

Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis

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For however much we throw the word “accessible” around in academic discussions as the strength of a philosophy book, Todd McGowan’s “accessibility” in his latest book, *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* is quite stunning. In one chapter he compares the DaVinci Code to Derrida as it relates to hermeneutics and signification, without sacrificing any of the meaty aspects of the ideas, and ends up clarifying many psychoanalytic concepts in the process. He frequently sums up big ideas of Lacan or Freud in ways that get to the core of the thought. McGowan’s thought is highly influenced by Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, and Mladen Dolar (the Slovene School). In many ways, this is where I think McGowan gets his insistence on the Freudian death drive, his reading of ethics as the capacity to sustain the monstrous jouissance of the Other, and his focus on applying psychoanalysis to emancipatory politics. Despite his points of agreement with the Slovene’s, however, McGowan diverges

from them and others, including Lacanian analysts, in interesting ways, which is a line that I want to explore in what follows.

The book is situated in two larger sections, “Subjectivity” and “Society” but there are many arguments started in the first section that continue and are not really resolved until the end of the book. McGowan’s introduction to the book, “Psychoanalytic Hostility to Politics” does not so much as introduce the book as argue for the centrality of the death drive in Freud’s work and for its indelible role in any thinking of politics. McGowan points out the utter neglect of a radical notion of death drive in many twentieth century readings of Freud, from Marcuse, Adorno, to Norman O. Brown. It is in many ways not surprising that they neglected death drive, as McGowan notes, because much of their projects were tied to sexual liberation. As often was the case, these texts would present some pseudo dialectic of the two drives that situate civilization: *thanatos* and *eros*. McGowan summarizes these positions nicely when he states that what differentiates them from today’s post-Lacanian theory of the political is that they posited society could overcome antagonism within the social order (10 – 11). This notion presents a helpful point of contrast to today’s

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Lacanian left, from the far left radical position of Žižek to the more moderate left position of the Lacanian political thinker, Yannis Stavrakakis. Stavrakakis argues for institutional libidinal re-investments and criticizes Žižek's "apocalyptic" reading of the psychoanalytic act. Stavrakakis proposes an alternative to Žižek's radical act that creates a new positivity by positing two dimensions:

"Instead of incarnating an apocalyptic, total re-foundation of positivity, this articulation is characterized by a distinct ethical relation with lack: instead of covering it over, it purports to register and institutionalize lack/negativity" (Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, 32).

McGowan is nonetheless convincing in his sweeping argument that Freud's radicalization of the death drive renders immanent reform or change within the existing system to be totally impossible. Even on its more moderate spectrum, we still find this radical commitment to a politics of mourning or to a more radical libidinal act that re-positivizes the social relations as such on the more far left position in psychoanalysis. But what is the death drive? McGowan is right to note that it is an impulse to return

to an originary and traumatic loss, not to a place of inorganicness. This distinction is a crucial point Lacan made about the translation of *trieb* in Freud's original English and French translations of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Drive is by no means tied to a biological order, and is not tied to aggressiveness. Furthermore, the repetition of the death drive is what produces loss, and by extension, the death drive is central to the subjective production of enjoyment. Our only source of enjoyment is thus to produce loss as McGowan notes (13). The pleasure principle is replaced by the death drive for Freud in his later years, because McGowan states, "we desire the object as absent, actually obtaining the object produces dissatisfaction, not enjoyment" (69).

One learns at the outset of the text that it will focus on a very specific lineage of psychoanalytic thought as it pertains to the political and does not purport to give a wider survey or even incorporate any other post-Freudian thinkers outside of the Lacanian field. This exclusive trend is fairly common amongst Lacanians, and one should ask if there is a consequence to excluding voices such as Melanie Klein, Jung, Bion, and others. For Lacan, the dismissal of other Freudians was both a part of his teachings

and personality, having himself been barred from the IPA. We can locate today's intra-Lacanian debates between Miller and Žižek as emblematic of this same exclusionary potential amongst Lacanians. It is telling that most often these rifts that occur inside Lacanian circles tend to be tied to political differences¹.

Because the project of pairing politics with psychoanalysis is impossible, one of the best models for drive and emancipatory politics at the subjective level is the figure of the anorexic. The anorexic, McGowan says, without any irony, presents a deep truth of the political act because "the political act involves insisting on one's desire in the face of its impossibility" (30). Thus, the key to a politics based on the death drive is to find satisfaction in the drive itself.

"Through the loss of the privileged object, one frees oneself from the complete domination of (parental or social) authority by creating a lack that no authority can fill. Ceding the object is thus the founding act of subjectivity and the first free act" (31).

Herein lies the core wager of

¹ See Žižek's debate over Miller's "ironist position" as it pertains to cynicism in the concluding chapter of *Less Than Nothing*.

the text: to think through this loss at the core of every social and identitarian formation. To think the traumatic loss as *the site* of politics is both an ethical and a political project. The Freudian death drive blocks all efforts by authority to give the subject what it lacks, to fill over this lack at the subjective and the collective level, any effort will always wind up short. While he does not naturalize capitalism as the ultimate horizon of social organization available, there are times when McGowan goes too far in the direction of isolating the effects of capitalism in too general of a sense. He invokes terms such as "the capitalist subject" and frames this subject in highly universal terms that is certainly helpful for certain clarity, but it neglects other subjective modes that capitalism can produce. I am reminded in this context of the four subjective positions of Badiou, and for that matter surprised at the relative lack of Badiou in McGowan's text, despite the fact that Badiou is not a psychoanalytic thinker in any direct sense. Yet, McGowan's treatment of the relation between politics and capitalism is tied to a larger claim about the way in which capitalism structures the flow of desire and the relation of desire to drive in capitalism. The formula for this is well encapsulated when McGowan writes, "capitalism mistakes desire

for drive in the inability to get satisfaction in the act of not getting the object,” and thus capitalism operates on the principle that it can attain the object. This is why capitalist subjects without hope are no longer capitalist subjects, and it is also why desire is oriented towards an object that we don’t have access to. What a politics that is grounded on psychoanalysis does is re-orient the universal loss that capitalism seeks to overcome through accumulation and moves or transforms subjects at a libidinal level, from a politics based on desire—to a politics based on enjoyment. At a later point in the text he invokes a positive use of fantasy to thinking the impossible loss because in fantasy, “we experience enjoyment through the loss of the object.” Because fantasy makes evident the link between loss and enjoyment—allowing us to conceive of a politics that embraces loss rather than attempting to escape it—fantasy allows us to experience the impossible.

After laying the groundwork for the centrality of death drive to a politics founded on loss and enjoyment, McGowan shows how Marx precipitated these psychoanalytic lessons in *Capital*. Marx predicted the psychoanalytic political imperative when he states that: “For capitalism is already

abolished when we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself” (Marx, second volume of *Capital*).

The key point of interpretation for any future use of a psychoanalytic politics is not to provide a critique of the fantasies that underlie capitalist subjectivity, but to reveal where subjective enjoyment is located. Through the loss of the object, which is the foundation of our enjoyment, this act elevates the object with the power to satisfy subjects (70). But what seems unclear in this point is how precisely a new form of enjoyment can be enacted. He writes, “psychoanalysis will enable us to turn the tables on commodity logic and to place the emphasis on the act of sacrifice” (71). This constitutes a perspectival shift in *how* we enjoy, not in changing the nature of our enjoyment as such (71). This is in part answered with recourse to fantasy as we saw above, however, it should be noted that McGowan’s text unfolds in a quite linear fashion. It builds up arguments that are not exactly answered until the concluding chapters. This is why the last section of the book, “Society” is the most enriching.

In the first section of the text “Subjectivity,” McGowan generalizes the other alternative

to Lacanian psychoanalysis in psychology more generally by referring to various manifestations of “ego psychology” and conflates this movement that is largely dead in contemporary psychology with a whole range of manifestations from liberalism, to the Hegelians of recognition, to humanistic psychology. Many decades ago Lacan remarked that ego psychology creates a situation where the capitalist subject sees their enjoyment outside of themselves in the other, (73) and here McGowan builds off of this insight, but without recourse to other psychoanalytic thinkers. McGowan’s text could have used more in-depth discussion of how new syncretic modalities of psychology (humanistic, psychotherapy, existential, etc.) are not all modeled off of an ego modeled upon a perfect other. Herein lies a danger of Lacanian psychoanalysis that often leads to a sort of Manichaeism that divides and conquers. This is the nature of any truly original and revolutionary discourse, but perhaps it should be tempered with more nuanced reflections.

McGowan certainly makes a strong case for how psychoanalysis, compared to liberalism and Marxism, which posits justice as the first point of promoting egalitarianism,

begins with freedom. This makes McGowan’s politics highly devoid of ideology, for example in an interview with McGowan,² I asked him about Occupy Wall Street, and his response was telling as it pertains to this strain of thought:

Occupy didn’t identify with the missing binary signifier but involves an identification with the excluded. I have a real problem with the slogan that identifies the movement with the 99%. What happens? Instantly, a new Other is produced that is the 1%, and if we can just eliminate this 1%, then we will achieve the good. That’s the logic at work. In this sense, Occupy, despite its successes (including, I would claim, the re-election of Barack Obama), remained within a very traditional political paradigm. Identification with the missing binary signifier would insist, in contrast, would involve an identification with the inherent failure of the Other or the system itself.

McGowan’s politics is most eloquently summarized in the last sections of the text. The chapter, “The Case of the Missing Signifier”, we find that the only viable political

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² See full interview at Berfrois, November 12, 2013 <http://www.berfrois.com/2013/11/beyond-the-good-berfrois-interviews-todd-mcgowan/>

position is to identify with the missing signifier, and not to seek its radical elimination. The crucial point made here is that the missing signifier concerns the law itself, not those who are excluded: “by responding on the level of the immigrant, or by responding to the failure patriarchy on the level of the feminine, the battle is already lost” (277). Here, McGowan makes his own political position more clear within the Lacanian left, and does a good job in identifying how psychoanalytic differs from the Deleuzian vitalist project, the Derridian hermeneutic position. Because psychoanalysis recognizes that “politics requires an enemy or other. It requires a gap within the signifying structure where there can be no understanding. The divide between male and female is a division within the subject itself. The missing signifier is an internal torsion within every signifying system” (281). What this implies is a highly structuralist identification with the absent signifier, wherein we do not insist on subverting the system but on “adhering to the truth of the signifying system and forcing that truth to manifest itself” (281). While McGowan provides an series of accessible examples from the DaVinci Code to situate this approach to a psychoanalytic politics, what is missing is a more nuanced discussion of how this

position differs with singular thinkers such as Agamben, Badiou, Laclau and so on. The text is consistent however in this regard as its overall goal is to concentrate on the elaboration of a psychoanalytic politics, and it certainly succeeds in this regard.

In the chapter “Sustaining Anxiety,” McGowan argues for an ethics that can complement the larger political project of psychoanalysis. Unlike Zizek and Badiou, McGowan sees ethics and politics as constitutive of the same ground, and both are linked to the larger notion of loss developed out of the Freudian death drive. In a sweeping definition of how psychoanalysis treats ethics, McGowan remarks that ethics is posited through enjoyment itself, and not through the sacrifice of enjoyment, for which we can see rival schools of ethics such as Kantian or utilitarian ethics as adhering to (101). Recognition—as a mode of situating justice or a discourse on equality, from Kant to Rawls—operates on a false premise regarding the way that recognition handles enjoyment. Recognition blocks enjoyment as it involves submission to social authority. For psychoanalysis, this means that recognition reduces the subject to a social object, to a title and symbolic function: professor, student, etc. and this completely

misses the uniqueness of the subject (100). As McGowan states, “the search for recognition cannot have any ethical status whatsoever because it involves submission to an entity that exists only through the act of submitting to it” (101). But the critique of the “recognition Hegelians,” (Robert Pippin, Francis Fukuyama, etc.) is not waged at the level of the content of their theory as much as it is at the historicity of today’s subject relative to larger shifts in authority, particularly paternal authority. McGowan writes, “authority has become too close, and its obscenity has become visible” (104). This change in authority, McGowan argues, results in a collapse of the potential for an ethico-political project precisely because the other is now rendered bare. We should not understand this “barren other” from the perspective of Agamben’s *homo sacer*, as an excluded biopolitical other, but rather with recourse to Lacan’s theory of the four discourses. I understand McGowan’s argument to be situated at the university discourse that places knowledge (S2) in the place of the Master-signifier, and renders anonymous and neutral all knowledge as such. This results in the exclusion of a master signifier able to situate knowledge on the side of emancipation, evidenced for example through expert culture which results in the explosion of

a dizzying number of mini-father figures. The result of the “bareness of the other” is a pervasive rise of anxiety at the subjective level. This is why recognition is flawed at the level of subjectivity. It is also why ethics must involve a sustaining of anxiety in a radical way, in a way that opens the path to enjoyment (105). Thankfully, McGowan does not fall back onto an individualized ethics, but sees in the ethics of psychoanalysis an intimate connection the social bonds and what he refers to as the “uncaniness at the heart of the social relationship.” McGowan does a masterful job weaving the interrelationship between this macro-level subjective shift in the logic of late capitalism and its impact on desire and demand. The argument will sound familiar to readers of Zizek; however, McGowan presents it with a certain clarity that is even more refreshing. The argument goes that today, subjects do not experience a clear demand from social authority, and consequently, they do not discover the secret to the desire of the authority hidden beneath this demand (103). He proceeds to develop two prevailing subjective options, the pathological narcissist and the fundamentalist, both of which psychoanalysis, through the anxiety-drive alterity goes beyond. The first choice between the pathological narcissist and

the fundamentalist are the two subjective positions available today (103). While the term “fundamentalist” struck me as dated, going out of vogue following the end of the Bush era and the rise, or rather fall of the economy as the traumatic crisis on the left—as opposed to the outright imperialism of Bush following 9/11—it is still helpful in understanding the essence of these two subjective modalities.

To understand McGowan’s position on subjectivity, we find much of it developed in the chapter “The Appeal of Sacrifice.” Here, we find that subjectivity occurs in two steps: an initial loss occurs that constitutes the subject, and then, the subject makes an additional sacrifice in order to commemorate the first loss and to join the social order (146).

What we hold in common is not a common object, but it is the sacrifice as such. McGowan writes,

“According to psychoanalysis, neither the subject nor the social order exists independently but instead emerges out of the other’s incompleteness. The subject exists at the point of the social order’s failure to become a closed structure, and the subject enters into social arrangements as a result of its own failure to achieve self-identity” (145).

The “premature birth” of subjectivity leads the subject to a relation to the social or society as the site where they think this loss might be redeemed. What we hold in common is not a common object, but it is the sacrifice as such that the social can never adequately redeem. As stated before, McGowan sees in fantasy a positive application for thinking enjoyment, but interestingly he also sees fantasy as playing a role in the development of the two social bonds. By referring to Lacan’s theory of sexual difference he develops the male side of the bond, “that offers a familiar organization for society: it creates a social bond through the process of exclusion. Male identity emerges through the exceptionality of the primal father who is not subject to castration (154 – 155). Precisely because the social bond depends, according to the logic of male sexuation, on excluding a particular group in order to provide an enemy around which the collective identity of members of the society can form (155). Since each woman is a particular, the sacrifice is made possible in female subjectivity: “the logic of the not-all posits that there are only enemies, only outsiders, only exceptions” (159). McGowan notes how the 9/11 attacks enabled citizens to enjoy through the enactment of the social bond of friend/enemy.

“The authentic social bond occurs only in the shared-experience of loss—that is, only according to the female logic of not-having” (160).

Overall, the fundamental barrier to the establishment of an authentic social bond is the resistance to avowing the traumatic nature of the bond” (163) and the reader is left with a helpful set of examples to think through this impossibility at the heart of the social. McGowan’s text should be celebrated if for no other reason than its ability to clearly identify these various points of impossibility that any confrontation with the political manifests.

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