

The Lust for Power and the Logic of Enjoyment

Todd McGowan

Abstract: Politics today seems to revolve around power. Uncovering the working of power in politics was the main task of both Marx and Nietzsche. But the crucial psychoanalytic intervention into the question of politics is its introduction of enjoyment as the driving force in all our political acts. In this way, psychoanalytic theory represents a fundamental challenge to Marxist or Nietzschean conceptions of politics. In contrast to theories that focus on the good or on power, psychoanalytic theory explains our proclivity for acting against our self-interest as a clear product of the drive to enjoy. In a psychoanalytic conception of politics, one must leave a space for enjoyment, but one cannot consciously organize a political structure around it, since enjoyment cannot be our conscious aim.

Key Words: Enjoyment, Freud, Lacan, Power, Politics

From Good To Power

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud all shattered political illusions, but they didn't shatter illusions in the same way. Given their basic political conservatism relative to Marx, it makes sense to group Nietzsche and Freud together, to see their attack on political illusions as fundamentally different than Marx's. Marx undermines illusions not to enlighten individuals but in order to help bring about a communist revolution that would change the political terrain altogether. Neither Nietzsche nor Freud has any such aim. If they envision political change at all, it is certainly not the egalitarian revolution that Marx proposes.

But if we look closely at the critique of political illusions advanced by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, it turns out that Marx and Nietzsche have much more in common with each other than either does with Freud. Despite Nietzsche's abhorrence for socialism (which he pejoratively labels "*latent Christianity*"), he actually echoes Marx's interpretation of politics as a struggle for power.¹ Whereas Marx identifies all political history as the struggle between classes for power over each other, Nietzsche sees politics as the means that individuals or groups use to assert their power. There is a family resemblance between Marx and Nietzsche when it comes to analyzing the role that political illusions have for us. What's going on in politics for both is really a power struggle. Freud, in contrast, sees libido or enjoyment as the basis for all political organizations. He shatters political illusions by revealing that they secretly express forms of enjoyment. This hasn't been completely clear simply because Freud seldom discusses politics as directly as Marx and (to a lesser extent) Nietzsche do.

.....
¹ Nietzsche 2003, p. 172.

Placing enjoyment at the heart of politics is the most significant contribution of psychoanalysis to political theorizing. Although neither Freud nor Jacques Lacan do much direct political theorizing, the psychoanalytic project that they undertake provides the arsenal for revising completely how we think about politics. Thinking about politics in terms of enjoyment first and foremost enables us to make sense of what seems counterintuitive through any other form of analysis—the phenomenon of individuals acting politically against their own self-interest, acting in ways that do them harm rather than benefiting them. If the aim of our political activity is to discover a way of organizing and distributing enjoyment, then actions that violate our self-interest lose their anomalous status and become the rule rather than the exception, since enjoyment occurs through the destruction rather than the advancement of our self-interest.² We enjoy through forms of self-sacrifice, and in politics we enjoy the sacrifice of our own good.

Historically, thinkers have thought about politics in terms of the good of all. While individuals each pursue only their own good, the aim of political organization is the good of the collective. This idea remains constant from Aristotle to John Locke to Hannah Arendt to John Rawls.³ It is Aristotle who establishes the good as the object of politics, which Locke, Arendt, and Rawls later take up. In the *Politics*, he analyzes different forms of government in terms of their ability to achieve the good. He begins this work by proclaiming, “Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good.”⁴ Here, Aristotle translates the individual’s pursuit of the good to the political community’s same pursuit, which runs in parallel. Although what the good is differs from thinker to thinker, most of the major thinkers of the Western tradition share a rough consensus concerning the good as the aim of politics.

.....
2 Jacques Lacan suggests this inverse relationship between enjoyment and self-interest when he notes that “Freud’s use of the good can be summed up in the notion that it keeps us a long way from our *jouissance*.” Lacan 1992, p. 185. Our self-interest or our good protects us from enjoyment, but it is in sacrificing this self-interest that we enjoy, a dynamic made clearest when it comes to what we eat. We enjoy most those foods, like candy and cake, that damage our self-interest by impairing our health, while we find the least enjoyment in those foods that most contribute to maintaining us physically, like celery or spinach. Although it is possible to take pleasure in eating the latter, the fact that they are good for us makes it difficult to enjoy eating them.

3 Arendt’s critique of Marx is that his attempt to shatter political illusions takes the focus of politics off the good and places it on bare survival. In short, Marx transforms politics into a branch of economy and thereby eliminates politics as such, which Arendt sees as what is fundamental to human existence. See Arendt 1998.

4 Aristotle 1984, p. 1:1. For his part, Locke contends, “The end of Government is the good of Mankind.” Locke 1988, p. 417. At this closing point of the famous *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke uses the pursuit of the good as the basis for an argument against tyrannical authority, which has the effect of impairing this pursuit.

There is a clear logic to this conception of politics. It makes sense that people come together in order to defend themselves against possible harm and to ensure their own good. Otherwise, they would simply stay separated from each other in what Locke and others call a state of nature. The drive to form a political community suggests that its aim must be the good of those in the community.

One could see this idea of the good of the whole informing political actions in China today. President Xi Jinping promotes the development of capitalism under the organizing control of the Communist Party. He continues Deng Xiaoping’s transformation of China from a communist economy to a capitalist one, which lifts many Chinese workers out of poverty and enables savvy capitalists to live lives as prosperous as those in the West. While Xi’s policies have been politically repressive, they have been economically liberal and enabled the Chinese people an access to material comforts that they had hitherto not had. His adjustment of the Chinese economy could be said to have advanced the good of all. Despite Xi’s nominal investment in communism, one could easily interpret his leadership, especially the implementation of the New Economic Policy, according to Aristotle’s conception of the good, as with the leadership of almost any nation.⁵

Both Marx and Nietzsche recognize an obvious complication with this political privileging of the good in the analysis of politics. But rather than challenging directly the notion that politics is organized around the good, they simply raise the question—the good of whom? This is a decisive step. Once one introduces a division into the good that politics pursues, the idea that politics might be organized around the good of all quickly collapses. No political leader pursues the good of the whole but of a portion of the whole that has a privilege within the society. It becomes evident that political struggle is the struggle for power (or the expression of such a struggle)—either of a class or of a group or of an individual.

On this issue, despite their vast political disagreements, Marx and Nietzsche are proximate to each other.⁶ While Marx would analyze the French Revolution as the victory of an emerging bourgeoisie in its struggle with the landed aristocracy, Nietzsche would see the rise of Robespierre and the Reign of Terror as the embodiment of Christian slave morality in its modern manifestation.⁷ Marx sees this event as the

.....
5 Even a tyrannical government, like that of Kim Jong-un in North Korea, operates with a conception of the good. But according to Aristotle, the problem with tyranny—why it is tyranny—is that it enacts the greatest separation between public good and private good. Under tyranny, the private good of the leader or of a ruling cadre trumps the public good.

6 Perhaps it is this agreement about power that enables so many Marxist-oriented thinkers of the late 20th century to embrace Nietzsche’s philosophy, despite his open conservatism. Gilles Deleuze is the paradigmatic figure of this embrace.

7 See, for instance, Marx 2010 and Nietzsche 1997.

crucial progressive moment of modernity, and Nietzsche sees it as the culmination of the modern catastrophe. Although their analyses and value judgments differ widely, the basic interpretive move is the same: to discover the power dynamic hidden within the political structure and to understand politics in terms of power.

The basic difference is that Marx roots power in the economy and thus interprets history according to economic struggles, while Nietzsche locates power or the will to power in the psyche. Power, for Nietzsche, cannot be reduced to an economic causality. Although Nietzsche is critical of capitalism as much as (if not more than) Marx, he is critical of it for the opposite reason: he attacks capitalism for introducing the principle of equality into history, not for its production of vast inequalities. Furthermore, Marx envisions the future elimination of power through the withering away of the state under communism. In communist society, class struggle—the struggle for power—will come to end. Nietzsche’s vision of the future is diametrically opposed to this. His future *Übermensch* beyond good and evil will be a figure of ultimate power, not of its absence. But these differences do not obfuscate Marx and Nietzsche’s shared critique of politics centered on the good.

In taking up this position, Marx and Nietzsche introduce what appears as a fundamental break with Aristotle and with the entire tradition of political theorizing that he begins. By stripping away the illusion of the good and exposing politics as a power struggle, they seem to usher in a new, more honest era of political theorizing. Rather than messing around with the ideal of the good that really governs no one’s political activity, we can cut to the chase and talk directly about power.

But the good and power are not as opposed as they seem. Marx and Nietzsche believe that they are revolutionizing how we think about politics, but their revolution actually leaves the former structure almost entirely intact. It is a revolution in name only, and it requires Freud, despite his refusal to involve himself in political projects, to bring about a substantive change.

In his *Seminar VII on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan shows the connection between the good and power. The good is simply the form that power takes. As he points out, “The domain of the good is the birth of power.”⁸ The good is not an abstract political ideal but what we have power over and can make use of. In this way, Lacan connects the good as a political ideal with the various goods that we possess. By doing so, he makes it clear that we use the good, just like we use goods, to keep us at a distance from the trauma of enjoyment. Lacan continues in *Seminar VII*, “what is meant by defending one’s goods is one and the same

.....
8 Lacan 1992, p. 229.

thing as forbidding oneself from enjoying them.”⁹ Eliding the difference between the good and goods enables Lacan to see that the good represents what we cannot enjoy, which is why no political organization has ever pursued it.

The same dynamic holds for power as well. Like the good, power represents an attempt to protect ourselves from enjoyment. Power is power over enjoyment. We look to gain power in order to avoid encountering the enjoyment that threatens to upend our everyday existence. When they attain power, people use it to isolate themselves from the others’ enjoyment: they buy vast tracts of land, build fences, install alarms, and hire security guards, all so that they can avoid the disturbance that the other’s enjoyment would introduce through playing loud music, producing strange smells, and even intruding on their property. Power is appealing because enjoyment is threatening. It promises to undermine our psychic equilibrium. By keeping the other’s enjoyment at bay, one keeps one’s own enjoyment at bay as well, which is in fact the point of creating distance from the other.

Like the good, power provides an opportunity for enjoyment only in the negative sense. When one enjoys power, one enjoys giving it up. No one just intelligently holds on to power. As power becomes secure, leaders put it at risk in wars or with actions that can only lead to failure. All leaders constantly work toward their own downfall because work in this direction is the only way to enjoy the power of leadership. When we look at the catastrophic decisions of political leaders in modern world history—Robespierre’s turn against Danton, Lincoln’s policy of appeasement with the white South, Lenin’s appointment of Stalin as General Secretary, or Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union, just to name a few—it becomes clear that those in power do not enjoy retaining their power. Of course, there are countless actions that leaders take to hold on to power, but there is nothing enjoyable in this. Even those leaders who retain power for life find ways to create jeopardy for their rule and themselves. The only way to enjoy power is to push it to the point where one loses it, which is why Napoleon ends his days on St. Helena.

For psychoanalysis, both the good and power serve as lures to obscure the role that enjoyment plays in politics. We take refuge in the idea of the good or the idea of power in order to avoid confronting how we derive enjoyment, which takes something from us rather than giving us anything. We attain the good or accumulate power, but we enjoy through what we lose. Just as the good and power provide respite from the disturbance of enjoyment, political theories focused on the good and on power offer the same respite. Psychoanalysis marks a radical break with the logic of the good articulated by Aristotle and the logic of power articulated by Marx and Nietzsche. No political organization can pursue

.....
9 Lacan 1992, p. 230.

the good because the good doesn't exist, not just because it is merely a guise for power but because we erect the good as a good only in order to enjoy its sacrifice. When we pursue the good or power, we are doing so because they provide fuel for our mode of enjoying, not because they are desirable or enjoyable in themselves. Rather than enjoying the good, we enjoy its sacrifice.¹⁰

Conscious Vs. Unconscious

When we look at the controversy that Marx's economic interpretation of history and Nietzsche's power analysis stirred up, it certainly seems that they hit a nerve. But their theoretical contributions provided a disturbance that could be assimilated into prevailing political thought in a way that the psychoanalytic emphasis on enjoyment could not. This is due to the difference between consciousness and the unconscious. Despite its unpleasantness, the will to power is not unconscious.

It is true that some find it difficult to avow their lust for power. They couch their attempts to seize power, for instance, in terms of equality and justice for all. While campaigning for universal justice, they manage to empower themselves and, what's more important, their form of morality. This is what the Right finds so infuriating about what they call "limousine liberals," the political figures who proclaim their concern for equality while managing to make a fortune for themselves. Equality here functions as a guise for a project self-enrichment.

This is what Nietzsche hates about Christianity, which he sees as a version of slave morality. Slave morality, according to Nietzsche, is the dominant morality of modernity. He does not object to the fact that slave morality rules since he finds the will to power perfectly natural—some type of morality must be in power—but he disdains the prevarication that underlies it. At the same time that Christian slave morality argues for the downtrodden, it aims at political dominance. It contends that we should identify with the outcasts of society, but it turns this identification into a privileged position within society. This basic dishonesty of modern political morality (following Christianity's model) leads Nietzsche to go on a consciousness raising campaign against supposed warriors for justice. He wants do-gooders to become aware that fighting for equality and justice is really a fight for power. No one escapes the will to power, least of all the egalitarian do-gooder.

For those who believe themselves acting according to certain political ideals, encountering Nietzsche for the first time can be a disheartening experience. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, for instance, he shows that the history of morality is actually a history of the struggle for power rather than an attempt to arrive at the good. Christian

¹⁰ As Joan Copjec puts it, "The psychoanalytic subject, in short, being subject to a principle *beyond* pleasure, is *not driven to seek his own good*." Copjec 1994, p. 87.

morality and its modern secular equivalent emerge not out of a faith in God or a desire for justice but from the spirit of what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*—the resentment of the weak for the strength of the powerful. The desire for equality is the product of a profound hatred of the elevated status of the powerful, which is why Christian-based morality is always the morality of the slave, according to Nietzsche. Slave morality is fundamentally reactive, always responding to the activity of the strong and powerful individuals that it wants to bring down a notch, in contrast to the active master morality that it supersedes in human history.¹¹

There is surely something disturbing about confronting the will to power lying beneath one's striving for justice. No Christians would feel comfortable admitting that their Christianity is nothing but a project for secret dominance, nor would socialists freely avow that their socialism is an attempt to seize power for those like them, which is what Nietzsche charges. Nietzsche sees how difficult his message is to receive, which is why he calls himself an untimely thinker, one who has come perhaps a hundred years too soon. He recognizes that the harshness of his message of annihilating the value of traditional values will rub most readers the wrong way.¹² It is, he believes, inassimilable to consciousness except in the case of the courageous few—the *Übermenschen*.

But in the end, no matter how disturbing the revelations of the will to power are, they are not traumatic. We actually can assimilate, with more or less difficulty, our lust for power into consciousness. This is because the status of this lust is not unconscious but preconscious. It is because the lust for power is not like sexual lust. We might not be aware of it, but with sufficient prompting, we can bring it into consciousness. It may lead to an unflattering self-conception, but it will not force our consciousness to confront something foreign to it.

In this sense, it is significant that when Nietzsche describes the role that power plays in the psyche, his recurring term for it is the "will to power."¹³ While most of us in modernity do not avow the will to power, it is nonetheless tied to our conscious will rather than our unconscious desire. The will to power is not, for Nietzsche, the unconscious desire

¹¹ See Nietzsche 1989.

¹² Nietzsche repeats the idea of his untimeliness many times, but perhaps its greatest expression occurs in *Ecce Homo*, where he proclaims, "The time has not come for me either. Some people are born posthumously." Nietzsche 2005, p. 100.

¹³ Although the book entitled *The Will To Power* was a posthumous compilation of Nietzsche's notes put together haphazardly and tendentiously by his sister, the idea of a will to power suffuses his philosophical work. This makes this title for his notebooks understandable, even if it was constructed with the worst of intentions by a future Nazi (Elisabeth-Förster Nietzsche) who would eventually befriend Adolf Hitler and thereby propagate a terrible misunderstanding of his thought. See (or not) Nietzsche 1968.

for power. This is why the uncovering of the will to power can be brought to consciousness. Although it may be unpleasant to admit one's will to power to oneself, it can be done.

With unconscious desire and the enjoyment it produces, the case is altogether different. How we enjoy cannot become conscious because it follows a logic that the structure of consciousness cannot integrate. Desire is not just unpleasant or unflattering for our conscious self but upends the teleological bent of consciousness, which is why Aristotle could not have discovered the priority of enjoyment himself without first having discovered the unconscious. The unconscious is the site of enjoyment. One must conceptualize the unconscious and its alternate logic before one is able to see how enjoyment drives our activity.

We cannot achieve enjoyment by accomplishing our desire as if it were a task that we set for ourselves. This is what makes it unassimilable to consciousness, in contrast to power. Enjoyment is not the result of the successful attainment of an aim, which is the only way that consciousness can operate. Our conscious projects aim at successfully achieving a goal. This structure is not how enjoyment occurs. Instead, we enjoy the barrier to the desire's accomplishment or realization. It works only as a task thwarted, but one cannot consciously try to thwart a task without making the thwarting of the task the goal to accomplish. Consciousness cannot escape teleology, but enjoyment cannot be reduced to it. This is why it defies any assimilation to consciousness, in contrast to Nietzsche's will to power.

The great example of these competing logics in human history is the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. The conscious goal of the Committee for Public Safety was advancing the revolution and ensuring the survival of the republic. The committee saw the Terror as a way pursuing this aim. But the enjoyment of the violence of the Terror ended up undermining the committee itself, leading to the Thermidorian reaction that resulted in the death of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and their allies. Ultimately, the Terror paved the way for Napoleon's empire, which was the definitive end of the committee's hopes for the republic.

Robespierre would have never been able to articulate his enjoyment of the Terror, and yet this violence, precisely because it violated his own inherent revulsion at the death penalty, ended up driving him to eliminate even his own former close friends and allies, like Camille Desmoulins. The enjoyment of the Terror becomes a sacrifice that provides an intoxicating enjoyment for the partisans of the revolution. Even if one interprets Robespierre cynically, as someone striving for power rather than for universal equality, it is still the case that enjoyment subverted his conscious will to power.¹⁴ The enjoyment of the Terror constantly

.....
¹⁴ Just to be clear, there is no real historical warrant in the cynical interpretation of Robespierre. There is no evidence that he was not a true believer in the revolutionary project.

threatened his power and eventually brought it to an end.

At the height of the Terror in early 1794, Robespierre proclaims the conscious aim of its use. In a discourse before the National Convention, he states, "We must suffocate the interior and exterior enemies of the Republic, or perish with them; however, in this situation, the first maxim of our politics must be that we lead the people with reason, and the enemies of the people with terror."¹⁵ Consciously, Robespierre views the Terror as a tool for the preservation of the Republic. Without recourse to it for the enemies of the Republic, he believes that the revolution would fail. But what ultimately undermines the revolution is this very tool that Robespierre believed would save it.

This is a clear case where the conscious intention of the political leader fell victim to his unconscious enjoyment. Far from being a just a tool in the prosecution of the revolution and the establishment of the Republic, the Terror became an end in itself. The enjoyment of the violence overcame the revolution, just it did later in the Soviet Union. No leader could avow this enjoyment as an end in itself because it can be an end only unconsciously. For consciousness, it is never more than the byproduct of how we fail to realize our conscious wishes. We cannot make enjoyment our conscious goal, but we can take stock consciously of its priority in the psyche and in politics. To do so, we must see just how enjoyment works in relationship to pleasure.

The Enjoyment of Not Obtaining Pleasure

Enjoyment and pleasure exist in a dialectical relationship. Enjoyment is the privileged term in this relationship, as it drives the subject unconsciously. The subject acts for the sake of its enjoyment, even though enjoyment can never become the subject's conscious goal. Pleasure, on the other hand, is the subject's conscious goal. By consciously striving for pleasure, the subject produces enjoyment, which occurs as an unconscious aim of the attempt to achieve pleasure. In this sense, pleasure is nothing but Freud's term for what Aristotle calls the good and what Nietzsche calls power.

Freud defines pleasure in a precise way that initially appears counterintuitive. He sees pleasure obtained through the lessening of the subject's excitation rather than through the increase of it. According to his conception of the pleasure principle formulated in the *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, "pleasure is *in some way* connected with the diminution, reduction or extinction of the amounts of stimulus prevailing in the mental apparatus, and that similarly unpleasure is connected with their increase."¹⁶ As he goes on to discuss, the proof that

.....
¹⁵ Robespierre 1967, p. 356.

¹⁶ Freud 1963, p. 356.

this conception must be right is the sexual act itself. Everything in the act moves toward its culmination in orgasm, which we experience as the greatest pleasure imaginable. Freud continues, “An examination of the most intense pleasure which is accessible to human beings, the pleasure of accomplishing the sexual act, leaves little doubt” about the validity of the pleasure principle.¹⁷ Although the discharge of excitation is more materially evident in the case of men than of women, the sexual conduct of both sexes nonetheless supports Freud’s theory. The conclusion of the sexual act is, for almost everyone, the highlight of the process—maybe even the highlight of life itself—because it marks the height of pleasure.¹⁸ When one thinks of it this way, the conception of the pleasure principle as the discharge rather than the accumulation of excitation makes much more sense and ceases to seem counterintuitive.

Pleasure is necessarily momentary because it is a culmination. One experiences pleasure with the diminution of excitation, and then the experience of pleasure is quickly over when there is no more excitation left to diminish. This leads Freud to lament that we are structured psychically so as to be incapable of sustained pleasure. While we might imagine a utopia of constant pleasure, the structure of our psyche makes living in such a utopia impossible. The best that we can hope for is rapid repetition of the pleasurable experience in which we discharge our excess excitation. But every build up of excitation involves us in unpleasure until we are able to discharge what we have built up, so this utopia would maximize unpleasure just as it maximized pleasure, which many would consider less than utopian.¹⁹

Given Freud’s conception of the pleasure principle, he explains the building up of excess excitation—in foreplay, for instance—as simply propaedeutic to the eventual release. One builds up tension or excitation just to give oneself something to discharge. There is no intrinsic value in the excitation itself. Becoming all hot and bothered is only important because it is the prelude to a future release that will be an end to this unpleasant state and produce pleasure. One must begin by creating the problem that the discharge of excitation through the pleasure principle will solve. The problem has value only insofar as one can solve it via the pleasure principle.

The pleasure principle, as Freud defines it, is compatible with

17 Freud 1963, p. 356.

18 Even the opponents of psychoanalysis tend to agree with Freud on this point. Michel Foucault fantasized about dying at the moment of orgasm because this is the moment of maximum pleasure. This unusual correlation confirms the commonsensical status of the pleasure principle.

19 Most utopias follow the reality principle rather than the pleasure principle. For instance, in his *Utopia*, Thomas More minimizes all potential ways of building up excitation: no one wears sexy clothes; no one eats different food than others; no one accumulates wealth; and so on. More’s theory, which almost all later utopians follow, is that adhering to the reality principle and keeping excitation to a minimum will produce a more stable and contented society.

Nietzsche’s will to power. The discharge of excitation in the pleasure principle is akin to the individual discharging its strength in the will to power. In fact, some of Nietzsche’s accounts of the will to power employ almost exactly the same terms that Freud uses in his description of the pleasure principle. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche proclaims, “Physiologists should think twice before positioning the drive for self-preservation as the cardinal drive of an organic being. Above all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its strength—life itself is will to power—: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *consequences* of this.”²⁰ Both the pleasure principle and the will to power involve getting rid of an excess and taking pleasure in this evacuation of what one has built up.

There does seem to be a crucial difference between the pleasure principle and the will to power. One can discharge excitation and receive pleasure (following the pleasure principle) without dominating others, but the will to power implies violence. This is only an apparent discrepancy, however. Nietzsche’s conception of the *Übermensch* is not a figure of ultraviolence but rather one of solitude and aloofness. To go beyond good and evil is to become so powerful that one no longer needs to dominate others but can exist on one’s own. This is Nietzsche’s moral ideal of how one might develop the will to power, and it offers a way of further reconciling it with the pleasure principle.²¹

Like power, pleasure can become a conscious aim. It might be disturbing to admit to myself that I want to experience an orgasm five times a day or that I want to destroy the life of my successful colleague at work, but these ideas are simply preconscious, not unconscious. I know that they are preconscious rather than unconscious precisely because I can uncover them on my own, by reflecting on what I want and what I do. I can read Freud or Nietzsche and recognize the role of the pleasure principle or the will to power in my everyday life. No matter how disturbing pleasure or power is, neither requires me to confront the barrier of the unconscious, which operates according to its own logic and does not allow its ideas to flow easily into consciousness. In contrast

20 Nietzsche 2002, p. 15. Here, Nietzsche sees a fundamental incompatibility between the Darwinian theory of natural selection, which posits a natural desire to survive, and his conception of the will to power. For his part, Freud does not see any necessary contradiction between the pleasure principle (or even the death drive) and Darwinian theory but imagines himself as accompanying Darwin, along with Copernicus, in displacing humanity from its central position in creation. It falls to Lacan to point out the incompatibility between psychoanalysis and natural selection, as he does in *Seminar VII*.

21 Nietzsche provides the most eloquent formulation of his ethical ideal and its absence of domination in *The Gay Science*. He states, “For one thing is needful: that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself—be it through this or that poetry or art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold! Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually prepared to avenge himself for this, and we others will be his victims if only by having to endure his sight. For the sight of something ugly makes one bad and gloomy.” Nietzsche 2001, p. 164. Moving beyond good and evil produces a self-satisfaction that has no need to do violence to others.

to the preconscious, the unconscious becomes accessible only through techniques that bypass the censorship of consciousness—dreams, slips, jokes, or the psychoanalytic session itself and its practice of free association.

Where pleasure is different from power, as Freud conceives it early on in his thinking, is that we cannot become conscious of the actual object that provides pleasure. Since the real object of our desire is always linked to an incestuous object, we repress it and construct our reality around this unconscious gap in the world of consciousness. Power is different insofar as we can know clearly what we want to dominate with our power. Power doesn't require any recourse to the unconscious. But that said, it is the homologous structure of pleasure and power that render both processes accessible to consciousness. Neither the act of obtaining pleasure nor the act of exercising power need be unconscious, even if there is something disagreeable about seeing oneself as a figure of pure lust or a brute. The disagreeable doesn't demand recourse to the unconscious.

If we recognize this homology between the pleasure principle and the will to power, the claim about Freud's debt to Nietzsche, despite his own claims to the contrary, seems more likely than not to be valid.²² While Freud did not plagiarize Nietzsche, it is safe to say that he thinks along the same lines when he theorizes the pleasure principle in the early part of his career. But everything changes—including Freud's theoretical debt to Nietzsche—when he discovers the death drive and the enjoyment that it produces when he writes *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. At this point, Freud goes where Nietzsche has not gone before. He articulates an alternative logic to that of the pleasure principle, one that trumps the primacy of the pleasure principle and even forces him to reconceive the unconscious (though he never makes this change explicit).

We experience pleasure through the diminution of excitation, but we experience enjoyment through creation of it. In contrast to pleasure, we derive enjoyment from what produces a disturbance in our psychic equilibrium. But we cannot simply create excitation by wishing it into existence. The psyche becomes excited through the emergence of a problem. What makes our existence enjoyable is the posing of questions, not the answering of them.

.....
22 On multiple occasions Freud denies extensive reading of Nietzsche's works because he saw the proximity to his own ideas and wanted to avoid amalgamating his own theory with Nietzsche's. For instance, in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, he states, "In later years I have denied myself the very great pleasure of reading the works of Nietzsche, with the deliberate object of not being hampered in working out the impressions received in psycho-analysis by any sort of anticipatory ideas." Freud, p. 15-16. The problem with this formulation, as various critics of Freud have pointed out, is that he would have to already know Nietzsche's thought in order to know that it comes dangerously close to anticipating the discoveries of psychoanalysis. What's more, a glance in Freud's office preserved from his brief time in London at the end of his life reveals that Nietzsche's collected works are among the books that he brought with him while fleeing the Nazis. The parallel between the pleasure principle and the will to power is impossible to deny. But the pleasure principle is not the last word in the psychoanalytic project.

To put it in psychoanalytic terms, we become excited through the emergence of an object that arouses desire but remains always unattainable. Enjoyment requires a lost or absent object that can never become present and that exists only insofar as it is lost because objects that are just there, objects that are present, have no inherent value. Value emerges through what is missing. Loss creates the excess excitation that leads to enjoyment, which is why the subject must suffer its enjoyment rather than finding pleasure in it. The relationship between enjoyment and loss, a loss that produces excitation and gives the subject something for which to strive, represents the key to the politics of enjoyment.

Enjoyment is always a melancholy enjoyment. When an object is constantly present, we find ourselves unable to enjoy it. But when we lose it or it disappears, we experience it as truly enjoyable. This dynamic is most clearly visible in love relationships. When sex with the partner is an everyday possibility, it can turn into a mechanical duty or even something unpleasant. But when one knows that one's time with the partner is limited or when the partner has been away for a long time, the sexual encounter becomes reimbued with enjoyment. Most adages are risible, but the notion that "absence makes the heart grow fonder" does manage to hint at the logic of enjoyment. Because enjoyment involves an engagement with absence, suffering always accompanies it.

Since enjoyment necessarily involves suffering, any attempt to eliminate suffering will meet with intractable resistance. Eliminating suffering is eliminating enjoyment. In order to preserve their possibility for enjoyment, subjects will cling to loss and to the suffering that it entails. Utopian plans for a society organized around the elimination of suffering founder on the requisite role that suffering plays in our enjoyment. If we were to successfully get rid of suffering in a future society, we would simultaneously create an enjoyment-free society. Such a world is not only practically impossible but theoretically impossible as well. Unless utopia contains non-utopian elements, it can have nothing to make it enjoyable for us—and thus there is no way that we can desire to create it.²³

We can understand the contrast between pleasure and enjoyment by returning to the sexual act. According to Freud's conception of the pleasure principle, the culmination of the act—the discharge of excitation—is all. But once we focus on enjoyment rather than the pleasure principle, this vision of things undergoes a total transformation. Rather than seeing the initial flirting, passionate kissing, and intimate

.....
23 What makes Fredric Jameson's recent utopia possible to desire are its obvious shortcomings rather than its perfections. In *American Utopia*, Jameson makes the outrageous argument that we should universalize the military and forge a utopia in this way, since support for the military is so strong and since it already functions like a socialist institution. This argument completely elides the fact that support for the military depends on the nationalistic violence that it perpetuates and that Jameson's utopia would eliminate. But this (fatal) flaw in the utopian vision makes it possible to imagine enjoying the world that Jameson envisions.

touching as merely preliminary to the main event of orgasm, one could interpret orgasm as the momentary pleasure that puts an end to the enjoyment of these preliminaries. The existence of the orgasm enables our consciousness to accept all the obstacles that intervene leading up to it—the flirting, the inconvenient pieces of clothing that must be removed, the fundamental barrier of the other's desire. These obstacles, not the big finish, make the sexual act enjoyable.

The barriers to the culmination of the sexual act are what make the act enjoyable, but no one, except a perverse subject, would be able to remain contented with the barriers alone and not take the process to its concluding point. We use the orgasm to smuggle our enjoyment of the obstacles to the sex act past the suspicions of consciousness. Even though he never fully articulates it, this is what Freud's discovery of enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle implies. The point ceases to be the final orgasm and becomes all the trouble that it takes to get there.

If the thrill of orgasm renders the sexual example of enjoyment too difficult to accept, one could think instead of the roller coaster ride at an amusement park (which the sexual act models itself on). The pleasure of the roller coaster occurs during the moments when one speeds down the steep slopes at a breathtaking pace. At these moments, one experiences one's excitation diminishing and feels pleasure. But the enjoyment of the roller coaster takes place elsewhere—as one heads slowly up the ramp to prepare for the burst of pleasure. One finds enjoyment in the build up of excitation or the encounter with an obstacle (the large hill) that occurs in the slow movement that does not provide pleasure. No one would ride a roller coaster that only went uphill and never provided any pleasure because the psyche must find a way to translate its drive for enjoyment into the consciousness of pleasure. But at the same time, no one would ride a roller coaster that only went downhill and provided nothing but pleasure. The interruption of the pleasure is the only site at which one can enjoy. We cannot just renounce pleasure altogether. If there were no pleasure, there would also be no enjoyment. But pleasure functions as an alibi for enjoyment. It is a payoff that the unconscious makes to consciousness in order to slip its enjoyment past the censorship of consciousness.

Enjoyment is inextricable from suffering. It occurs through some form of self-destruction, which is why it is absolutely irreducible to consciousness. The self-destructive form of enjoyment necessitates its unconscious status. Although one can consciously strive for pleasure, one cannot consciously strive to enjoy since enjoyment involves suffering and damage to the psyche. To attempt consciously to enjoy would inevitably transform the suffering into pleasure, just like trying to throw a game changes loss into a form of victory. If one actually loses the game, one succeeds in throwing it. If one tries consciously to suffer, one succeeds in suffering and perversely turns it into a pleasure. In this

sense, because enjoyment requires suffering, because one must suffer one's enjoyment, the pursuit of it must remain unconscious. There is no possibility for consciously resolving to enjoy oneself. Enjoyment can only be the result of one's unconscious desire, while one's conscious will aims to find pleasure.

Our inability to try to enjoy leaves psychoanalytic thought with limited political options. One cannot organize a society around enjoyment since it cannot be our conscious aim. Doing so would unleash the greatest erection of new forms of suffering that we can imagine. Enjoyment occurs through the encounter with the obstacle to pleasure, but one cannot make the obstacle into an object to achieve without altering its status as an obstacle. One cannot will to encounter obstacles without eliminating the enjoyment that they would provide. Confronted with this impossible situation, all that we can do is to recognize the primacy of enjoyment and allow for its intrusions into politics.

The Politics of Sacrifice

Foregrounding enjoyment in politics makes it possible to understand why people constantly act against their own good when they make political decisions. Enjoyment is not only distinct from the good but emerges only through its sacrifice. When we betray the good by acting against our self-interest, we create a path for our enjoyment. This fundamental psychoanalytic idea cuts against all our usual ways of thinking about politics.

Because the idea of power or economic interest so governs our way of thinking about political choices, we find it strange and require an explanation when subjects act politically against their own self-interest. When the impoverished vote for candidates who unabashedly promise to promote the interests of the wealthy, this defies contemporary common sense. There is, however, a commonsensical explanation for this challenge to common sense of ideology. Those who act politically against their own self-interest have fallen for some ideological manipulation, like the idea that they will benefit from trickle-down economics or that a horde of invading immigrants stand ready to take their low-paying jobs. Or, more fundamentally, capitalist ideology has convinced them that capitalism is not a socioeconomic system at all but simply human nature. Whatever the manipulation that has occurred, the fact that people act politically against their own interest testifies that some kind of ideological intervention has occurred.

Psychoanalytic theory in no way denies the existence of ideology but actually provides an essential ingredient for it. It is impossible to have a theory of ideology without the notion of an unconscious, which is why the primary Marxist theorists of ideology bring a psychoanalytic approach to their theorizing. This is certainly the case with Louis Althusser, who formulates the most compelling advance on the theory of ideology since

the time of Marx himself. His epochal contribution in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” relies theoretically on both Freud and Lacan.

According to Althusser, individuals become subject to ideological interpellation when they misrecognize themselves in the mirror reflection of the symbolic authority. This self-image is an imaginary deception that fools them into believing that they belong to this authority and that they have agency within the social order constituted by it. Ideology convinces individuals to take an image for the real. As Althusser famously puts, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence.”²⁴ In addition to referring to the individual’s misrecognition in the mirror that evokes Lacan’s essay on the mirror stage, Althusser employs two of Lacan’s signature categories—the imaginary and the real—in his description of how ideology functions.²⁵ We are ideologically duped when we unconsciously identify ourselves as active subjects and fail to see how the real historical relations of production make active subjectivity impossible. The theory of ideology depends on the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious.²⁶

But despite the important role that psychoanalysis plays in the theory of ideology, the fundamental contention of psychoanalysis is that ideology is not the most intractable barrier to subjects acting for their own good. Subjects are not simply duped into acting against their own self-interest. Their enjoyment depends on them not doing so. Ideology makes our betrayal of self-interest easier to rationalize, but it in no way drives this betrayal, since without it we would find ourselves bereft of what makes our lives worth living—our enjoyment. A theory of ideology is not central to a psychoanalytic conception of politics. Ideology shapes the form that our self-destructive enjoyment takes, but it does not create our propensity for self-destruction.

If we take into account the priority of enjoyment and necessity of sacrificing self-interest in order to enjoy, the problem of politics turns around completely. We don’t have to explain subjects who abandon their self-interest politically but rather those who manage to find a way to follow it. That is where the real anomaly lies. We use self-interest as

.....
24 Althusser 1984, p. 36.

25 Slavoj Žižek offers an even more psychoanalytically informed understanding of ideology than Althusser. He contends that ideology functions through an operation of subtraction: it takes the traumatic real out of the social reality in which it ensconces the subject, so that the subject can believe that this social reality operates without the activity of the subjects whose belief constitutes it. See Žižek 1989

26 If one does not accept the idea of the unconscious, a theory of ideology would make no sense. One would have to posit that individuals willingly allow themselves to be duped by ideology, if they cannot have an unconscious investment in it. This preposterous image of a theory of ideology without recourse to the unconscious is why Marxism, as its concern with ideology developed, became increasingly dependent on psychoanalytic thought in the 20th century.

a good to sacrifice in order to enjoy. This is why people support those officials who undermine their interests rather than advancing them. By simply providing an alibi for consciousness—like claiming that cutting taxes on the wealthy will spur economic growth for all—officials make it possible for individuals to sacrifice their own good and enjoy their support for such figures.

Because our enjoyment cannot be assimilated to consciousness, there is a limit to our ability to enjoy ourselves politically. We must be able to convince consciousness that our action will genuinely produce pleasure. If all we can see down the path laid out is unpleasure, we cannot psychically go in this direction. This is the case with conservative parties and immigrants or those not belonging to the dominant group. For instance, although voting Republican would offer a black American a great deal of enjoyment (through the extreme sacrifice of self-interest involved in supporting a party that makes openly racist appeals to white voters), the unpleasure that this would create is too evident to ignore for all but a tiny minority of black Americans. Thus, black support for the American conservative party hovers between 10% and 15%. If the Republican Party continues to reserve its pleasure for whites, this percentage will remain abysmal. Enjoyment in politics is the driving factor, but it cannot occur without any responsiveness to the problem of pleasure.

There is one case in politics where people seem to pursue their own interest with great vehemence. Rather than supporting candidates who would redistribute wealth and detract from their fortunes, the wealthy by and large give their money to those who promise to minimize government intervention and preserve class inequalities. Such officials actively defend the interests of the wealthy against any possible outbreaks of class warfare. This seems like a completely self-evident case of subjects pursuing pleasure (or power, to use Nietzsche’s term) to the detriment of their enjoyment.

But even here, in what appears as the clearest case of self-interested political activity, the subversion of self-interest is fully apparent. When members of the upper class endorse cuts in the social safety net and tax breaks to build their fortunes even larger, they wantonly destabilize these fortunes by exacerbating class antagonisms. The more desperate the lower class becomes, the more likely it will be to act out in a revolutionary way. And even if it doesn’t go this far, increased pauperization will produce an unlivable society, forcing the wealthy to retreat further and further behind their defensive walls, leaving them less capable of readily obtaining pleasure in society. In their desire for an ever increasing accumulation, they put everything that they have at risk. They produce a world in which they must live in constant fear of losing what they have all in order to gain a little bit more. But the pleasure of this little bit more exists only to justify the destruction of life in common that

their political practices enacts. This destruction—the sacrifice of both the public good and their own—fuels the political activity of much of the upper class.

Of course, there are those from the upper class who do attempt to moderate the violence of the capitalist system toward its lower rungs. These figures, like Bill Gates or George Soros, strive for both good of all and their own good by trying to produce a more equitable society. But at the same time, they don't give up their activity as ruthless capitalist subjects when they are not promoting the good. Despite all their political and charitable activities, they remain two of the richest people in the world. But unlike other ruthless capitalists, they attempt to separate the destructive enjoyment of capitalist accumulation from the pleasurable pursuit of the good when they help the downtrodden. The problem is that the destructive enjoyment is much more effective than their attempts to ameliorate its effects in their other activities. Their destructive accumulation always outstrips their concern for the good. In their activities oriented around the good, neither Gates nor Soros goes far enough to put the capitalist system itself at risk because they dare not upset their primary mode of enjoying. Despite all their acts of conspicuous philanthropy, they remain on the side of the destructive enjoyment that capitalist accumulation provides for them.

The arena where political enjoyment appears most openly on all sides is climate change. Those who disavow the obvious fact of human-generated global warming enjoy the continued destruction of the planet. What's striking is that they don't go to great lengths to hide this. From the chants of "drill baby drill" to the panegyrics to coal power, climate change deniers almost go so far as to make their enjoyment of global destruction—and thus their own self-destruction—explicit. While they do have recourse to economic concerns or jobs as a conscious alibi obscuring this unconscious enjoyment, they come very close to making enjoyment conscious, though this is ultimately impossible.

What's instructive about this issue is that those concerned with fighting climate change also lay bare the privilege of enjoyment in their position, even if it is not quite so clear cut. They argue, of course, that saving the planet is good, that it is in the self-interest of everyone. But at the same time, they fight climate change by clamoring for renunciation. We must give up cars and planes, meat and non-local produce. We must abandon the pleasure of cheap energy and lavish consumption, opting for a minimalist ascetic regime in order to preserve the earth. Here, the enjoyment of self-sacrifice counters the enjoyment of destroying the earth proffered by the climate change deniers. But it is one form of enjoyment versus another, not a contest of competing goods or a power struggle.

Across the political and economic spectrum, we can find no one able to pursue self-interest or the good. Enjoyment always gets in the way. It is the political stumbling block that makes political activity

desirable. When we find ourselves tempted to view politics cynically as the obscene terrain of the will to power, we should recognize this cynical interpretation as a lure that keeps us focused on consciousness rather than the unconscious. Power exists to obscure enjoyment. Nowhere is this more the case than in the world of politics. Rather than seeing power lurking beneath those striving for the good, we must see enjoyment hidden in the will to power.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Althusser, Louis 1984, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *On Ideology*, trans. Ben Brewster, London: Verso, 1-60.
- Arendt, Hannah 1998, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Aristotle 1984, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Copjec, Joan 1994, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Freud, Sigmund 1957, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 7-66.
- 1963, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analyses*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 16, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press.
- Lacan, Jacques 1992, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, New York: Norton.
- Locke, John 1988, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, Karl 2010, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Political Writings, Volume 2: Surveys from Exile*, New York: Verso, 143-249
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 1968, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage.
- 1977, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1989, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage.
- 2001, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2002, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2003, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. Kate Sturge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2005, *Ecce Homo: How To Become What You Are*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maximilien Robespierre, Maximilien 1967, Session of 5 February 1794, in *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, vol. 10, eds. Marc Bouloiseau and Albert Soboul, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Žižek, Slavoj 1989, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso.

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 6 /
Issue 1