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LACAN AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY: FANTASY AND ENJOYMENT IN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND POLITICAL THEORY

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Abstract

In this paper we explore and exploit the theoretical, empirical, and critical potential of subjectivity in political theory and psychoanalysis, suggesting that a turn to fantasy and enjoyment can help sharpen what is at stake in appeals to this concept. We indicate – in the first part – the way fantasy has already been invoked in the literature to enhance our understanding of organizational practices, in order to show – in the second part – how a Lacanian approach to “the subject of enjoyment” can supplement such accounts. We focus on three key themes linked directly to the concept of subjectivity. The first theme concerns how to think the relationship between political and ethical subjectivity. The second revolves around how fantasy and enjoyment allow us to rethink the relationship between reason and affect. The final theme explores how a logic of fantasy allows us to explore what has been called “the problem of self-transgression”.

Keywords
Lacan; subject; fantasy; enjoyment; ethics; politics


The “who”, which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the daimon in Greek religion which
accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters. (Arendt, 1958, p. 180–181)

Let us say that the subject is not often studied. (Lacan, 1989[1965], p. 18)

The appeal to political subjectivity carries a critical value in a context where the objectivist ideals of natural science methodologies exert considerable power over the way we think about the conduct of social and political research. Modern natural science, according to Lacan, actively forgets or forecloses the subjective drama of its practitioners, and this has consequences. The price one pays for this active forgetting is the “return of the subject” in the form of various foundational crises in science and mathematics documented in the history and philosophy of science (Lacan, 1989, pp. 17–18; Glynos, 2002). If social and political research emulates natural science by similarly guaranteeing its findings on a methodology that sutures the subject – whether the researching subject or the researched subject – it carries comparable risks. In drawing our attention to the foreclosed subject, then, Lacan anticipates those philosophers of science, and social science researchers who declare such scientistic aspirations as quixotic, misplaced, even dangerous. On the contrary, “the impossibility of detachment through methodological guarantees” means we must “take seriously a subjectivity that always intrudes, no matter what one’s best intentions” (Walkerdine et al., 2002, p. 194).

In this paper, we aim to explore and exploit the theoretical, empirical, and critical potential of subjectivity in political theory and psychoanalysis, suggesting that a turn to fantasy and enjoyment can help sharpen what is at stake in appeals to this concept. We indicate the way fantasy has already been invoked in the literature to enhance our understanding of organizational practices, in order to show how a Lacanian approach to “the subject of enjoyment” can supplement these accounts. We suggest that the categories of fantasy and enjoyment are useful vehicles with which to think the insights of a Lacanian approach to subjectivity for political theory and analysis.

**Fantasy as a category for social and political study**

Today there is considerable interest in psychoanalysis, as evidenced by an increasing autonomization of academic fields, such as psychoanalytic ethnography, psychoanalytic human geography, psychoanalytic political economy, and psychoanalytic sociology. Though the theoretical and political significance of fantasy is not often directly discussed in this literature, it is clear that, as an idea, fantasy exerts much intuitive appeal. In the context of mainstream political theory, however, while not absent, the category of fantasy rarely gets a look-in.
Of course, it could be said that fantasy does make an appearance under the guise of cognate terms. Consider, for example, the utopian tradition in politics. Here, what is usually thought of as a “blue-print” or a “vision” of harmony able to resolve social antagonism and perfect human life, has been occasionally described as a “fantasy or fantasm” (Marin, 1984, p. 196). Nevertheless, if there has been an interest in fantasy or cognate terms in the context of political theory, this interest has clearly been marginal.

In the wider academic context, however, there has been some interesting qualitative research done by scholars homing in on fantasies in relation to specific social practices. Though the theoretical and political implications of fantasy’s role in structuring social practices are under-explored, there is considerable scope for further and more systematic development along these lines. Consider, for example, several studies that have focussed on individuals’ fantasies in the context of workplace practices (Gabriel, 1995, 1997; Walkerdine, 2005, 2006; Byrne and Healy, 2006). These studies are significant because they represent initial attempts to document the content of workplace fantasies, trading on the powerful intuition that they have an important role to play in our understanding of how social practices – in this case workplace practices – are organized, sustained, or potentially transformed.

For example, in one of his studies Yannis Gabriel explores a series of individuals’ fantasies in the context of a range of workplaces (Gabriel, 1997). Echoing earlier research by Martin and colleagues (Martin et al., 1983), he finds a good portion of them to be leadership fantasies, namely, individuals’ fantasies about their organizational superiors. Rather than falling into hermetically sealed classes, Gabriel finds that these fantasies possess features that often mix and overlap within each fantasy, albeit with different emphases (Gabriel, 1997, p. 337). Thus, he finds fantasies with the emphasis placed upon the caring leader who recognizes and rewards what one is rather than what one does, the accessible leader, the omnipotent/omniscient leader (which Gabriel considers to be the most common fantasy about leaders), and the legitimate leader. Moreover, the beatific side highlighted thus far has a corresponding horrific side, namely, the ruthless leader, willing to instrumentalize employees, the distant, inscrutable leader, the leader as fallible and as a failure, and the leader as impostor. In our interpretation, the realization of the beatific or horrific aspects of these fantasies, also leads to the experience of particular affects. For example, Gabriel finds contempt and sarcasm in response to the failure of the leader to live up to his or her imputed omnipotence, or anger and injured pride in response to the leader’s failure to adequately exhibit the virtues of care and accessibility projected onto him or her.

Similarly, Valerie Walkerdine charts a range of fantasmatic contents in the context of workplace practices (Walkerdine, 2005). Typifying the way work
practices of 18–21-year-olds are sustained, for instance, she finds a combination of lifestyle fantasies (fantasies about what to consume with one’s hard-earned cash, under the gaze of a significant Other) and self-sufficiency fantasies (fantasies about how a combination of luck and entrepreneurship will result in a successful self-made future). A more specific fantasy appears to prop up the telesales work of a 31-year-old woman, namely, the fantasy of eventually becoming a television presenter. Another woman in her 30s sustains her 150% work rate (well beyond what is expected, but which is nevertheless welcomed and solicited by her boss) by appealing to a fantasy in which her efforts would one day be rewarded by the long sought-after recognition of her father. In recording these fantasies, Walkerdine is explicit in her concern about the normative significance of subjects’ fantasies. For a start, she suggests that the often commented-upon epidemic of depression and skyrocketing anti-depressant sales is at least partly due to the failure to achieve the success individuals are told is within everyone’s reach. Second, she implicitly points to the role fantasies play in shaping the expression and meaning of affects. Putting your line-manager in the position of someone in need, for example, may invert a relation of exploitation, generating sympathy rather than anger (Walkerdine, 2005, p. 53). In addition, however, she suggests that the fantasies she canvasses tend to reinforce a dominant tendency to place “the burden of responsibility for work on the personality of the worker” (Walkerdine, 2005, p. 59). Together they tend to downplay the significance of poor pay and conditions, insecurity and exploitation, including the broader socio-cultural and politico-economic conditions that make these possible.

One final feature of fantasies, or rather a particular type of relation to fantasy, concerns a tendency toward idealization. This tendency often expresses itself in a polarized response, normally elicited when a person or situation does or does not meet highly idealized standards. The responses here are either one of total rejection when even the slightest divergence from the ideal is perceived, or its opposite, one of unconditional acceptance no matter how far short of the ideal one falls. While observations of this sort have been noted in the context of workplace practices (see, e.g., Gabriel, 1997; Byrne and Healy, 2006) it is not uncommon to find these sorts of response in social and political life more generally. In the context of contemporary feminist practices, for example, Jonathan Dean finds similar tendencies underlying the so-called deradicalization thesis (Dean, 2008). The deradicalization thesis captures a common sense in feminist circles that there has been a loss of feminist purity in contemporary feminism’s engagement with state institutions. However, when looked at more closely, Dean shows how this judgement relies on a very specific vision of radicality rooted in the “purity” of 1970s second-wave feminist movements, namely their attempts to avoid, and thus avoid being contaminated by, the patriarchal logics of state institutional channels.
A Lacanian approach to subjectivity and fantasy

The above studies, as well as similar ethnographic analyses that invoke the term “fantasy”, have been a very rich source of insights from an empirical, methodological, and critical point of view (see also Walkerdine, 1986; Gabriel, 1991a, b, c, 2001; Walkerdine et al., 2002). These insights serve as inspiration for us in this section, which aims to explore how a Lacanian approach to fantasy and enjoyment may serve to reframe many of the observations and concerns articulated by such psychoanalytically inspired and critical psychological researchers. More specifically, we articulate a logic of fantasy with reference to existing work that links post-structural political theory and psychoanalysis in an explicit and systematic way (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Žižek, 1989; Laclau, 1990; Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). We claim that drawing on this literature enhances our capacity to draw out the political and ideological implications of fantasy more clearly, and open up avenues through which to reframe questions at the intersection of the ontological and methodological axes. Such implications and questions may have an interesting bearing on our understanding of a wide range of phenomena, whether these concern nationalist movements, the way the media report on topics concerning, for example, immigration or religious issues, or the way fantasies facilitate or obstruct workplace transformations, such as various management, audit, and consumer-oriented reforms. In order to explore this potential, we first present a Lacanian perspective on subjectivity and fantasy (this section), before we start drawing out the analytical and critical bite of fantasy (next section).

In developing such a perspective (see also Fink, 1995), we can start with the Freudian notion of Spaltung (splitting). This notion is important because it shapes Lacan’s conception of the subject, in which this split appears as an ontological condition of subjectivity as such. According to Lacan, ignoring the implications of this constitutive split would amount to a betrayal of psychoanalysis: “[I]f we ignore the self’s radical ex-centricity to itself with which man is confronted, in other words, the truth discovered by Freud, we shall falsify both the order and methods of psychoanalytic mediation” (Lacan, 1977, p. 171). The subject of psychoanalysis is thus the ex-centric subject, a subject structured around a radical split.

There are several benefits that accrue to such a conceptualization. First, if objectivist versions of (social) science foreclose the subject, psychoanalysis is determined to pursue a different path. Second, such a path does not legitimate simplistic or reductionist accounts of subjectivity because it avoids attributing to subjectivity a positively defined essence (such as a privileged notion of true interests/needs or a certain type of inherent rationality). Third, it permits a thorough grasping of the socio-symbolic dependence of subjectivity. The idea of the subject as lack cannot be separated from the subject’s attempts to cover over this constitutive lack at the level of representation by affirming its positive (symbolic-imaginary) identity or, when this fails, through continuous identificatory acts.
aiming to re-institute an identity. This lack necessitates the constitution of every identity through processes of identification with socially available traits of identification found, for example, in political ideologies, practices of consumption, and a whole range of social roles; and vice versa: the inability of identificatory acts to produce a full identity by subsuming subjective division (re)produces the radical ex-centricity of the subject and, along with it, a whole negative dialectics of partial fixation. Subjectivity in Lacan’s work, then, is linked not only to lack but also our attempts to eliminate this lack that, however, does not stop re-emerging.4

One question that emerges here concerns the precise conceptualization of the level at which identification and identity (and its failure) matters, under what conditions and in what contexts. For instance, can socio-political analysis remain at the level of meaning or signification? If not, how should one theorize the “material” irreducible to signification? Here, one needs to stress the productivity of the Lacanian distinction between the “subject of the signifier” and the “subject of enjoyment (jouissance)”. While this distinction can help shed light on how we can think the relation between affect and politics, it is a distinction that also leads us directly to the category of fantasy.

We can see this by fastening onto the concept of enjoyment (jouissance), which differs markedly from notions of pleasure or satisfaction already used in socio-political analysis, ranging from the banal (Breslin, 2002) to the sophisticated (Foucault, 1998). Lacan posits jouissance as always-already lost, serving in this way to prop up the subject as an extimate subject of desire: the prohibition of jouissance – the nodal point of the Oedipal drama – is exactly what permits the emergence of desire, a desire structured around the unending quest for the lost, impossible jouissance. When subjectivity is conceived in terms of lack, then, this lack can be understood as a lack of jouissance.

The fact that this jouissance is always-already lost, however, does not mean that it does not influence processes of identification. On the contrary, it may even be possible, starting from this ontological premise, to introduce a complex typology of the modes of interaction between enjoyment and the dialectics of socio-political identification.

1. For a start, it is the imaginary promise of recapturing our lost/impossible enjoyment that provides the fantasy support for many of our political projects, social roles, and consumer choices. A good portion of political discourse focuses on the delivery of the “good life” or a “just society”, both fictions (imaginarizations) of a future state in which the current limitations thwarting our enjoyment will be overcome.5 The politics of utopia provides the exemplary case of the structure we are describing here.6

2. But this is not the full story. What sustains desire and motivates our acts of identification at an affective level is not reducible to some abstract fantasmatic promise of fullness. This desire and motivation is sustained also by the subject’s limit-experiences linked to a jouissance of the body. Without such experiences, our faith in fantasmatically inflected political projects – projects which never
manage to deliver the fullness they promise – would gradually vanish. Celebratory practices associated with the defeat of a national enemy, even the success of a national football team, are examples of such experiences of enjoyment. Nevertheless, this experienced *jouissance* remains *partial*: “That’s not it” is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected (Lacan, 1998, p. 111). Its momentary character, unable to fully satisfy desire, fuels dissatisfaction. It reinscribes lack in the subjective economy, the lack of another *jouissance*, thereby reproducing the fantasmatic promise of – and desire for – its recapture.

3. The promise of a full enjoyment that escapes our attempts at identificatory capture and that serves as the motor of desire is linked to what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, and it is this object that forms the centre-piece of a subject’s fantasy. When Lacanians say that fantasy supports reality (see, e.g., Žižek, 1989), they tend to mean that the credibility and salience of any object of identification relies on the ability of the fantasmatic narrative to provide a convincing explanation for the lack of total enjoyment. Ontologically, of course, this lack of total enjoyment is necessary. However, in the subject’s economy of desire this “truth” must be actively forgotten, and it is this dialectic of confrontation with, and denial of, lack, which gives rise to the logic of fantasy. Indeed, oftentimes the cause of the lack of enjoyment is attributed to someone who has “stolen it”. Romantic nationalist histories, for example, are frequently based on the supposition of a golden era (Ancient Greece and/or Byzantium for modern Greek nationalism, the Jewish kingdom of David and Solomon in many versions of Jewish nationalism, etc.). During this imagined golden age, the nation was prosperous and happy, only to be later destroyed by an evil “Other”, someone who deprived the nation of its enjoyment. Typically, nationalist narratives are rooted in the desire of each generation to try and heal this (metaphoric) castration, and give back to the nation its lost full enjoyment. The identity of the evil “Other” who prevents the nation from recouping the enjoyment it has lost shifts as a function of historical context. It may be a foreign occupier, those who “always plot to rule the world”, some dark powers and their local sympathizers “who want to enslave our proud nation”, immigrants “who steal our jobs”, etc. In this view, the obstacle to full enjoyment shifts depending on the specificity of the fantasmatic narrative at stake, but the formal logic remains the same. The important point is that fantasy fosters the solidarity of the national community, consolidates national identity, and animates national desire. It does this by structuring the social subject’s *partial* enjoyment through a series of collective practices (celebrations, festivals, consumption rituals, etc.) and by reproducing itself at the level of representation in official and unofficial public discourse (as a beatific narrative and a traumatic scenario).

In this way, then, we can see how fantasy can be understood as a schema linking the subject to socio-political reality via a reference to the object-cause of...
desire and jouissance. In some sense, this object (the objet petit a) comes closest to defining the Lacanian subject: it escapes all identificatory attempts at capturing the hypothesized full enjoyment it represents, thus maintaining the subject’s fantasmatic desire; and it supports the subject’s identifications by organizing its partial enjoyment and/or by conveniently attributing this partiality to the action of a localizable agent thereby masking the ultimate impossibility of a full encounter. Like the daimon Arendt recuscitates from ancient Greek religion (see epigraph) – the objet petit a is simultaneously the most intimate kernel of the subject, yet also external to this same subject. This is why the notion of subjectivity in Lacan’s work is interesting. Subjectivity cannot in any straightforward way be opposed to objectivity, because it is split between itself as lack and itself as the fantasmatic object promising to cover over a lack that, however, cannot be interiorized by the subject. This is one way to understand Žižek’s appeal to Daniel Dennet’s category of “objectively subjective” (1991, p. 132) in capturing the paradox of fantasy:

The basic paradox of the Freudian notion of fantasy resides in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of “subjective” and “objective”: of course, fantasy is by definition not “objective” (in the naïve sense of “existing independently of the subject’s perceptions”); however, it is also not “subjective” (in the sense of being reducible to the subject’s consciously experienced intuitions). Fantasy rather belongs to the “bizarre category of the objectively subjective – the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don’t seem that way to you”. (Žižek, 2002, p. 316–317)

The logic peculiar to fantasy, then, entails the staging of a relation between the subject (as lack) and the object (as that which always escapes socio-symbolic capture), thereby organizing the affective dimension of the subject, the way it desires and enjoys. The paradigmatic form of such a staging, of course, involves transgressions of public norms and ideals. For in transgressing prohibitions or officially affirmed ideals subjects aim at that which appears to lie beyond the socio-symbolic horizon and which holds out the promise of a full enjoyment. Fantasy thereby links the “dry” socio-symbolic field (through a reference to its official insignia) to the “sticky” affects of the subject. This suggests that identifying a narrative as a specifically fantasmatic narrative, involves homing in on the affective investment made in one or more of its elements, as well as the subject’s transgressive relation to an officially affirmed ideal.

Implications of a Lacanian approach to fantasy and enjoyment in social and political studies

An account of the logic of fantasy and enjoyment allows us to draw out some very specific implications. We will organize our thoughts around three key themes linked directly to the concept of subjectivity. The first theme concerns
how to think the relationship between political and ethical subjectivity, raising questions about whether we can draw a distinction between normative and ethical critique. The second theme revolves around how fantasy and associated concepts allow us to rethink the relationship between reason and affect through the signifier/\textit{jouissance} matrix. The final theme explores how a logic of fantasy and enjoyment allows us to explore what has been called “the problem of self-transgression”.

**Pluralizing subjectivity: social, political, ideological, and ethical**

The title of our paper – Lacan and Political Subjectivity – raises the question of when it is appropriate or helpful to qualify subjectivity as political and, by implication, as non-political. Our earlier account of identity and identification suggests one way of doing this. For we could link political subjectivity to the moment in which a social identity is disrupted and contested, thus enabling subjects to engage in acts of renewed identification. In this view \textit{social} subjectivity can be connected to practices whose norms are taken for granted, and \textit{political} subjectivity to those practices in which these norms are actively contested or defended.\footnote{Similar considerations apply to ideological subjectivity.}

Thinking along the social-political axis in this way enables us to examine the question of critique from a normative perspective because what is at stake are the concrete norms informing a practice. In abiding by these norms the \textit{social} subject engages in the practice in a way that exhibits a certain logic, which we can characterize as a social logic. Consider Walkerdine’s discussion of individuals’ workplace fantasies, referred to earlier. It is clear that this investigation was partly motivated by a normative worry about an increasingly hegemonic psychologizing social logic (see also Salecl, 2003 on a similar theme). With the phrase “psychologizing social logic” we designate those discursive patterns that, in the self-interpretations of actors, tend to account for the success and failure of work-related activities in terms of psychology or personality, rather than in terms of wider socio-economic features linked to (missed) collective decision-making opportunities. Or consider Dean’s discussion of what we could call “patriarchal social logics” (Dean, 2008). Such logics would denote a tendency in the discursive patterns (of institutions and actors) to shrink the options available to women to enhance their personal and collective autonomy.

An appeal to \textit{political} subjectivity, then, introduces doubts about the norms embodied in dominant social logics prospectively and retrospectively. Prospectively, it contests such norms in the name of an alternative norm, a democratic ideal or the value of autonomy for example. Retrospectively, it asks how a dominant social logic was instituted in the first place: what political logics led to its introduction and sedimentation? What battles, alliances, and identifications made possible the successful institution of a particular norm or social logic?

Earlier, we noted how the category of fantasy can be usefully deployed as a way of better appreciating the political significance associated with processes of
identification and the study of subjectivity. We are now in a better position to see how this might be so, because fantasy can serve as a way of trying to give content to the obstacles to and/or direction of political contestation and mobilization. An appeal to fantasy, therefore, introduces another axis along which we can pluralize subjectivity. For what is at stake here is not so much the content of norms embodied in a social logic (or a “counter-logic”), so much as the mode of the subject’s engagement with these norms. And fantasy can be understood as a way of mediating the subject’s relation to the norms and ideals governing a social or political practice.

The question of mediation is important here, and can be approached from the point of view of enjoyment. One mode of enjoyment, for example, might be understood in terms of a subject’s overinvestment in an ideal or norm, which we can link to Lacan’s concept of phallic enjoyment. Here, the subject is in the thrall of his or her fantasy, and thus insensitive to the contingency of social reality. This may explain the frequently encountered response of subjects to their leaders noted in our account of Gabriel’s studies: either total rejection or total embrace. But it also raises questions about what sorts of practice may correspond to a non-phallic form of enjoyment, what Lacan calls jouissance feminine (or Other jouissance). Here, the subject is taken to acknowledge and affirm the contingency of social relations and to pursue an enjoyment that is not guided by the impulse to “complete”, to “totalize”, or to “make full or whole”, an enjoyment situated, rather, on “the side of the not-whole” (Lacan, 1998, pp. 76, 84). This thought guides the research of Byrne and Healy (2006), whose empirical study of cooperative forms of organization suggests that perhaps a different sort of relation to fantasy – and thus mode of enjoyment or subjectivity – is possible. The value of their case analysis resides in the connection they make between a phallic mode of enjoyment and the subjects’ aversion to ambiguity, but also in the glimpses they offer of an alternative non-phallic mode of subjectivity in which subjects appear more ready to embrace contingency. Insofar as the subject’s relation to social norms is mediated in a phallic mode, we understand this subject as an ideological subject; and insofar as the subject engages by means of a non-phallic enjoyment, we can qualify it, following Lacan, as an ethical subject.

This matrix of doubly paired subjectivities (social-political and ideological-ethical) enables us to provide a more complex picture of social and political practices. It allows us to give specific sense, for example, to Walkerdine’s warning against treating reasons for exploitation as simply or straightforwardly a matter of ideology or false-consciousness (Walkerdine, 2005, p. 60). The logic of fantasy, in particular, enables us to add an extra layer of complexity to our account of ideology. It suggests to those of us interested in better understanding the conditions of political transformation that obstacles to change are not just social (inclusive of cultural, economic, and so on), but also ideological – where
the power of ideology here derives its force and content from the logic of fantasy
and the way this structures our subjective relation to enjoyment.

Affect, reason, and politics

During the last two decades what the Enlightenment relegated to the
stigmatized (irrational) periphery of human life – emotion, affect, passion,
and so on – has gradually returned centre-stage. In sociology and the social
sciences more generally, for example, most of the 20th century was marked by
an “expulsion of emotion” mainly due to “an almost exclusive emphasis on the
cognitive bases of social action”, an emphasis shared by functionalism, rational
choice theories and even some conflict theories (Barbalet, 2001, p. 16). This
situation started to change from the late 1970s onwards, when emotions, the
“scandal” of reason, made a miraculous comeback through the establishment of
the now thriving “sociology of emotions” (Kemper, 1990; Williams, 2001, p. 1).
The 2001 publication of an edited volume entitled Passionate Politics (Goodwin
et al., 2001), and the 2002 special issue of Soundings on “Regimes of Emotion”,
both devoted to the “politics of emotion”, offer an indication of how this trend
is now starting to encompass mainstream political science and political analysis.
Indeed, by taking into account emotion, affect, and passion one may be able to
reach a more thorough understanding of “what sticks” (Ahmed, 2004): both
what fuels identification processes and what creates discursive fixity. Within this
framework, it is now acknowledged that “cognitive agreement alone does not
result in action” (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 6) and thus can neither facilitate new
identification acts nor feed protest, political participation, and/or other types of
political activity. Furthermore, as a result of the centrality emotion acquires,
“what is difficult to imagine is an identity that is purely cognitive yet strongly
held. The ‘strength’ of an identity, even a cognitively vague one, comes from its
emotional side” (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 9).

A Lacanian approach to subjectivity and fantasy affirms these intuitions and
accepts the central role that affect or jouissance plays in accounting for the
“grip” of identity or the “vector” of identifications. It is true, of course, that
Lacan has been accused of neglecting the affective dimension of analysis in what
appears to be his intellectualizing tendencies. But the emphasis placed upon the
symbolic order (the big Other) indicates that his approach to affect is a complex
one, suggesting that analyses that are sensitive to the Other transcend the
opposition between affect and intellect: the subject is “affected” by the Other.
Both what he calls “affective smoochy-woochy” (Lacan, 1988, p. 55) and an
over-intellectualisation can serve as imaginary lures and thus resistance
strategies of the ego (Evans, 1996, p. 5). 9

A set of distinctions can be drawn between affect, emotion, and passion in the
effort to better grasp what is at stake here. Some of these are more technical
than others (see, e.g., Lacan’s discussion of love, hate, and ignorance as the three
fundamental passions – Lacan, 1988, p. 271). But it suggests that there is much
to be gained in trying to enhance conceptual precision. For example, we can grasp a basic Lacanian insight by drawing a distinction between affect and emotion. If affect represents the quantum of libidinal energy, we could say that emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers (or “ideas” in Freudian terms). It is because of this, according to Lacan, that emotions such as depression or anger can deceive: their meaning and significance is a function not of their intrinsic properties, but rather of the subject’s universe of meaning and the way that fantasy structures this. It is for this reason that Lacan cautions against the lures of emotions, paying special attention to the “letter” of what is said and the displacements of affect. This suggests that a key aspect of understanding the significance of emotions in the organization of social practices involves trying to map them in relation to the underlying fantasies that organize a subject’s affective enjoyment. ¹⁰

Self-transgressive enjoyment

Everyone seeking to understand how certain power structures manage to institute themselves as objects of long-term identification and how people get attached to them is sooner or later led to a variety of phenomena associated with what, since de la Boetie, have been gathered together under the soubriquets “voluntary servitude” or “contented slave”. The central question here is simple: Why might we be so willing and often enthusiastic – or at least relieved – to submit ourselves to conditions of subordination even when we are consciously opposed to them? Why are we often keen to comply with the commands of authority, often irrespective of their (dubious) content? As Wilhelm Reich put it in his Mass Psychology of Fascism, “What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don’t steal and why the majority of those who are exploited don’t strike” (Reich in Rosen, 1996, p. 1).

The famous words of Rousseau from the second chapter of The Social Contract are heard echoing through Reich’s statement: “A slave in fetters loses everything – even the desire to be freed from them. He grows to love his slavery…” (Rousseau, 1971, p. 172).¹¹

The problem of willing submission is linked to what has been called “the problem of self-transgression” (Glynos, 2003). The problem of self-transgression aims to capture an intuition about those kinds of situation where an individual or group appear both to affirm an ideal and, simultaneously, to transgress it. The problem of self-transgression, then, calls for a critical explanation of why and how a subject is often complicit in the contravention of an ideal which she nevertheless affirms. Fantasmatic enjoyment is just one way of trying to understand this problem. Other ways might appeal to notions like hypocrisy, role-conflict, collective action impediments, false-consciousness, and so on (Glynos, 2003, pp. 3–7). All together these approaches yield slightly
different conceptions of self-transgression, but here we wish simply to register what a Lacanian conception would look like.

Such a psychoanalytic conception of self-transgression would seek to deploy its conceptual apparatus (split subjectivity, desire, fantasy, and enjoyment) to explain why and how these instances of self-transgression are possible. The general claim here is that the transgression of the ideal is accounted for in terms of the enjoyment structured in fantasy. One socio-political implication of such an approach concerns how a self-transgressive practice can sometimes function to support or sustain the ideal being transgressed. This is because this transgression (and thus failure to meet a publicly affirmed ideal) can serve as a source of enjoyment. For example, military communities have practices and codes of conduct that often transgress the public ideals of the institution (ideals like fair and equal treatment) but which are kept secret – the practice of “hazing” or initiation ceremonies, for instance. The established private or officer is well aware that forcing a new recruit to undergo a series of painful and humiliating experiences transgresses the military institution’s ideals that he officially avows. The claim here would be that not only are these ideals not subverted by such practices, but they also make possible the enjoyment of their transgression that, in turn, sustains those very same ideals. Fantasmatically structured enjoyment thus alerts us to the politically salient idea that oftentimes it may be more productive to consider the possibility that concrete ideals may be sustained rather than subverted by their transgression. It is a claim that shares an affinity with similar theses propounded by Bakhtin (1968) and Bataille (1987) who argue that periodic carnivalesque transgressions tend to bolster rather than undermine the social order. Bataille, for instance, declares that “[o]rganized transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is” (1987, 65).

From a Lacanian perspective, then, acceptance of and obedience to authority is not reproduced only at the level of knowledge and conscious consent, but also – and importantly – at the level of fantasy. Most crucially, the reproduction of this power structure relies on a libidinal, affective support transmitted via fantasy that binds subjects to the conditions of their symbolic subordination. This suggests that social and political change may be facilitated through processes of dis-investment and re-investment, giving rise to an interesting perspective on classic approaches to the concept of freedom, such as those propounded by Isaiah Berlin (1969) or Charles Taylor (1979) (see Glynos, 2003, 2008). Thus, if psychoanalytic intervention (and, by extension, political intervention, and critical theory) is to have any effect in these cases, it must aim between the lines, so to speak, at the field of fantasmatically structured jouissance, and the way it constitutes our desires and sustains various social and political practices. It would aim to effect a “crossing of the fantasy”, one of Lacan’s formulations in defining the ethics (and the end) of psychoanalysis (Ţiţeşcu, 1989; Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007; Glynos, 2000a, 2001; Zupančič, 2000).
In socio-political terms this crossing implies a particular ethics of relating to the lack in the Other and the fantasmatic narrative which covers it, promising new socio-political possibilities.

**Conclusion**

While there has been some discussion of fantasy as an explicitly political category (see, e.g., Žižek, 1996, 1997), we think the specificity of the category itself remains underdeveloped, both theoretically and methodologically. Developing the conceptual and methodological specificity of fantasy and enjoyment from a Lacanian point of view appears promising to us in helping to ascertain more precisely its ideological and political significance, largely because of the connections that have been drawn between this strand of psychoanalysis and an already developed post-structural approach to social and political study (Žižek, 1989; Glynos, 2001; Stavrakakis, 2005, 2007; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). We conclude with a few questions indicating directions of possible future research along these lines.

From a theoretical point of view, the specificity of the category of fantasy itself remains underdeveloped, including its conceptual relation to signifier and affect. Undertaking a genealogy of the category of fantasy may prove productive in addressing this question, especially when viewed from the perspective of social and political theory. Another way forward here is to explore differences in the way different psychoanalytic traditions approach the category of fantasy, with the aim of teasing out the differential implications for how we think affect in relation to social and political phenomena. Relatedly, the specificity of a fantasmatic narrative, as opposed to other forms of narrative, or the specificity of the Lacanian notion of fundamental fantasy, in the singular (as opposed to experienced fantasies, in the plural), is also unclear in relation to the study of social and political phenomena. What, if any, are the implications of such distinctions for purposes of social and political study? Finally, many Lacanians tend to place considerable emphasis upon the notion of ethics, in which the mode of subjective engagement in relation to fantasy is highlighted (Žižek, 1989; Stavrakakis, 1999; Glynos, 2000a, 2001; Zupančič, 2000). However, a lot of interesting work remains to be done in exploring how to connect this account of ethics in a productive and innovative way with the more familiar normative considerations that occupy many political theorists and analysts.

Theoretical and methodological concerns are, of course, not unconnected, and so many theoretical issues feed directly into important questions about method. We will focus here on one fairly basic methodological question about how to access and apprehend fantasies at the individual and collective levels. Of course, thinking carefully about the role of the analyst is important, whether in terms of the judgements s/he makes in characterizing and exploring a practice,

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or in terms of how the analyst’s own fantasies may be implicated in such studies (see, e.g., Walkerdine, 1986; Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 183–191). But an equally central question asks whether there are any advantages, methodologically speaking, in drawing a distinction between individual fantasies on the one hand and collectively shared fantasies on the other, and whether there are theoretical implications for insisting on this?

For example, some works refer to individual fantasies in the workplace context which are not collectively shared (e.g., Gabriel, 1997; Walkerdine, 2005). It may transpire that a subject’s submission to an oppressive working relation is sustained by her/his individual fantasies of inadequacy. Following one of Walkerdine’s examples, these fantasies may be structured around the subject’s father, for whom the subject’s efforts were never good enough. Her/his capacity, in the workplace context, to absorb without question an excessive workload is then accounted for by her/his desire to please her/his father. Other approaches, however, focus primarily on shared or collective fantasies and their role in the workplace (see, e.g., Gabriel, 1991a, b; Contu and Willmott, 2006). Here, we can imagine a fantasy that is shared and collectively enacted by a number of workers exploited by management. In this case, a social fantasy staging the sabotage of management may structure a whole host of activities and interactions among staff, even if this sabotage never materializes, thereby perpetuating a relation of domination between management and staff.

This raises the question of how to think the relationship between privately held individual fantasies and collectively shared fantasies, and their respective and/or combined impact on social and political practices. For example, how might individual fantasies come to reinforce or disrupt collectively shared fantasies? Under what conditions can individual fantasies come to be collectively shared at some level, and what forms can such social fantasies take? What sorts of relation are possible between fantasies of the oppressor and fantasies of the oppressed? To what extent do such fantasies (or interaction between fantasies) facilitate an ideological relation to workplace practices, rather than an ethical, or even a political relation? It is clear that even if there are good heuristic reasons for drawing a distinction between individual and collectively shared fantasies, the conceptual implications – both theoretical and methodological – demand careful attention.

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Notes

1 For a detailed Lacanian analysis of utopian fantasies see Stavrakakis (1999), especially Chapter 4.
2 For an exploration of the relation between fantasies of leaders and fantasies of followers, see Kets de Vries and Miller (1984), and Schwartz (1990).
3 For examples of the way how the Lacanian concept of fantasy has already been deployed in the context of workplace practices, see Fleming and Spicer (2003); Byrne and Healy (2006); and Contu and Willmott (2006).
4 In this context, it is worth noting that the resources available to the lacking subject in order to attempt a (re)constitution of her identity are, broadly speaking, of two distinct types: imaginary and symbolic. Hence the distinction Lacan draws between imaginary and symbolic forms of identity and identification. On this, see Fink (1995, pp. 84–90); Stavrakakis (1999, Chapter 1); Glynos (2000b, pp. 96–101).
5 In this section, especially in our analysis of nationalism, we draw on Stavrakakis with Chrysoloras (2006) – also see Stavrakakis (2007, Chapter 5).
6 Utopia is used here in the strong sense of the word, as a discourse that offers final and unquestionable solutions from the point of view of a subject supposed to know whose authority is never really put into doubt. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that contemporary utopian studies are considering alternative, less rigid understandings of this concept, with the aim of avoiding the more dubious political implications of subscribing to a strong utopian programme. See, for example, Levitas's discussion of Jacoby's anti-utopian “iconoclastic utopianism” and her plea for a recognition of the “necessary failure” of utopia (Levitas, 2007, pp. 302–303).
7 This section draws on and develops ideas in Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory (Glynos and Howarth, 2007. See, especially, pp. 127–132).
8 For a more detailed discussion of this see Glynos and Howarth (2007, pp. 110–113, 120–123); and Stavrakakis (2007, Chapter 8).
9 For a detailed account of Lacan's shifting position on affectivity see Stavrakakis (2007, Chapter 2).
From a Deleuzian perspective, Brian Massumi has also elaborated a similar distinction between emotion and affect. According to Massumi, “emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders” (Massumi, 1996, p. 221). Affect here is understood as an unassimilable intensity, while emotion entails the “insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically forced progressions, into narrativisable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning” (Massumi, 1996, p. 221). In this sense, emotion marks a “capture and closure of affect” within a primarily symbolic structure (Massumi, 1996, pp. 228, 220), and initiates a dialectic similar to the one between real and symbolic in Lacan.

See Stavrakakis, 2007, Chapter 4.

References


