one, some or many. Claiming the opposite would mean to fall back into an extremely problematic dichotomy between inside and outside, and consequently, to identify the exit with a metaposition. This would then amount to an even more problematic fetishisation, according to which psychoanalysis, for instance, would be considered the “great Outdoors” of the logic of capital, a small oasis of authenticity within the vast capitalist desert. Lacan’s critical stance is clear: psychoanalysts must restrain themselves from becoming self-sufficient, self-absorbed or self-centred, for these are precisely the key features that will abolish the radical and critical character of their discipline and

5. “Here let us pause for a moment to assure the analyst that he has our sincere sympathy in the very exacting demands he has to fulfil in carrying out his activities. It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those ‘impossible’ professions in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results. The other two, which have been known much longer, are education and government.” *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXIII, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001) 248. Henceforth cited in the text as Standard Edition, followed by the volume number.

integrate it into the logical frameworks of the dominant social discourse. A case of such assimilation is well known, the International Psychoanalytic Association, which can mockingly be called the “professional insurance plan against analytic discourse” (*Television* 15). The institution, created by Freud in order to be the official guardian of his epistemic invention, soon became an institutionalisation of the resistance against the most revolutionary insights of psychoanalysis.

By searching for a way out of the capitalist discourse, the task of psychoanalysis becomes embedded, from the very outset, in a significantly broader context than the supposed intimacy of the analyst’s office. In the apparent clinical withdrawal from the social structures, the latter are most effectively at work. They re-emerge in the patient’s speech, as well as in the structure of his or her libidinal economy. Capitalism is inscribed in the mental apparatus—this was already Freud’s insight, when he found the best metaphor for unconscious desire in none other than the capitalist, meaning that psychoanalysis began with a fundamental critical and political insight rooted in the rejection of the opposition “unconscious—conscious” or “private—social.” The unconscious is no archive or reservoir of unclear representations and forgotten memories; it is a site of discursive production. Consequently, what matters most in the unconscious is not the “explicit content” of memories and signifiers, but *what happens* to them, the procedures that manipulate the material, and which can be approached in a logical way. Freud famously broke this logic down to two central symbolic operations—condensation and displacement—for which Lacan provided a linguistic translation: metaphor and metonymy. But for Freud the unconscious processes were all about a specific *form of labour*. Operations like condensation and displacement are no simple automata; they demand a labouring subject, which, in the given regime knows only one form, labour-power. Hence, to talk about unconscious labour is far from innocent. Freud refers to the same economic reality and to the same conceptual apparatus as Marx.

The important Freudian insight would thus be that the unconscious is no neutral or transcendent space of thinking: its mechanisms and the corresponding mode of enjoyment depend on the same structure as the social mode of production. Lacan named this predominating structure the master’s discourse, a discourse that he first identified with the logic of the signifier, which comes down to his famous definition “the signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier.” To these three discursive elements Lacan later added the surplus-object, *a*. However, for the master’s discourse the same conclusion needs to be drawn as for the unconscious. It may be the oldest discourse, yet it does not function in the same way in different historical contexts (slaveholder societies, feudalism and capitalism). Why is this the case?—Because its four elements (master-signifier, S_1 ; knowledge, S_2 ; subject, S ; and surplus-object, *a*) know different “personifications” (as Marx would put it) in different modes of production. This point can be read along with the remark, from the *Communist Manifesto*, that the “history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”—and not of Class Struggle.⁶ Marx and Engels were cautious

6. See Karl Marx, *Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 246.

enough not to make of class struggle a trans-historical invariable, which would simply assume different concretisations in different historical epochs. They even write that capitalism resolves previous class struggles and replaces them with the capitalist struggle between two social classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Capitalism “simplifies” class struggle by making the non-relation that supports society fully visible in the split into two opposing camps, while past societies were still engaged into multiple class conflicts. Again, this does not imply that capitalism revealed the true essence of past struggles but that it fabricated something entirely different from the existing social inequalities and introduced new modes and strategies of exploitation, which introduced new social structures, etc.

To repeat, both class struggle and the master’s discourse turn out to be empty concepts, if we detach them from their social concretisations. They do not designate some ahistorical essence of history or positive entity; they stand for the inconsistency, contradiction or instability that traverses each concrete historical mode of production but which is also transformed together with the mode of production.⁷ The feudal lord cannot be compared with the modern capitalist, even if he can be associated with the same discursive articulation or with the same insatiable tendency of exploitation etc. Class struggle designates for Marx and Engels both the structure of the social link and the distortion of this structure. In other words, class struggle is an empty concept *precisely because* it designates structural instability and even instability *as* structure, thereby rejecting the essentialist readings, where structures are said to form an enclosed and stable order. Homologically, Lacan’s notion of the master’s discourse, too, envisions the instability in the relations of domination and not some eternal master, which would remain identical throughout history. One could therefore reformulate Marx and Engels by saying that all history is the history of the master’s discourses. In Lacan’s translation of the classical Marxian problematic, the master’s discourse should be taken as a formula of nonexistence rather than existence—namely of the nonexistence of the social relation, on the background of which other social links become possible (such as the hysteric’s discourse, which Lacan associates with various political revolutions, the university discourse, which is linked with modern science, or finally the analytic discourse, which concerns psychoanalysis but should not be limited only to that framework).⁸

Going back to the quotation from *Television*, we can ask ourselves who or what is the enigmatic saint that Lacan associates with the exit from the capitalist discourse. Let us consider the lines that precede the quoted excerpt:

A saint’s business, to put it clearly, is not *caritas*. Rather, he acts as trash: his business being *trashitas*. So as to realise what the structure imposes, namely

7. In the last instance, Marx’s term “mode of production” is homologous with Lacan’s notion of “discourse.” But the “mode of production” without specification (“slaveholder,” “feudal,” “capitalist” etc.) clearly does not say anything.

8. For the deduction and elaboration of the four discourses, see Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (Seminar XVII)*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007).

allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take him as the cause of the subject's own desire. In fact it is through the abjection of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position, at least within the structure. For the saint, this is not amusing (*Television* 15-16, translation modified).

The task of the analyst consists in "realising what the structure imposes." But the realisation of structure also means its destabilisation, by detecting and circumscribing its internal impossibility, contradiction and disclosure. In doing so, the analyst enables the subject to become aware of its position within the given regime of production, namely that the subject is constituted as pure split, in the case of capitalism, as commodity labour-power.⁹ Marx already showed that labour-power is marked by inconsistency, because it is both one commodity among others and the only commodity that can produce other commodities. In this respect, he assumed the same position in relation to the proletariat that Freud did toward his neurotic patients: he was their analyst, in the sense that he *dissolved* (the actual meaning of *analysis*) the layers of appearances and fetishisations in order to reach the point where structure is realised in nothing other than the subject's inconsistency. In labour-power the contradictions of the commodity universe are knotted together—this is the actual critical point of Marx's labour theory of value, to which we shall return further below.

The realisation of structural imperatives requires transference, in which the analyst assumes the position of the cause of the analysand's desire and thereby establishes the libidinal relation that sustains the analytical economy. Here, a certain displacement is at work, since the analytical situation achieves something that otherwise remains unknown to the subject: it creates the conditions in which the subject can openly confront its own status in the broader social reality: "to be aware of his position, at least within the structure." This is why psychoanalysis does not aim at doing charity (*caritas*), i.e., creating the conditions, in which the subject would be reintegrated into the given social frameworks. Charity is a form of love, which does not seriously problematise the regime that created the conditions requiring charity. What Lacan calls *trashitas* contains a more subversive tendency, which aims to subvert the regime of domination by repeating its contradictions within the analytic situation. Yet should the task of analysis consist in more than mere repetition of existing deadlocks, it needs to prevent the development of transference into yet another "love-relation" (*caritas*) and instead orientate the subject toward the point where its act will transform the established mode of enjoyment. Targeting this transformation means working on a possible resistance against capitalism.

Lacan provided different names for this analytic goal—the pass, traversing the fantasy, identification with the symptom—which all envision the same structural shift: transformation of the subject ("the pass"), defetishisation ("traversing the fantasy") and organisation of structural contradiction ("identification with the symptom").

9. See Jean-Claude Milner, *Clartés de tout* (Paris: Verdier, 2011) 90.

In all these cases the realisation of what (the capitalist) structure imposes will widen the gap that allows the commodified subject to be transformed into a “saint-trash,” the counterpart to commodity. One subversive aspect of *trashitas*, transference, thus consists in its rejection of the only love that capitalism cultivates for its impoverished subjects (*caritas*). Of course, by practising *trashitas*, psychoanalysis risks strengthening the dependency of the analysand on the analyst, which is why Lacan incessantly repeated that the analyst should never identify with the object of transference. The risk of transference lies in the analysand’s fetishisation of the analyst as a “subject supposed to know,” to recall Lacan’s formulation; by identifying with this figure, the analyst would indeed end up in self-fetishisation, turning psychoanalysis into yet another form of capitalist domination. The analyst is merely a provisional love object, and the end of analysis inevitably coincides with the dissolution of transference.

Psychoanalysis should thus envision the subject’s confrontation with capitalism and strive to bring him or her to the point where an apparently private symptom can be recognised as a concrete manifestation of the general economic framework. There is no private suffering, and to cure concretely means to cure from capitalism. This would be the basic difference between psychoanalysis and other psych-professions. Psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy all engage in the practice of *caritas* and thereby mystify the actual position of the subject within structure.

The association of laughter with the exit from capitalism is another surrealist moment in the citation from Lacan’s *Television*. Laughter as a weapon against capitalism seems to suggest that capitalism might be structured like a joke, and the envisioned universalisation of laughter – “the more saints the more laughter” – would mean the downfall of capitalism. Should psychoanalysis teach us how finally to laugh at capitalism? Much of the effectiveness of capitalism surely concerns the fact that it is more successful in causing anxiety than laughter. While Nietzsche wrote that all the gods died of laughter when one of them claimed He was the only one, will the same fate strike Capital, once everyone starts laughing at its advocates, who never get tired of repeating that we live in the best possible world or that we need to tighten our belts because we have been living beyond our means? “The more saints the more laughter” evidently means “The more ‘abjects’ the more politics,” a politics carried out with a somewhat different humour than the one proposed by the capitalist class. For the saint’s laughter is not the only laughter Lacan talked about. It is the inversion of the capitalist’s laughter, which Lacan stumbled upon in Marx’s *Capital*:

Marx introduces this surplus value almost guilelessly (...) after taking some time, when he lets the person involved, namely the capitalist, speak. (...) Marx allows him to take his time to develop this apologia, which appears to be nothing if not honest, and there Marx points out that this spectral figure he confronts, the capitalist, laughs.

This feature, seems superfluous, nevertheless struck me when I first read it. It seemed to me then that this laughter is properly something that refers to what, at that very moment Marx is unveiling, namely what concerns the essence of surplus-value. (...)

What I am unveiling in the passage has, of course, not been noted until now (...) I mean the conjuncture of laughter with the radically eluded function of surplus-value (...)

In short, there and elsewhere, I mean in the radical function hidden in the relation of production to labour, as well as elsewhere, in another, deeper relation, where I am trying to lead you with the help of surplus-enjoyment, there is something like a fundamental gag, which is located strictly speaking in this joint, where we have to drive our wedge when the relations that are in play in the experience of the unconscious, understood in terms of its most general functioning. (*Seminar XVI* 64-65)

The capitalist hijacks laughter by imposing his own idea of humour. The matching passage in Marx is to be found in the section on the production of absolute surplus-value, the chapter on labour and its valorisation, where Marx lays out most openly his correction of the political-economic labour theory of value, a correction that displaces the accent from the all-too-simple claim that “labour is the source of value” to the more sophisticated association of the source of value with the contradictions of the commodity form:

In fact, the seller of labour-power, like the seller of any other commodity, realizes [*realisiert*] its exchange-value, and externalises [*veräußert*] its use-value. He cannot take the one without giving the other. The use-value of labour-power, in other words labour, belongs just as little to its seller as the use-value of oil after it has been sold belongs to the dealer who sold it. The owner of the money has paid the value of a day’s labour-power; he therefore has the use of it for a day, a day’s labour belongs to him. On the one hand the daily sustenance of labour-power costs only half a day’s labour, while on the other hand the very same labour-power can remain effective, can work, during a whole day, and consequently the value which its use during one day creates is double what the capitalist pays for that use; this circumstance is a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injustice towards the seller.

Our capitalist foresaw this situation, and that was the cause of his laughter. The worker therefore finds, in the workshop, the means of production necessary for working not just 6 but 12 hours. (...) The trick has at last worked: money has been transformed into capital. Every condition of the problem is satisfied, while the laws governing the exchange of commodities have not

been violated in any way. Equivalent has been exchanged for equivalent. For the capitalist as buyer paid the full value for each commodity, for the cotton, for the spindle and for the labour-power. He then did what is done by every purchaser of commodities: he consumed their use-value.¹⁰

What the capitalist exploits is not simply labour but a specific structural feature, the minimal gap between use-value and exchange value. He mobilises the alienating dimension of the commodity form and turns this alienation into a privileged source of value. In doing so, he successfully implements labour-power as the commodified version of the subject. However, the commodity form is clearly not the only form of alienation. A much more fundamental level of alienation is labour as such. More precisely, what the English translation of Marx calls “alienation” is in German called *Entäußerung*, externalisation. By choosing this notion, Marx literally repeated something that Hegel already wrote in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when he ranked labour and speech among processes of constitutive alienation, processes that do not simply cause alienation, but which simply *are* alienation in action. However, capitalism is the first mode of production in history that rigorously organises the creation of value around this alienating character of labour and speech, in other words, of discourse.¹¹

The critical importance of the labour theory of value that Marx adopted from his predecessors in political economy (Adam Smith and David Ricardo) consists in a highlighting of what the classics had failed to understand. For them, the labour theory of value was meant to situate labour as the source of value, next to self-interest (or what Freud called “human narcissism”). However, Marx recognised the insufficiencies and mystifications of this simple approach. For him the source of value is not labour but *exploitation* (among others of labour), and more fundamentally, the *exploitation of alienation* that inevitably marks all forms of human activity. And one should not forget that in this productive process, the *mystification of exploitation* (what Marx calls fetishism) plays a role that is just as important as exploitation. There is no exploitation without its ideological mystification, which strives to make exploitation socially invisible. Several readers of Marx have thus mistakenly concluded that he is merely rewriting Adam Smith by adding more drama, which is false. Instead, Marx provided the epistemic conditions that enable one to envision, behind the social exploitation of concrete men, women and children, a more fundamental exploitation of structural contradictions. With this move Marx also succeeded in isolating an entirely different form of subjectivity. Unlike the non-alienated and abstract subject of private interest in classical political economy,

10. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 300-301, translation modified. Henceforth cited in the text as Capital I.

11. Or as Alenka Zupančič has recently claimed, capitalism is the first mode of production, to have transformed the nonexistence of a social relation—a social non-relation— into the privileged source of profit. See Alenka Zupančič, “Sexual is Political?” in Samo Tomšič and Andreja Zevnik eds., *Jacques Lacan Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015).

the subject of alienation and exploitation is no psychological or pathological (narcissistic) subject, no subject supposed to possess positive knowledge of its private interests and of market laws. Political economy remains centred on consciousness and cognition. On the other hand, the subject discovered by the critique of political economy, is non-psychological, non-individual and an 'abject' of knowledge; it is a subject of truth, which Marx targeted by introducing notions and procedures such as alienation, exploitation, contradiction and class struggle into the efforts of economic thought to elaborate a scientific theory of value.

Let us remain with the quoted excerpt from *Capital* a bit further. Marx continues to address the problematic of alienation in the following way:

By turning his money into commodities which serve as the building materials for a new product, and as factors in the labour process, by incorporating living labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorisation process, an animated monster which begins to 'work', 'as if its body were by love possessed'. (*Capital I* 302)

Marx openly exposes two levels of alienation, the constitutive and the constituted, when claiming that what capitalism does is incorporate living labour into a lifeless thing. We should keep in mind that this incorporation, which is also mortification, does not simply target the production of commodities, but also and above all the transformation of living labour into labour-power, a measurable and calculable commodity, which, despite all asserted equality in exchange, assumes an exceptional status within the capitalist universe. While living labour has often been interpreted in a vitalist way, one should nevertheless consider that Marx's expression does not envision some non-alienated positive substance, but precisely the aspect of labour that, according to Hegel, makes of it a process of constitutive alienation. Instead of "living labour" one might as well write "living alienation," alienation that has not yet assumed the formal envelope of the commodity form. The predicate "living" is misleading because it suggests a vital horizon beyond alienation, a state in which labour would be liberated of alienation. But alienation is above all decentralisation and externalisation. It does not have the exclusively negative and tragic connotation of a "subjective drama," that the vitalistic readings persistently denounce. As Marx, Freud and Lacan have more or less implicitly argued, alienation should be transformed from tragedy to comedy. Only through this transformation can something like a political mobilisation of subjectivised negativity—subjectivity without predicates and/or imaginary features such as "race," "gender," "nationality" etc. (all cases of constituted alienation)—be achieved and the class struggle effectively actualised in the confrontation of two classes. (We can observe, today more than ever, that class struggle is most often a "one way street," "class struggle from above," as it has also been called.)

When talking about the capitalist's laughter, Lacan hints that no one ever seriously considered that the structure of jokes might reveal something about the scope and the effectiveness of capitalism. This is not entirely the case, since such a consideration can be found in none than Freud's book on jokes, which is filled with economic comparisons and where the central object of discussion is nothing other than *Lustgewinn*, surplus-enjoyment, the psychoanalytical homologue to surplus-value. Here is an exemplary comparison of the unconscious with capitalism, where the economic tendency toward saving re-emerges in the psychogenesis of jokes:

I may perhaps venture on a comparison between psychical economy and a business enterprise. So long as the turnover in the business is very small, the important thing is that outlay in general shall be kept low and administrative costs restricted to the minimum. Economisation (*Sparsamkeit*) is concerned with the absolute height of expenditure. Later, when the business has expanded, the importance of the administrative cost diminishes; the height reached by the amount of expenditure is no longer of significance provided that the turnover and profits can be sufficiently increased. It would be niggling, and indeed positively detrimental, to be conservative over expenditure on the administration of the business. Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that when expenditure was absolutely great there would be no room left for the tendency to save (*Spartendenz*). The mind of the manager, if it is inclined to saving (*Ersparung*), will now turn to economisation (*Sparsamkeit*) over details. He will feel satisfaction if a piece of work can be carried out at smaller cost than previously, however small the saving may seem to be in comparison with the size of the total expenditure. In a quite analogous fashion, in our complex psychical business too, economisation in detail (*detaillierte Ersparung*) remains a source of pleasure, as may be seen from everyday happenings. (*Standard Edition VIII* 156-157, translation modified)

The unconscious engages in budget cuts and there is one insight that brings Freud particularly close to social economy: once business runs smoothly and expands with success, the tendency to economise turns toward the reduction of labour-costs. The system invests in the "division of labour" in the sense that it strives to prevent its political organisation. The entire liberal economic model with its fantasies of *homo oeconomicus* and private interests is destined to implement a system of values that would counteract the political tendencies of labour movements. When it comes to disorganising labour, no expenditure is too high, for as soon as the conflict between capital and labour would externalise in production, it would push class struggle into the midst of social reality and increase the costs and losses. So what Freud calls the "economisation over details" in fact concerns a multitude of strategies, which will support the interiorisation of the capital-labour conflict, the most successful interiorisation being precisely the creditor-debtor relation, as Marx's reinterpretation of primitive accumulation has shown. Here, the indebtedness of the system is "outsourced" to the multitude of political subjects and socially

implemented as the new “Holy Spirit,” the social link, in which the subject can participate only under the condition that he or she assumes the commodity form.

In another passage, Freud describes the tendency toward saving in the following way: “‘*saving (Ersparung) in expenditure on inhibition or suppression*’ appears to be the secret of the pleasurable effect of tendentious jokes” (*Standard Edition VIII* 119, translation modified). The success of jokes, but also of capitalism, lies in the minimisation of investment for inhibiting and repressing counter-tendencies. Once resistance is neutralised, the mechanism appears to run smoothly and the economic apparatus can exploit the sources of enjoyment without restrictions. We should be attentive to what Freud says here. He does not claim that social repression is abolished and the unconscious tendencies can find their uninhibited way into the realisation of their “creative potentials.” He remarks something much more sophisticated, namely that the unconscious conflict undergoes a transformation—the libidinal economy meets no *internal* resistance. This neutralisation of resistance is embodied in Lacan’s already-mentioned notion of the ideal worker, which now stands for labour without the moment of resistance; labour merges entirely with production and willingly executes the imperatives of capital.

Neoliberalism in fact created the conditions for such an ideal worker to emerge in the social context: the entrepreneur, the economic figure that Freud places alongside the capitalist in *Interpretation of Dreams*.¹² In a scenario in which the labourer has become a small entrepreneur, the capitalist does not need to invest in suppressing conflictual social movements or the organisation of labour. This is no longer necessary because this expenditure has successfully been delegated onto the labouring subjects: their main task is to work on themselves, impose self-discipline, stand in mutual competition, and in doing so they provide the best service to the system. The capitalist worldview, which adds private property and the egoistic pursuit of private interests to apparently universal political categories such as freedom and equality (thereby excluding *fraternité*, a non-narcissistic love as the foundation of a non-capitalist social link)—strives to create the conditions in which inhibition and suppression would be entirely delegated onto the subjects, and exploitation turned into self-exploitation.

Now, if both capitalism and the exit from it are structured like a joke, what types of jokes are at stake in both cases? Or differently put, what tension in jokes do these situations of laughter address? There are two notable Freudian examples, which thematise capitalist reality directly and contextualise the peculiar character of the capitalist’s humour. One is the well-known joke about salmon mayonnaise. A poor guy borrows a certain amount of money from his wealthy friend, after explain-

12. See *Standard Edition V* 223. I engage more extensively with the quotation in question in *The Capitalist Unconscious. Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015). See also Mai Wegener, “Why Should Dreaming be a Form of Work?” in Samo Tomšič and Andreja Zevnik, *Jacques Lacan Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015).

ing his situation. The friend lends the requested amount only to find the poor guy shortly after in a fancy restaurant eating salmon mayonnaise:

“What? You borrow money from me and then order yourself salmon mayonnaise? Is *that* what you’ve used my money for?” “I don’t understand you,” replied the object of attack; “if I haven’t any money I *can’t* eat salmon mayonnaise, and if I have some money I *mustn’t* eat salmon mayonnaise. Well, then, when *am* I to eat salmon mayonnaise?” (*Standard Edition VIII* 50)

The joke is labelled cynical because the accused person displaces the accent from the reproach that “in his circumstances he has no right to think of such delicacies *at all*” (*ibid.*). Behind the apparent mocking of the creditor’s moralism, the debtor is in fact revealed as the one who is trapped in the creditor’s fantasy: means of subsistence, yes, luxury, no. The reproach is, thus, that the debtor has violated the unwritten rule, according to which he is not allowed to live beyond his means, and if he borrows money, it must be in order to repay his creditors, and not to spend it on personal enjoyment. The cynicism of the debtor can be translated into direct speech: “I can’t deny myself what tastes good to me, and it’s a matter of indifference to me where I get the money from to pay for it. There you have the explanation of why I’m eating salmon mayonnaise on the very day you’ve lent me the money” (*ibid.* 52). Freud rightly remarks that the translation abolishes the conditions of a joke—in the given case the minimal displacement in the debtor’s reaction to his creditor’s reproach: “I will not finance your enjoyment”—and turns it into a piece of cynicism. We can observe why such direct confrontation would not be funny, while also revealing complete impotence in face of the reproach: “In your position you have no right to enjoy.” It would in fact legitimise the capitalist fantasy that the poor personify the subject of enjoyment.

We can recall that Marx comes upon this fantasy when he criticises the “political-economic tale” (myth, fiction) of primitive accumulation, which provides the genesis of the capitalist and the labourer. In some distant past, to recall the story, there have presumably been two sorts of people, the elite, who renounced enjoyment and accumulated the first wealth, and the “lazy rascals,” who spent “their substance, and more, in riotous living” (*Capital I* 873), i.e., who have, as today’s advocates of austerity incessantly repeat, lived beyond their means and ended up possessing merely their labour-power, the capacity of their bodies to produce other bodies (commodities). So, what was, according to the political-economic tale, originally a subject of enjoyment has progressively been transformed into an indebted economic subject, who is forced to enter the market and assume the commodity form as the sole support of social relations. According to classical political economy, enjoyment produces debt, which is not false in itself, for Marx’s correction of the political-economic tale of primitive accumulation remains within this claim, but with a crucial correction. Marx first rejects the fantasy of the subject of enjoyment—there is no such “thing” as a subject of enjoyment, this subject is indeed an ideological fiction, which provides a basis for the problematic capitalist “morality,” the abstinence theory, which argues for the birth of wealth out of renunciation

of enjoyment. Marx's second correction consists in situating enjoyment correctly. The latter is no quality or action, pertaining to some presupposed and in the last instance fictitious subject, but a feature of the system. It is capital, which enjoys, and it enjoys under the condition of pushing its subjects deeper into indebtedness.

To return to Freud's joke, the debtor would disarm himself if he responded with open cynicism, for then he would walk straight into the ideological trap that the creditor's reproach had ready for him. He would admit that all he wants is "enjoyment without boundaries." *Vivre sans temps mort, jouir sans entraves* was also the demand of the revolutionary students in 1968: life without boredom, i.e., without abstract capitalist time, which forces everyone into an automatized process of production; and enjoyment without restrictions, i.e., without capitalist morality, according to which surplus-enjoyment follows from self-imposed abstinence. But the goal of capitalism is to raise everyone into a regime, in which they will enjoy (in) exploitation and thus become something like ideal masochists. This makes of capitalism a far more obscene form of domination than any previous historical form of the master's discourse. In this respect capitalism comes close to what Freud analyses under the category of obscene jokes, or more precisely, smut.

Financial capitalism or neoliberalism openly displays its systemic obscenity, and it is also no surprise that in this era the critical voices of political economy are entirely overshadowed by the unanimous voice (laughter) of what Marx had already envisioned with the term "vulgar economics":

In *M-M'* we have the irrational form of capital, the misrepresentation and objectification of the relations of production, in its highest power: the interest-bearing form, the simple form of capital, in which it is taken as logically anterior to its own production process; the ability of money or a commodity to valorize its own value independent of reproduction—the capital mystification in the most flagrant form.

For vulgar economics, which seeks to present capital as an independent source of wealth, of value creation, this form is of course a godsend, a form in which the source of profit is no longer recognizable and in which the result of the capitalist production process—separate from the process itself—obtains an autonomous existence.¹³

The obscenity of vulgar economics consists in the fetishisation of the highest capitalist abstraction—capital itself—which is equivalent to the self-fetishisation of capitalists as producers of value and vulgar political economists as scientists of value (this branch of "positive" science falls also statistics, one of the central factors in the distortion of social reality behind abstract numerical data). Incidentally, Marx shows that this condition displays the two tendencies that Freud ascribes to a certain type of tendentious joke: violence and obscenity. The cynical joke remains stuck in this perspective. There is, however, another tendency, which goes against

13. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 516-17.

the established mechanism and which makes an unusual exception to Freud's classification, the sceptical joke, with the rightly famous example:

Two Jews met in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. "Where are you going?" asked one. "To Cracow," was the answer. "What a liar you are!" broke out the other. "If you say you're going to Cracow, you want me to believe you're going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you're going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?" (*Standard Edition VIII* 115)

Freud immediately recognises in this verbal absurdity a complication, which contains a valuable epistemological lesson with direct political implications for a non-cynical notion of critique:

But the more serious substance of the joke is the problem of what determines the truth. The joke, once again, is pointing to a problem and is making use of the uncertainty of one of our commonest concepts. Is it the truth if we describe things as they are without troubling to consider how our hearer will understand what we say? Or is this only Jesuitical truth, and does not genuine truth consist in taking the hearer into account and giving him a faithful picture of our own knowledge? I think that the jokes of this kind are sufficiently different from the rest to be given a special position. What they are attacking is not a person or an institution but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions (*ibid.*).

While the capitalist's joke targets persons, more than anything else, the sceptical, or one could also say the critical-political joke, attacks and problematises the structure behind them. If Marx claimed in a letter to Engels that *Capital* was the biggest bomb ever dropped on the head of the bourgeoisie, we could justifiably claim that it was also an attempt to produce the deadliest joke in history (one can think of the matching Monty Python sketch), to create something like a politics of comedy, or at least to ground politics on a non-capitalist humour. Indeed, in Marx, but also in Lacan, the notion of critique comes to overlap with comedy. Critique *qua* comedy: this would be the Marxian discontinuity in the history of critique, its first revelation being that the capitalist's laughter concerns the fact that a web of social appearances (freedom, equality, property and the hypothesis of private interest) successfully camouflages the constant invention of ever-new forms of inequality, which help to keep profits growing.

Both the critique of political economy and psychoanalysis assume a status that is homologous to that of the sceptical joke: one that appears absurd from the perspective of the dominant regime of knowledge and thought, but which, nonetheless, sabotages the joke called capitalism. The political explosive that Freud's sexual aetiology of neuroses and his theory of sexuality dropped on the head of bourgeois puritanism also consisted in demonstrating that libidinal economy comes down to constant deviations, without a natural sexual norm in the background. Enjoyment is not so much a sign of perversion as the privileged indicator that there is no such thing as normative sexuality. Capitalism has been only partially successful in inte-

grating these lessons, for what it cannot digest is the point that Lacan so vehemently accentuated: “There is no sexual relation.” Capitalism needs fetishist fantasies of positivity, vital forces and creative potentials, for only in this way can it sustain the illusion that everything works just fine in this best of all possible political worlds, and continue making exploitation acceptable for the majority of its subjects.