

**Mourning Neoliberalism:
Emancipation in the Age of Precarity and Digital Psychopolitics**

Felix Shing Hay Yeung

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School of Philosophical, Historical and Interdisciplinary Studies
University of Essex

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For
my parents, Kelly and Edmund
my brother, Steve

「泉涸，魚相與處於陸，相呴以溼，相濡以沫。」

As the spring dries up, the fish live on land, wetting each other with their spit and froth.

– Zhuangzi, Book VI

“The living vent on the dead their despair that they no longer give thought to themselves.”

– Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

「我的訴求就是上班。」

My demand is to get to work.

– Mr. Lai

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Abstract

This Dissertation provides a multilayered diagnosis of the psychosocial and psychopolitical landscape of contemporary capitalism, exploring the persisting obstacles to emancipatory change despite mounting dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the order. The Dissertation comprises three parts:

The first part reconstructs the structural, institutional, and cultural paths leading to the persistence of neoliberal hubris amid widespread precarity and insecurity. I describe the psychopolitical impacts of neoliberal socialization, highlighting both the *soft* charm of competitive entrepreneurial ideals and the *hard* disciplinary effects of social insecurity. This system causes individuals to experience both internal psychoneurotic anxieties and external objective ones simultaneously, which people negotiate differently depending on their subject/object positions, most with individualizing and depoliticizing effects.

The second part aims to discuss the main psychosocial symptoms of contemporary capitalism in the literature under three headings: (i) manic cultures of accelerated work and consumption, (ii) medicalized and individualized regimes of psychiatry and psycho-culture, and (iii) paranoid, populist political mobilizations. On the one hand, I demonstrate that these symptoms are not merely psychological but are also sustained by institutional norms, cultural expectations, and material infrastructures. On the other hand, drawing from object-relations psychoanalytic theories of ‘pathological organizations,’ I suggest that these formations solidify in ‘wounding attachments’ that various leverage our attachments to partial libidinal gains to perpetuate the havoc such formations wreak in our societies, psyches, and emancipatory imaginations.

In the concluding chapters, I show that our addictions and attachments to such wounds must be mourned and weaned if emancipation is to be imaginable. This involves experimenting with how freely-associative and containing spaces can be reopened, both in our everyday lives and in potential counterpublics, so that stalled emancipatory visions can reemerge.

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‘You are welcome (into my mind).’

Part I - Background

Chapter 1. Introduction

‘We’re doomed’

At some point during the early phases of drafting this Dissertation, I found myself repeating the same sentence – sometimes as a description of our collective future, sometimes with dread about my career, sometimes with grief, and other times with schadenfreude (as a rebuke against those who support the capitalist cannibals and fascists – ‘we both burn eventually’). At first, I felt this was idiosyncratic, the mumbling of a depressive who had read too much Frankfurt School.

But gradually, I realized how this feeling is shared in the younger generations across geopolitical divides. As I substantiated my view of our doom in my classes, there were practically no objections – some even reacted as if this were no big news. In Hong Kong news media between 2022 and 2023, the statements “we did not plan to have a next generation” (我們沒有打算有下一代) and “This is our last generation” (這是我們最後一代) sparked some heated online controversies, all surrounding generational despair. American working-class young adults in Jennifer Silva’s studies rendered a similar point in stronger language: “we are all f*cked.”¹ In Bernard Stiegler’s *Age of Disruption*, we can read a teenage European similarly proclaiming: “all that is over and done with, because we’re sure that we will be the last generation, or one of the last, before the end.”²

As I worked on the research that culminates in this Dissertation, I am more convinced that these seemingly nihilistic, despairing proclamations are well-grounded. We are locked in a capitalist system that has long since thrived on pillaging continents and cannibalizing the masses for the

¹ Jennifer M Silva, ““This Thing Is a Joke”: How Working-Class Young Americans Make Meaning out of Politics in an Era of Distrust and Isolation,” *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 75, no. Suppl 1 (2023).

² Florian, as quoted in Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, trans. Daniel Ross (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 9. An *Economist* article reported heightened despair amongst Gen-Z youths, citing falling job satisfaction and social media use as potential factors. “The Middle-Aged Are No Longer the Most Miserable,” *The Economist*, 30 August 2025.

sake of accumulation. This system, in its neoliberal iteration, seduces and exhorts many with cruel positivity and overly idealized images into taking up debt, personal responsibility, forcing us to accept the psychic and material burdens this brings on our own accounts. On the flipside, the same system relentlessly represses and disciplines anyone who opposes it and those who, through misfortune, find themselves in the growing ‘waste pile’³ of the ‘underclasses’ despite – or somehow *because of* – the beautiful picture neoliberalism paints.⁴ Capitalism pays no heed to the long-term and social consequences of its actions, and now it seems brutally apparent that the collective future of our planet is being sold away.

As time progressed, many realized that there is something terribly wrong with the world, and that change is both pressing and necessary. But the saddest of all, perhaps, is how victims of this neoliberal capitalist order – despite knowing and experiencing well the ravages of the system – are kept in place either in frantic mania or debilitating anxiety and depression, unable to find collective ways out. Indeed, recent political movements show how victims can mirror the survivalist state of the economy and identify with the unabashed cannibals at the top of the pyramid (elites with a tiny bit of bad conscience are now shunned as hypocrites to prop this up), striving either to ascend the ladder, leaving others behind, or simply ‘fight back’ by scapegoating and repressing the more vulnerable. In the survivalist ‘pathological organization’ people now internalize, foster, and inhabit, it is by aligning oneself with the powerful that one deserves to live, lest ‘others’ should rot and die.⁵ In a world that threatens to drown us all, many cheer along with the cannibals, imagining that that would win them a seat on the spacecraft to Mars.

³ For ‘waste pile’ see Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005).

⁴ See Jonathan Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness: Essays in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), ch. 11.

⁵ Jessica Benjamin, “‘The Wolf’s Dictionary’: Confronting the Triumph of a Predatory World View,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 53, no. 4 (2017).

1.1. The Problem with Existing Accounts, and my Account as an Attempt to Rectify It

How did we get to this point where no effective challenges to the order exist? Why, in particular, do people cling so firmly to the order that rips them off and cannibalises them, that even if their frustrations are articulated, this often fails to challenge the economic determinants of their misery?

A similar question puzzled the critical theorists of the 20th Century, and one of the explanations is the enforcement of mass social conformity, which diminishes the individual's capacity to reflect and resist.⁶ Closer to our present, some have remarked on the psychological effects of novel technologies of seduction in the spheres of marketing and digitization, and proposed to describe the age as '*psychopolitical*.'⁷ Explanations for current psychopolitical deadlocks have variously alerted us to the structural failures of post-war democratic capitalism,⁸ the narcissistic commodification of selves under the 'new individualist' and consumerist cultures,⁹ the power of neoliberal culture to command identification and smooth out resistance,¹⁰ the overstimulation and disruption of people's psyches and their lifeworlds by technological and social acceleration,¹¹ and people's entrenchment in perverse enjoyment of 'pure excesses' mandated by the capitalist unconscious.¹²

A proper summary of all these explanations with sufficient nuance would itself deserve another PhD project. But as a general observation, although all of these accounts are onto something, I find many too simplifying, if not grandiose, in their proclamations. As I go on to demonstrate

⁶ See e.g. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1969]).

⁷ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017).

⁸ Wolfgang Streeck, *Taking Back Control?: States and State Systems after Globalism*, trans. Ben Fowkes and Joshua Ratz (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2024); "The Return of the Repressed," *New Left Review*, no. 104 (2017).

⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1982).

¹⁰ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford Briefs, 2015); *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

¹¹ Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*; Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), chs. 10–11.

¹² Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); *Pure Excess: Capitalism and the Commodity* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

in this Dissertation, the existing accounts tend to mistake a phenomenon or trend for the whole, when, in fact, there is more variety. In the spirit of Foucaultian genealogy, perhaps we cannot (and should not) so easily assume that there is a uniform structure of power and subjection that practices and subjects unfold from.¹³ This, of course, does not mean that we must stay with describing only local ‘force relations’, but only that such general claims should be made with due awareness of the historical particularities, contingencies, and potential infelicities that can be disclosed at different levels of analysis.

In this Dissertation, *I aim to provide a multilayered, nuanced analysis of socialization in the neoliberal order, with special emphasis on disidentificatory and abjective currents that cut across class and generational distinctions and the difference digital technologies make. This will pave the way towards a better understanding of the deadlocks to emancipatory resistance.* My main goal is not to criticize existing accounts, but to integrate their insights and complement them with intricacies of the situation in a realistically comprehensive picture of the deadlocks we face.

I view this Dissertation’s main contribution as bringing together disparate accounts into a comprehensive overall picture. To do this, I differentiate between various aspects of neoliberalization (ideological vs. structural, institutional vs. cultural, coercive vs. seductive), and between modes where people can identify/disidentify with their environments. I also try to weave together descriptions of economic, social, and cultural shifts under neoliberalism with psychological accounts of the ways these shifts are interpreted and internalized in a unified but differentiated picture. Besides, I also include structured considerations of populist and digitalization trends of neoliberalization post-2008.

¹³ Foucault argues that power should be analyzed “in the first instance” as multiple and contingent “force relations” that only later – but never necessarily – congeal into larger formations such as the state, laws, and various social hegemonies. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 92–98.

1.2. Wounding Attachments to Pathological Organizations

As a work of diagnosis, I will make general claims about the present, although attention will also be paid to the intricacies of identificatory processes in the contingent and conflicting present. As I shall argue, the major blockage to emancipatory mobilizations under the neoliberal psychopolitical regime is that *individuals are exhorted in various ways to mirror the cannibalizing logics of the socio-economic order, thus producing a tight bind between the psychic and the social, where one reproduces the other*. The precise socio-cultural formations under which this happens will be discussed in three chapters under the titles of (i) manic culture, (ii) medicalized sedation and compulsive psycho-activation, and (iii) paranoid politics. These are the most widely discussed in the neoliberal literature, and, I believe, encompass most ills of neoliberal psychopolitics. Common to all three is what I call ‘wounding attachments’ to the social order.¹⁴

1.2.1. Wounding Attachments in General

Conceptually, ‘wounding attachment’ refers to a subject’s attachment to an object that wounds. In our psychosocial context, what wounds is our neoliberal social order. Wounding attachments are an upshot of the social order, which is paradoxically producing wounds and offering partial patches (or promises of patches) for these wounds. In the broadest understanding of this concept, there is no specification of *how* this attachment is sustained – in particular, *whether this attachment is constitutive of the subject, or is only perpetuated due to objective*

¹⁴ The use of the term ‘wounding attachments’ evokes Brown’s similarly titled “Wounded Attachments” – where Brown describes the pitfalls of the politics of *victimized* identities under conditions of (neo)liberal post-politics. Although the two concepts are related, ‘wounding attachments’ cover attachment to identities, objects, and ideals that goes beyond victim culture. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), ch. 3. The concept of “wounded attachments” has stronger affinities towards Judith Butler’s concept of “passionate attachment to subjection,” where injurious social power exerts powerful influence over individual psyches by exploiting their dependency on the system for recognition and survival, thus producing paradoxical attachments to the order *in the subject’s psyche*. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997). A similar idea has also been noted in Martijn Konig’s reading of neoliberalism, when he describes how system-endemic “traumatization” is hijacked by neoliberal cultural forms that “‘encircle’ the traumatic moment,” (falsely), locking subjects in by promising that we can ‘do something’ about the trauma in system-congruent terms. Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressives Have Missed* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 121.

circumstances that force the subject to be in a constant, dependent relation to the wounding order. Hence, on one extreme, the ‘attachment’ can be maintained purely by external factors. This is the case with a worker who comes to identify ‘on the surface’ with workplace targets to keep their job, or the distressed poor adopting the role of a psychiatric patient, medicating themselves purely to secure social benefit payments.¹⁵ In these cases, we can expect that the subject’s attachments to neoliberal culture will change with changes in external conditions.

However, most wounding attachments go deeper and are at least partly internalized. This is because the neoliberal order, through the distribution of recognition, sanctions, material rewards, and (promise of) gratifications, structures subject and abject-positions in ways congruent with the functioning of the order. Under the lure of rewards and promises and threats of sanctions, people are often incentivized to align their identifications with the former and, even more so, to avoid falling into the latter.

In many instances, neoliberal attachments are formed naturally as subjects seek gratification and avoid humiliation within the social order without questioning its legitimacy. Here, a potential cycle of ‘addiction’ can form between the wounding order and the subject – in particular when the subject, addicted to the compensatory gratifications the order provides, aligns themselves with the ideals and normative subject positions of the order. We can cite examples of consumerist subjects who are intensely attracted to promises of unlimited, boundless consumption, even though most of them fall short. Nonetheless, the persistent dissatisfaction and growing desire fuel deeper attachments to consumerist cravings for better, enhanced products and self-improvement strategies.¹⁶ As another example, distressed psychiatric patients can be attached to their diagnostic labels and even the incarcerating

¹⁵ For worker disengagement, see Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), ch. 3. For acquiring diagnosis to gain welfare, see H. Hansen, P. Bourgois, and E. Drucker, "Pathologizing Poverty: New Forms of Diagnosis, Disability, and Structural Stigma under Welfare Reform," *Soc Sci Med* 103 (2014). We will return to both topics in subsequent chapters.

¹⁶ On consumerism, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007). We will return to this in chapters 2 and 4.

psychiatric system for the ‘care’ our system still provides, despite the latter’s inability to address real psychosocial causes of the origins of their distress.¹⁷

At this level, part of the wounding attachment remains opportunistic. The attachment to the order, though passionate, *can change* along with the social environment – a consumer may find better satisfaction outside consumer goods and a psychiatric ‘patient’ may receive better social care when the right circumstances emerge. There needs to be no intrinsic connection between the subject’s need for gratification and its current (wounding) form, *other than the fact that the gratifications provided by our wounding order are the only ones socially available*.¹⁸ We can imagine that social change is sufficient to reform people’s psyche in less pathological directions.

1.2.2. Attachment to the Wound for Its Woundingness – the Psychodynamic Account

However, wounding attachments can be the most deeply *internalized* when the attachment attaches to the wounding social formation, not simply opportunistically, but precisely *for the wounds it inflicts*. This way, *individuals are so libidinally attached that they will resist being freed from the wounding order, because they derive irreplaceable, ‘perverse’ satisfactions from the order*. This is like how Freud remarks, in describing mourning, that “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a [better] substitute is already beckoning to them.”¹⁹ This is the deepest sense of ‘wounding attachment,’ and likely the greatest obstacle to emancipatory social change.

Now, although this idea of attaching to something that wounds sounds counterintuitive, psychoanalysts have observed this in clinical contexts and theorized it variously. For instance, the Lacanian conception of *jouissance* designates the force within the human psyche that drives

¹⁷ On how psychiatric labels command patient’s attachment, see Nikolas Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future: The Politics of Mental Health* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2019), 73–75. We will return to related themes in chapter 5.

¹⁸ There are some parallels here between wounding attachments of this type and ‘adaptive preference formation’ as described by Jon Elster. See Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ That Freud describes this in the context of mourning is in line with my later arguments, where mourning is seen as a necessary step towards the undoing of our wounding attachments to the order. Sigmund Freud, *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 244. All subsequent references to Freud will be cited in the following format: Freud, SE [volume number], [page number].

the subject to be attached to objects for the idiosyncratic *dissatisfactions* they produce.²⁰ While Lacan's theory of *jouissance* treats attachments to wounding/dissatisfying objects as constitutive of human desire *per se*, a more useful elaboration of attachments to wounding powers for our purposes can be found in the theory of "pathological organizations" in post-Kleinian object-relations theory.²¹ Here, "pathological organization" refers to psychologically-ingrained systems of interrelated phantasies and object-relations that provide the person with relative psychic stability and freedom from anxiety, although – as *pathological* – they also often involve varying degrees of rigidity and unmitigated (self-)destructiveness that obstruct developmental progress.

In his pioneering study of pathological organizations, psychoanalyst Herbert Rosenfeld discovers that the organization of the internal world in narcissistic patients is dominated by destructive parts of the psyche gathering in a superegotic 'mafia gang' that props up the fragile ego by attacking loving and dependent parts of the self and external others.²² In Rosenfeld's theorization, narcissistic patients are particularly 'difficult' to cure because the gang-dominated organization is masterful at outlawing change and therapeutic human contact by sadistically projecting their dependency and vulnerabilities onto others whom they would then humiliate and denigrate. Indeed, Rosenfeld describes, the internalized superego 'gang' can be so strong that *any alteration to the person's mode of sadistic object-relating is viewed as a persecutory threat to the achieved stability of the pathological organization and is either aggressively rejected as foreign intrusion, or – when the ego is forced to reckon with its dependency and imperfections – experienced as abject defeat*. This way, the gang-like superego extorts the ego's

²⁰ See Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8–10.

²¹ Herbert Rosenfeld, "A Clinical Approach to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Life and Death Instincts: An Investigation into the Aggressive Aspects of Narcissism," in *Melanie Klein Today: Developments in Theory and Practice*, Vol. I, ed. Elizabeth Bott Spillius (1988). See John Steiner, *Psychic Retreats: Pathological Organizations in Psychotic, Neurotic and Borderline Patients* (London: Routledge, 2003); "The Interplay between Pathological Organizations and the Paranoid-Schizoid and Depressive Positions (1987)," in *Melanie Klein Today, Volume 1*, ed. Elizabeth Bott Spillius (London: Routledge, 1988).

²² Rosenfeld, "A Clinical Approach to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Life and Death Instincts: An Investigation into the Aggressive Aspects of Narcissism."

compliance in forcefully *maintaining the organization and regarding therapeutic changes as horrifying*.

Following the footsteps of Rosenfeld, later psychoanalysts also discovered other pathological organizations involving less overtly aggressive manifestations. Common to all such organizations are the following:²³

- i. Ferocious, exacting, gang-like superego structures defined by strong destructiveness, driving sadomasochistic self-relating,²⁴
- ii. Formation of pathological organizations as 'psychic retreats' using rigidified ego structures and sadomasochistic patterns of object-relating, to seek 'perverse gratification', 'containment' and 'protection' by the ferocious superego.²⁵
- iii. Upsurge of abject anxieties when the organization described in (ii) is shaken or challenged.²⁶
- iv. A perverse denial of truths exposing one's finitude, including dependency, loss, and helplessness.²⁷
- v. Blocked contact to others and essential parts of the self, especially parts more in touch with one's dependence, finitude, and guilt for the self's destruction.²⁸ The pathologically organized generally projects relational troubles onto others, leaving those helping them feeling hopeless and blamed.²⁹

As an upshot of (iv), pathological organizations can stabilize the psyche against looming anxieties only at the cost of halting the individual's development towards mature and open forms of object-relating. As the psychoanalytic story of development goes, we can live a good life only if we can find our own way in acknowledging our finite and (inter) dependent natures. An ego hooked by idealizations and the sadomasochistic need to humiliate will necessarily find themselves disillusioned and humiliated repeatedly by the world they fail to control.³⁰ Yet, when

²³ For structured summaries of various ways psychic retreats and pathological organizations can be structured, see Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*.

²⁴ See esp. Eric Brenman, "Cruelty and Narrowmindedness," in *Melanie Klein Today: Developments in Theory and Practice*, Vol. I, ed. Elizabeth Bott Spillius (1988).

²⁵ Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 8-12.

²⁶ "Pathological Organizations " 337-38.

²⁷ *Psychic Retreats*, 94-100.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁹ See Steiner, "Pathological Organizations " 334-35; Betty Joseph, "Addiction to near Death (1982)," *ibid.*, 317-18.

³⁰ Adam Phillips, "The Magical Act of a Desperate Person," *London Review of Books* 35, no. 5 (2013).

the ferocious superego outlaws any consciousness of one's dependency and finitude, the pathologically organized has also lost any precious opportunities to learn from the negative, meaningfully connect with others, and, still less, to discover organizations where people can enjoy one another's company without perverse idealization and humiliation.

1.2.3. Attachment to Woundingness – the Psychosocial Account

I have surveyed the psychodynamics of pathological organizations because it helps us understand existing social pathologies. The first bridge between the social and the individual is that the development of personal pathological organizations frequently stems from social pressures. These pressures are first experienced during childhood, as transmitted through parental anxieties of social descent,³¹ and later, directly from the neoliberal order in adulthood. As Judith Butler argues, the exacting nature of parental and social demands confronts every neonate with the experience that assuming the position of the normalized subject and avoiding abjection is a matter of psychic and social 'survival.' Such survival pressure forces the internalization of social authorities and their ideals into the psyche.³²

Aside from the internalization of contents, the particular form in which (individual) pathological organizations take shape can also occur through social habituation, and the internalization of phantasy correlates embedded in institutions and socio-economic structures (for instance, expectations of accelerated activity incline people to adopt manic defences, or digital trends in decontextualized and anonymous speech disposes people to paranoid defences. See Chapters 4 and 6.) This means that participating in a *psychosocial* pathological organization also inclines the subject to reorganize one's phantasies in the form of a socially-sanctioned pathological organization. This is how, as I just mentioned, people's psyches may mirror the social order, forming a vicious cycle that blocks the emancipatory way out.

We will look into particulars of how social formations can compel wounding (social) attachments to it in greater detail, but in this Introduction, I would like to describe a general

³¹ See e.g. Rachael Peltz, "The Manic Society," *Psychoanalytic dialogues* 15, no. 3 (2005): 363; Lynne Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis: Culture, Character, and Normative Unconscious Processes* (Milton: Routledge, 2020), chs. 10, 16.

³² Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, Introduction.

trend where people's wounding attachments to the neoliberal order are compelled. This is congealed in what Jessica Benjamin describes as the survivalist 'only-one-can-live,'³³ and Lynne Layton's as 'somasochistic modes of relating' endemic in neoliberal psychopolitics.³⁴

On the socio-structural level, the economy is 'survivalist' in the sense that it is characterized by growing inequalities and zero-sum competition where a small class of elites prosper while a rapidly expanding 'underclass' of individuals rot in material deprivation and abject humiliation. Closely associated with but conceptually distinct, it seems, is the emergence of internalized pathological organizations which mirror the survivalist economy, where people harbour zero-sum competitive fantasies that confirm social distinctions by splitting the world between the deserving and the undeserving, the winner and the vanquished, and in actions that try to align with the former while abjecting the latter. Such fantasies can be explicitly expressed through ruthless survivalist ideologies within far-right circles that espouse classist, racist, and sexist views of evolutionary 'survival of the fittest' and justify predatory and retaliatory actions against the 'unfit,' 'weak,' and 'vulnerable.'³⁵ In more subtle forms, they pervade the strivings of the neoliberal professional and middle classes, where the struggle to maintain their class status involves attempts to distance themselves from the less successful and lower classes, who are seen as less smart or less hardworking, and will rightfully 'clean their toilets' for them.³⁶

Survivalism, congealed in pathological organizations of phantasies and rigid object-relations that confirm socio-economic distinctions can derail the development of relational capacities and emancipatory consciousness of the agents in question, inciting them to projectively disown their vulnerabilities to the system in aggressive and abjective dynamics towards the more precarious as scapegoats. So instead of striving for meaningful collective action aiming to

³³ Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (Routledge, 2017), ch. 7.

³⁴ Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*.

³⁵ See e.g. Quinn Slobodian, *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025); Alan Finlayson, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web," *Theory, culture & society* 38, no. 6 (2021).

³⁶ The image of people enjoying themselves too much 'cleaning their toilets' emerged in Lynne Layton's middle-class analysis and who struggled with inherited class-status anxieties from her upbringing. See Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, ch. 10.

transcend the unjust socio-economic order, survivalist fantasies drive people to act out masochistically on themselves in individual strivings, and sadistically on scapegoated others in abjective aggressions. Worse still, insofar as abjective aggression amplifies fears of the rejected, it reinforces the need for aggression along the same lines. The result is the self-proliferation of people's wounding attachments to survivalist pathological organizations with diminishing means of escape.

If this is the case, then the vital task of emancipation from the present would not only involve the mere restructuring of social and economic relations, but also the recovery of individual and collective means for loosening the grip of survivalist pathological organizations. This, as I show in later chapters, involves the important work of *containing* traumas and psychic wounds imposed on all of us by the order, *mourning* survivalist and omnipotent fantasies, so as to open up collective fantasy spaces where emancipatory imaginations can be reactivated.

1.3. Chapter Outline

To properly account for and propose solutions to the vexed issue of emancipation under neoliberal psychopolitics, this thesis is divided into three parts.

Part I reconstructs the structural, institutional, and cultural paths leading to today's financial hubris amidst precarity and insecurity. Chapter 2 introduces the various facets of the neoliberal order, tracing its historical and ideological emergence from the late 1970s to the present, while highlighting both the *soft* charm of competitive entrepreneurial ideals and the *hard* disciplinary effects of precarity on subjects. Chapter 3 examines how the neoliberal order triggers both internal psychoneurotic anxieties and external objective anxieties in individuals, as they are compelled to negotiate variously by organizing their identifications with subject/object positions.

In Part II, I describe in detail three main psychosocial symptoms of neoliberalism. Chapter 4 deals with how manic cultures of accelerated work and consumption can crowd out our consciousness of psychosocial troubles while redirecting our attention towards individual, frantic activities supported by socially-sanctioned omnipotent fantasies of triumph and control.

Chapter 5 discusses neoliberalized psychiatry, psycho-activation and wellness and how they variously activate, sedate, compel, or punish neoliberal subjects, all to the effect of responsabilizing (and sometimes punishing the individual for socially-induced distress). Chapter 6 discusses paranoid political mobilizations as the most destructive and aggressive organization, where paranoid-projective scapegoating of the more vulnerable becomes the dominant means of expressing stress and frustration with the neoliberal order, breaking potential emancipatory alliances between the precaritized while making the downtrodden suffer more for phantasized gains.

Throughout the three chapters in Part II, I demonstrate that these symptomatic, pathological formations are not held together solely by psychological forces. Institutional norms, cultural expectations, and material infrastructures also sustain and proliferate them. Besides, continuous with the earlier ‘pathological organizations,’ I suggest that these symptoms solidify in ‘wounding attachments’ that leverage our attachments to partial libidinal gains to perpetuate the havoc they wreak in our societies, psyches, and emancipatory imaginations.

In Part III, I argue that our addictions and attachments to such wounds must be mourned and weaned if emancipation is to be imaginable. Chapter 7 begins by providing an account of the neoliberal subject through the lens of the psychoanalytic theory of the superego. This is followed by a consideration of how free-associative practices – ordinarily restricted to therapy spaces – can be extended into individual experimentations in life. Chapter 8 addresses the most challenging question: how can containing spaces be reopened in a ‘proletariat public sphere’ to revive stalled emancipatory visions? Although the vision presented in the final chapters will not add up to any emancipatory blueprint, the hope is that warnings against potential pitfalls and recommendations for receptivity and containing can provide some indication of how a better future may be brought about.

1.4. Some Methodological Clarifications

Before plunging into the substance of the discussion, here are some cautionary notes on the limitations of the account. To a significant extent, I consider the account I give to occur *in*

medias res. Instead of being firmly situated in any particular theoretical tradition, I introduce and invent conceptual tools only to the extent that I consider them useful for elucidating the phenomena at hand. The approach I adopt is pragmatist. Different conceptual frameworks are incorporated into the account to illuminate the operations of the phenomenon and suggest potential emancipatory ways out.

As such, the account will sidestep many conceptual disagreements in the literature surveyed. For instance, I remain agnostic regarding Marxist debates on the relations between ‘base’ vs. ‘superstructure’ and agency. I also incorporate ideas from the early and later members of the Frankfurt School, including Adorno and Benjamin on the one hand, and Habermas, Negt, and Kluge on the other. Besides, although most psychodynamic concepts I employ are drawn from the object-relations tradition, I also draw on Freudians (Hans Loewald, Jonathan Lear), relational analysts (Jessica Benjamin and Lynne Layton), and Lacanians (Mari Ruti and Slavoj Žižek).

In substance, I avoid speculations about the early infant, including the workings of the death drive and the discussions of early fusion/‘plenum.’³⁷ I believe that social deprivation is so strong that destructive and omnipotent tendencies in neoliberal subjects are bound to arise, rendering discussions of the constitutive nature of infancy less relevant to an account of neoliberal psychopolitics. In the final chapters, I paint relatively broad-brush models of psychoanalytic cure, given the relative pointlessness of dwelling upon therapeutic controversies that have little bearing upon emancipatory *social* change.³⁸ Perhaps there is no way to resolve disputes over technique without ongoing social experimentation.

Another problem concerns ‘paranoid’ readings. Central to my diagnosis of neoliberalism are warnings against the danger of paranoid/abjective elaborations of the survivalist economy. Yet, the challenge is that critiques themselves may harbour the same paranoia it seeks to expose, as

³⁷ See for relevant discussions, Amy Allen and Mari Ruti, *Critical Theory between Klein and Lacan: A Dialogue* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), ch. 1; Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

³⁸ For differences between, say Kleinians and Winnicott, see Jan Abram and R. D. Hinshelwood, *The Clinical Paradigms of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott: Comparisons and Dialogues* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018).

critiques become scathing, intolerant, and seek only to humiliate and ‘scapegoat’ their social and theoretical opponents.³⁹ Though the worry of paranoid critique cannot be dispelled completely, I try to mitigate it with more balanced discussions. For instance, the account of paranoid currents in right-wing politics (Chapter 6) can be read alongside the criticisms of Left-wing theorizations of fanatical resistance (Chapter 8). Here, paranoia is conceptualized as a pathological organization – a pitfall that may afflict everyone. When it comes to theoretical disagreements in the text, these disagreements are primarily selected to substantiate blind spots in existing theories. In expressing disagreement, my goal is not to polemically defeat any theoretical opponent, nor do I claim that the readings I presented are authoritative readings of the thinkers in question. Readers who consider my interpretations of particular authors to be misguided are invited to ‘repair’ the narrative by translating the relevant ideas here into better theoretical terms and building a better understanding of our psychosocial situation and ways of emancipating from it.

Writing as a participant-observer of a psychosocial phenomenon in which one is deeply imbricated, I have found the task I set daunting in various ways. But, hopefully, by carefully building on the intelligence of those before me, a relatively well-integrated and accurate picture emerges. I tried to clarify as far as I could and be as factually and theoretically non-distortive as possible. Yet, insofar as not all writing is a result of conscious choices, it is likely to be limited – even paranoid – in some places.

Perhaps this Dissertation can be read in the spirit of a Winnicottian interpretation: it is written not necessarily because it must be right, but to “let the [reader] know the limits of my understanding.”⁴⁰ In Bollas’s evocative elaboration:

“interpretation is used not for its apparent accuracy, but as a kind of evocative form: because the [author] is talking, curiously the [reader] is free not to listen! But in not

³⁹ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 117.

listening, the [reader] seems intrapsychically directed towards another interpretation.”⁴¹

For apparent reasons, I have rendered ‘analyst’ as ‘author’ and ‘patient’ as ‘reader’ in the above quote. Hopefully, if something is to come out from this Dissertation, the reader’s other interpretation can become more accurate, pointing to a more hopeful view of emancipation than if no such Dissertation had ever been written.

On this note, let’s begin.

⁴¹ Christopher Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

Chapter 2. On the Neoliberal Order

To properly study the despairing present, we need to understand the complex historical trajectory that has been leading up to our present, and there is no better point to start with what is commonly referred to as the ‘neoliberal’ capitalist order we have had since the 1980s.

As I detail in this chapter, the neoliberalization of the advanced capitalist order involved a range of policies inspired by neoliberal myths of the ‘free’ market that strengthened the power of capital against the powers of labour and the regulatory forces of the state within advanced capitalist societies. These policies funnelled huge wealth towards the top 1% while gradually eroding social protections for the rest and entrenching them in precarity. Socially and culturally, the neoliberal order also instrumentalized ideals of the ‘individual’ and individual ‘responsibility’ as means of creating subjects as ‘entrepreneurial’ human capital subjected to constant pressures of (self-)improvement and value-appreciation under worsening competitive conditions.

That I have chosen to chart neoliberalism’s multiple facets in this Dissertation is not to ignore the cracks that are showing up in this order. In the literature of the recent decade, different authors have commented on the purported ‘death’ of neoliberalism, or at least its collapse into an ‘interregnum.’⁴² The financial meltdown in 2007-08 was an important watershed, as it witnessed coordinated *sovereign* interventions by capitalist states to backstop global financial markets that collapsed under the exorbitant greed and hubris of its beneficiaries, only to be followed by imposed austerity and precarization for the masses. The latter, eventually and understandably, found despair or politicized resentment against the order as the only way out.⁴³

⁴² For accounts that suggest that neoliberalism is ‘dead,’ see McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London: Verso, 2021); Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2024). For accounts that discuss how the neoliberal order is collapsing and ‘undead,’ see Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022); William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism : Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*, Theory, Culture & Society (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014); Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet - and What We Can Do About It* (London: Verso, 2022).

⁴³ On the social, economic and political logics underlying such changes, see Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism : Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*, ch. 5; “The Revenge of Sovereignty on Government? The Release

Simultaneously on the macroeconomic, political, and cultural levels, our order has departed from the optimistic promises of early neoliberal ideologues that a free, deregulated market would stimulate economic growth, bringing freedom and prosperity for all. The return of sovereignty as the visible guarantor of the capitalist order and people's politicizing backlash against the socio-political status quo would have been unimaginable to earlier neoliberal ideologues, who believed that technocratic and liberated economism was sufficient to displace calls for social justice and for anything political.

I take a mostly agnostic stance on the conceptual question of whether neoliberalism is really 'dead' or if it is living on in an evolved or 'undead' state. I agree that the earlier age of optimistic economism, globalism, and depoliticization that some consider central to the neoliberal order has collapsed. Neoliberal subjectivation, as I will show too, is becoming more conflicted and anxiety-ridden, with cynicism, defeat and resistance increasingly replacing positive identification with entrepreneurial ideals. Whatever we have now is highly unstable, making it hard to make any reasonable prognosis.

Yet, while I see the value in refusing to designate the present, post-2008 order as neoliberal, this Dissertation will continue to use 'neoliberal' as a shorthand for the order we are in, as I focus more on the psychosocial *continuities and enduring effects* of previous neoliberal socialization and institutionalization on the present. In particular, I trace how decades of neoliberal ideas and fantasies have continued to shape our cultural imaginations and psyches, to the point that *we remain woundingly attached to various aspects of neoliberal institutions and practices, despite the order's looming failure and deepening cracks*. As I will show in later chapters, one reason why our individual and collective emancipatory imaginations are barren is that they are still crowded with 'neoliberal' fantasies of individualist self-improvement, zero-sum competition, personal responsibility, manic triumph, and shameful underperformance. This unbroken psychosocial continuity needs to be given up, and hence my recommendation

of Neoliberal Politics from Economics Post-2008," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021); Streeck, *Taking Back Control?*, chs. 5–6; Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011)..

that we *mourn* not (only) the neoliberal order that is collapsing, but (also) the neoliberalism we still variously fantasize.

In the chapters that follow, I will use the term “neoliberalism” or “neoliberal order” broadly as a shorthand to refer to the economic, institutional, cultural and ideological realities in advanced capitalist countries after the 1980s. This account takes a holistic approach to the ‘neoliberal’ order. As the discussion unfolds, it will also include developments not usually designated as ‘neoliberal’ (such as developments in medicalised psychiatry and algorithmicized digital platforms) but that have functioned together with other (neoliberal) practices to defend the power of capital accumulation and paralyze emancipatory imagination and resistance.

This chapter begins with a brief section that recounts major features of neoliberal thought, structuring later institutional and structural reforms, and how neoliberal reforms began under the crisis of the post-war economic order. (2.1) After this, the ‘hard’ governmental and institutional aspects of the neoliberal remaking of the world under ideals of competition and individual ‘freedom’ will be discussed (2.2-2.3), followed by how ‘hard’ structural reforms combine with ‘softer,’ more seductive aspects of consumerist and psycho-culture to create the neoliberal subject under the model of the financialized entrepreneur. (2.4-2.5) In the concluding section (2.6), I will look briefly into how the ‘underclass’ – constructed as a moralized category – feeds into the socialization of the normatively middle-class neoliberal subject.

2.1. Precursors to the Neoliberal Order

2.1.1. Neoliberal Thought

Coined by a group of economists in the Walter Lippmann colloquium of the 1930s, ‘neoliberalism’ was first used to designate their school of economic thought that emphasized the values of market freedoms and competition.⁴⁴ Although this school of thought is far from

⁴⁴ This is by no means a comprehensive summary of neoliberal thought. As an ideological tradition, neoliberal ideas has evolved over the years across different schools (aside from the classic Freiburg and Chicago Schools, we also have Virginia, Geneva, and Austrian Schools). For more nuanced summaries of neoliberal thought, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, UK:

homogeneous, neoliberal thinkers mostly converge in their privileging of the ‘freedom’ of private individuals within ‘free’ markets, while problematizing government interventions and democratic oversight as hindrances to the former. To support this, neoliberals give both normative and economic arguments.

On the economic side, neoliberals assert that free, competitive markets *most efficiently and impersonally* allocate productive forces of society, drive rational innovation, and discover rational solutions to action coordination in ways that no agent or organization can do.⁴⁵ On the normative side, markets are seen as the best guarantors of personal freedom, because they value people’s right to choose and disallow any forms of coercion.⁴⁶ Although neoliberals value an understanding of maximal market freedom under minimal state and legal limitations, they do not consider such freedom to result in chaos or disorder. This is because such freedom, though pursued from self-interest, is still subjected to the spontaneous ordering effects of competition that, they suppose, will produce and reward the efficient solutions to social problems far better than rational planning and democratic interventions.⁴⁷ Besides, neoliberals also believe in the socialising and educational effects of the market, which helps make socialized agents conform to the morally desirable model of the rationally guided, self-responsible entrepreneur.⁴⁸

The elevation of the ‘spontaneous order’ of competitive markets as guarantor of efficiency and freedom is mirrored in the neoliberals’ demonization of political powers and the public.⁴⁹ In

Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), chs. 1–3; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2014), chs. 1–5; Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017). Slobodian and Cooper also picked up on interesting recent developments that takes neoliberal thought to far-right populist directions. See, Slobodian, *Hayek's Bastards*; Melinda Cooper, "The Alt-Right: Neoliberalism, Libertarianism and the Fascist Temptation," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021).

⁴⁵ Austro-American neoliberals such as Hayek are highly sceptical of the human ability to know enough to plan well for the economy, instead they believe that the spontaneous ordering through price signals the free market as the best mode of coordination. See Friedrich A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *The American economic review* 35 (1945).

⁴⁶ See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 40th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), ch. 1; Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), ch. 10.

⁴⁷ See Ludwig Von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1996), 724–6; Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), ch. 15.

⁴⁸ Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 106–19; Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, Lecture 9.

⁴⁹ Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, esp. chs. 2–3.

their view, any intentional interference with the markets' self-correcting and discovery processes (such as price controls, redistribution, and 'coercive' union actions) is believed to lead to inefficiency and make everyone worse off in the long run.⁵⁰ Governments, as non-market agents wielding powers of coercion, are prone to abuse their powers.⁵¹ Democracy and calls for social justice are seen as majoritarian use of coercion in pursuit of misguided ends, threatening both individual freedom and the self-sustaining market order, sending us down the path of totalitarianism.⁵²

Neoliberal ideas gained prominence under the coordinated forces of capital during the crisis that emerged in the 1970s. And when those ideas are institutionalized, the 'neoliberal' policy realities do not always match those envisaged by thinkers.⁵³ But it is obvious how neoliberal ideas have formed the solid ideological basis for upcoming neoliberal policy along three directions:

1. erode the sovereignty of states by "*encasing*" them within a global legal-economic order;⁵⁴
2. *privatize* public functions and reduce the regulatory footprint of states on markets through *deregulation*.

⁵⁰ For examples of how the arguments of inefficiency are made, see Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), chs. 18–20; Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, chs. X–XI. There is a close affinity between this argument to how neoliberals view *inequalities*. For instance, Friedman argues that much of the inequalities of their time were produced by inefficient markets. Hayek takes a more defensive sense towards inequalities, proposing that they serve as payments for the innovative to improve people's living in the long run and should not be redistributed away. Hayek's view draws upon the fantasy that in the spontaneous order of things, few who are heroically experimental (an image now projected to the rich) will create things that enrich themselves, but such innovations will in the long run be shared and benefit others. See, *ibid.*, 176; Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, ch. 3.

⁵¹ This is especially the case of Virginia School neoliberals, see, MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*.

⁵² Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, ch. 3; *Law Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. 2, chs. 9, 11. The paranoid image of totalitarianism – assimilated to any sort of control – pervades early liberals such as Hayek and von Mises. I return to this briefly in chapter 6.

⁵³ Ideal outcomes of 'trickling down' and capitalism reducing inequalities never materialized in the global north. Globally, the fruits of absolute growth skew towards the highest percentile in global income, while relative growth were centred around the 'Asian middle class' and not in poorer classes and regions. See Branko Milanović, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), ch. 1. Neoliberal ideologies and realities also differ in terms of how market competition and repressive discipline functions, and how advanced capitalist state has played a continual role in guaranteeing the liquidity of (financial) markets, suppressing public resistance, and enforcing protectionist and colonial policies world-wide to the cannibalizing effects of neoliberal reforms. For accounts of unintended consequences of neoliberal ideas, see Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, 82–87; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70–81; Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), Things 7, 13.

⁵⁴ Slobodian, *Globalists*.

3. encourage competition to *activate and discipline* agents to become self-responsible entrepreneurs.⁵⁵

2.1.2. The Post-war Social State and its Crisis

For the first few decades since its formulation, a world system shaped by neoliberal radicals remained imaginary because the social orders of advanced capitalist countries in the post-war decades were ‘regulated’ capitalist democracies, where the labour in advanced capitalist states had a strong voice in shaping class dynamics in the post-war decades. State regulations of industries, macroeconomic policies catering to the Keynesian ideal of full employment and crisis avoidance, strong union presence, and elaborate systems of welfare catered to the needs of both capital and workers, providing a stable basis for strong and stable economic growth.⁵⁶ Looking back, the state-managed capitalist system performed remarkably well, as it produced high rates of GDP growth, corporate profits, low unemployment rates, and decreased poverty, while effectively preventing economic crises for the three post-war decades.⁵⁷ Such success for both capital and labour alike had led commentators to refer to this as a successful case of class compromise and the “golden age” of post-war capitalism.⁵⁸

The golden age persisted until a series of crises began to take shape towards the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, characterized by stagflation (i.e., both unemployment and inflation) and a decline in corporate profitability, partly caused by increasing pressure from workers and the emergence of new social movements. Coupled with the energy crisis, the 70s

⁵⁵ The more coercive *disciplinary* effects of free markets is not often explicit in neoliberal writings, but consider Hayek’s remarks: “Competition is as much a method for breeding certain types of mind as anything else: the very cast of thinking of the great entrepreneurs would not exist but for the environment in which they developed their gifts. [...] Competition is, after all, always a process in which a small number makes it necessary for larger numbers to do what they do not like, be it to work harder, to change habits, or to devote a degree of attention, continuous application, or regularity to their work which without competition would not be needed.” Hayek, *Law Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. 3, 76–77.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2014), 56–61.

⁵⁷ David M. Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 45–62.

⁵⁸ Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*; Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*. As others remarked, it was a ‘golden age’ only for the capitalist core, as unequal core-peripheral relations of extraction and expropriation remains in the post war decades. See, Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*; George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison, *Invisible Doctrine: The Secret History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Crown, 2024), ch. 8.

witnessed the rise of structural problems that Keynesian macroeconomic policy failed to tackle.⁵⁹ In the face of the failure of Keynesianism, advanced capitalist states began, after a decade of complex experimentation, to move towards neoliberal ideas in the 1980s. This created the neoliberal state that increasingly takes as its task the facilitation of unfettered global competition and capital flows, the *deregulation* of the market, the rolling back of welfare-state provisions under the banner of deficit reduction, and the crushing of resistance from labour and the public.

2.2. Hard Neoliberalism – Structural Changes

The shift from post-war regulated capitalism into neoliberal capitalism, characterized by the unfettered flow of capital and thorough-going redefinition of the world as a vast market for competition, results from the complex interactions of structural-economic factors and socio-political contingencies. However, as structural theorists of neoliberalism argue, the *central* challenge of the 1970s that propels the world towards neoliberalism is the crisis of “capital accumulation” – the threat felt by the capitalist classes in their ability to extract profit when economic growth slowed.⁶⁰ Thus, the neoliberal turn is in no small part pioneered and maintained by the coordinated (political) action of large capital and the ruling class to secure continued conditions for capitalist accumulation, drawing upon neoliberal thought surveyed above. As a response to the accumulation crisis, a series of institutional changes along the lines of globalization, privatization, and deregulation have functioned to defend profit accumulation.

On the international level, the US initiatives to foster multilateral trade treaties and agreements, as well as the establishment of global financial institutions, enable the unhindered flow of capital across state borders, while extending the influence of large private financial actors over

⁵⁹ Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 63–67.

⁶⁰ For structural explanation of the neoliberal turn, see: *ibid.*; Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2012), 133f; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), ch. 6.

individual state policies.⁶¹ Such institutions, along with international judicial apparatuses, enforce individual states' responsibilities to secure the return to capital owners and compel fiscal order during crisis, often to the detriment of states in acting for the interests of the democratic citizenry.⁶²

On the state level, motivated by the beliefs that markets are more efficient providers of services, states began to reduce their scope by cutting their 'bureaucratic inefficiencies' and provide greater scope for the market through tax cuts, privatisations, and deregulations. Privatization involves, in some cases, selling public services to private owners. In other cases, private-public partnerships are in place where the government contracts out public services. Both allowed private actors to profit from hitherto public services.⁶³

Deregulation occurs with states playing a reduced role in areas from consumer and environmental protection, telecommunications, to antitrust enforcement, campaign financing, banking, and finance. Instead of state control, neoliberal administrators believe that regulatory functions can be delegated to markets, relayed through the supposed efficiency of private lawsuits, or through disciplinary effects of the market on bad market actors.⁶⁴ The deregulation of vital state functions, especially in campaign financing, telecommunications, and the financial industry, proves extremely significant during the neoliberal decades, as it ensures the penetration of vested capital interests and profit opportunities into electoral politics, media ecologies, and the supply of money/credit.

⁶¹ Gindin and Panitch, *Making of Global Capitalism*, chs. 8–9.

⁶² Monbiot and Hutchison, *Invisible Doctrine*, ch. 6; Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System* (London: Verso, 2016), 52–56, ch. 4.

⁶³ Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 22. As commentators remarked, privatization often failed improve the quality and efficiency of public-services because the many divergences between private owner's goals of profit maximization (which often involves *looking marketable and efficient* in quantifiable metrics) and values endogenous to the services in question. We will discuss this further in 2.4. For the paradoxical nature of rent extraction in privatized public services, see Monbiot and Hutchison, *Invisible Doctrine*, 35–37.

⁶⁴ Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 16–21. For details of the US deregulation of financial markets and telecommunications, see Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 152–78. For discussions of lax regulations on capitalist interventions in electoral politics, see Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Most relevant to the average citizen, perhaps, are shifts in the labour market and the rolling back of state welfare provisions. Early in the 1980s, neoliberal governments showed themselves willing to crush union power with Thatcher's and Reagan's response to unions and strikes. Aside from legislation and deregulatory efforts chipping away at protections on labour, sectoral shifts in the economy from manufacturing to the expanding service sector mean that a series of less secure, less unionized, and even precarious forms of employment make up a bigger proportion of the economy.⁶⁵ At the same time, globalization and the increased mobility of capital within and beyond national borders subject local firms and workers to competition, putting downward pressure on their bargaining powers.⁶⁶ Last but not least, neoliberal macroeconomic policies assuming 'natural rates of unemployment' and austerity responses to crisis by governments also prove essential in curbing worker resistance.⁶⁷

On the side of welfare, a great deal of welfare-functions of the old Keynesian state are gradually financialized, privatized, and responsibilized into matters of individual choice in private insurance and credit markets. This is observed as investment in private pension funds increasingly supplements the role of "overburdened public pension systems"⁶⁸, and access to quality healthcare depends increasingly on enrolment in private insurance under the responsibility of individuals and their employers in the context of underfunded public healthcare.⁶⁹ Most significantly, is how governments embraced what Colin Crouch calls 'privatised Keynesianism,' such that the meeting of traditional welfare needs such as housing

⁶⁵ Colin Crouch, *Will the Gig Economy Prevail?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), ch. 2; Kim Moody, "The Neoliberal Remaking of the Working Class," in *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism*, ed. Damien Cahill, et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018). According to Colin Crouch, the chipping away of workers' rights has been heterogeneous across the labour market, with some being benefited while others having minimal protections.

⁶⁶ Gregory Albo, Sam Gindin, and Leo Panitch, *In and out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives* (Oakland, Calif.: PM Press, 2010), 25–263; Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End*, 24–27; Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 104–05.

⁶⁷ Albo, Gindin, and Panitch, *In and out of Crisis*, 93; Clara E. Mattei, *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), ch. 10.

⁶⁸ Armin Schäfer and Wolfgang Streeck, "Introduction," in *Politics in the Age of Austerity*, ed. Wolfgang Streeck and Armin Schäfer (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 22. For discussions of the privatizing and financializing effects of American defined-contribution pensions under 401(k), see Jacob S Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 5.

⁶⁹ Monbiot and Hutchison, *Invisible Doctrine*, 72–83. The issue with affordable healthcare under market-based insurance systems is especially pronounced in the US, see Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*, ch. 6.

and education are less and less provided by the governments (which are short on funds upon losing much tax revenue), but by deregulating financial markets and allowing households to take up private debt at their own risks, and at the benefit of profit and opportunities for speculation for financiers.⁷⁰

For welfare functions for people of absolute need, welfare agencies are often also partly outsourced. Under the banner of preventing welfare fraud and discouraging ‘welfare-dependency’ (problems demonised under neoliberal ideologies)⁷¹, the provision of benefits under neoliberal welfare regimes frequently comes with disciplinarity and conditionality demanding strict compliance with the terms of the neoliberal welfare contract. For instance, disability benefits often come with strict audits to demonstrate objective need, such as tight ‘Work Capability Assessments’ in the UK,⁷² while unemployment and single-parent benefits are temporary, and disbursed with requirements of (uncompensated) work and active participation in psychological and vocational programs that retrain individuals for their ‘employability’ in the market.⁷³ Informed by the neoliberal stigma of poverty as shameful dependency and individual failures,⁷⁴ the tight discipline imposed upon welfare recipients has rendered welfare less an institution for social support than the disciplinary enforcement of market norms. As Sanford Schram puts it: neoliberal welfare aims at “not so much assistance as discipline [...] focused on getting people to internalize market logic and accept personal responsibility for the need to find whatever means [...] to get by in the changing economy.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, ch. 5. See also related discussions in Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 210–17.

⁷¹ See Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 163–68.

⁷² In extreme cases, strict audits of working capability of disability benefit claimants are associated with suicides. China Mills and John Pring, "Weaponising Time in the War on Welfare: Slow Violence and Deaths of Disabled People within the UK's Social Security System," *Critical Social Policy* 44, no. 1 (2024).

⁷³ See, James Davies, *Sedated: How Modern Capitalism Created Our Mental Health Crisis* (Atlantic Books, 2021), ch. 5; Sanford F. Schram, "Neoliberalizing the Welfare State: Marketizing Social Policy/Disciplining Clients," in *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism*, ed. Damien Cahill, et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018).

⁷⁴ See Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 163–68; Loïc Wacquant, *The Invention of the "Underclass": A Study in the Politics of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022); China Mills, "'Dead People Don't Claim': A Psychopolitical Autopsy of UK Austerity Suicides," *Critical social policy* 38, no. 2 (2018).

⁷⁵ Schram, "Neoliberalizing the Welfare State: Marketizing Social Policy/Disciplining Clients," 313.

2.2.1. Precarizing Effects of Structural Reforms

According to the promises of neoliberal economic thought, deregulation should unleash the virtues of the market: good investments should come, stability should arise, and wealth should ‘trickle down’ to everyone, leading to the realization of individual freedom.⁷⁶ But what neoliberal reforms arguably did best was to restore profit rates and deliver tax cuts for the rich.⁷⁷ Reforms replaced the *imperium* of the state with the *dominium* of a tiny oligarchic class, producing a crisis-prone, precarizing economy that suffocates the masses and a state incapable of reigning in the economy’s devastating effects.

During the neoliberal decades, wages in advanced capitalist economies have remained largely stagnant, despite income and accumulated wealth from capital ownership reaching unprecedented levels.⁷⁸ At the same time, intergenerational mobility markedly declined.⁷⁹

Corresponding to the staggering rise of inequalities are the entrenchment of ever-widening segments of the population to *objective risks and insecurities*. Decades into neoliberal reforms, it seems more accurate to characterize the effects of neoliberal structural reforms as *precarizing*, rather than freedom-enabling for the bottom 99%. Most notably, under privatised Keynesianism, households are exposed to market pressures through indebtedness, which imposes demands on maintaining financial liquidity across long periods.⁸⁰ Besides, risk exposure comes from insecure employment caused by structural shifts in the labour market, and insecurities associated with childcare, pensions, and healthcare produced by welfare cuts

⁷⁶ Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 86–87. ‘Trickle-down’ is a common argument deployed by supply-side economists, which later is referred to as ‘voodoo economics.’ But such ideas is well present in neoliberal thinkers such as Hayek and Friedman, notably in their attacks on social welfare and union power. (See Section 2.1) On how trickle-down failed to work when left to the market, see Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism*, 142–47.

⁷⁷ Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 87–89.

⁷⁸ For summaries of relevant statistics, see: Milanović, *Global Inequality*; Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, ch. 4; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

⁷⁹ Branko Milanović, *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System That Rules the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 40–42. For specific trends in America, including urban-rural discrepancies, see also Raj Chetty et al., “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940,” *Science* 356, no. 6336 (2017).

⁸⁰ Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End*, 84–85; Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 109–12. See also, M. Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series ; 13. (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2012).

and privatization.⁸¹ Last but not least, as social insurance has been privatized and taken in highly financialized forms, people become more vulnerable to endogenous risks that materialize in systemic financial bubbles and crises during neoliberalism.⁸² As is brutally clear by the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007-8, states have proven unwilling to help individuals to insure against financial risks in the face of crisis. Even economically solvent individuals are vulnerable to systemic risks under the deregulated global financial system, but states are more on the side of banks that are ‘too big to fail,’ not precarized individuals who are ‘too small to protect.’⁸³

Of course, the effects of neoliberal precarization are uneven. Not everyone is as exposed as others, and an important predictor of exposure is *class*. Inequality means that the capitalists reap risks as opportunities for wealth appreciation, the upper echelons of the managerial class earn super-salaries and bonuses,⁸⁴ while the so-called ‘underclasses’ rot in the ‘waste pile’ under social stigma, destitution, struggling to survive under increasingly punitive carceral and welfare regimes.⁸⁵ Beyond the extremes, the neoliberal economy has inherited historical divisions between the middle class and working class, with the latter first experiencing the burdens of neoliberal precarity.⁸⁶ Yet, the material security of the former has also gradually been eroded. Taking the US as an example, by the 2000s, precarity of the middle classes became apparent.⁸⁷ The post-GFC economy witnesses more apparent changes, as the income of members of the ‘elite’ amongst elites – the top 0.1% - pulls away from the rest, strong

⁸¹ Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*. For current and projected risks of labour under the AI economy, see, Crouch, *Will the Gig Economy Prevail*; Phil Jones, *Work without the Worker: Labour in the Age of Platform Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2021).

⁸² Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 105–08; Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism*, Thing 6.

⁸³ For “too small to protect,” see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 71–72.

⁸⁴ See, Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, ch. 9.

⁸⁵ Zygmunt Bauman made a powerful analogy of the upward redistributive tendency of capitalism as a ‘waste-disposal’ industry that make waste to increasing segments of the population. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). On prosperity of urban elites contrasted with racialized ‘underclasses’ see Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 184–88; Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Duke university Press, 2009).

⁸⁶ For an account of precarizing trends of afflicting the US working-class, see Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁸⁷ Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*.

segregations begin to form within professional classes,⁸⁸ while employment precarity seeps into segments of professionals (most notably among creative and education industries). As of 2025, the college-employability premium for employment has reportedly been erased for men in the US.⁸⁹ Such trends drive the point that capital “invariably” leaves *all* labour behind, as the middle classes now begin to suffer neoliberal cannibalization that previously mostly targeted their poorer counterparts.⁹⁰ This also gives some *objective basis for ‘fear of falling’*, first conceptualized by Barbara Ehrenreich in the 1980s,⁹¹ as Wolfgang Streeck writes in 2021:

“For many of those dependent on the sale of their labour power, [neoliberalization] meant that more and more effort was required to preserve what they already had gained[...] Progress disappeared into a distant future or became individualised[...] Now, even subsistent withdrawal into a traditionalist, static mode of life required greater exertion, including a watchful readiness to adapt oneself obsequiously to constantly and unforeseeably changing markets and competitive conditions, at a high risk of failure and with no guarantee of a good end.”⁹²

Hayek’s vision of competition coercing those who prefer to live modest lives materialized, though the prospects of progress are pessimistic. The ethos of the age is reflected now in a generalized sense of decline that the next generation will be worse off.⁹³

Lastly, the political power of classes other than multinational capital has waned during the neoliberal decades. As Crouch describes, by the 2000s, working-class and lower-middle-class interests were hardly represented in party politics.⁹⁴ Studies in the US confirm that policy shifts during the neoliberal decades track elite and business interests rather than the general public, and still less the lower-income classes.⁹⁵ This is probably structurally attributable to the

⁸⁸ Julius Krein, “The Real Class War,” *American Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2019). Consider also recent reports on *Financial Times*, which indicated that middle-class income lags behind growth in both elite classes and lower-income classes, leading to a narrowing gap with lower classes. Tej Parikh, “The Source of Middle Class Anxiety,” *Financial Times*, 2 February 2025.

⁸⁹ John Burn-Murdoch, “Rising Graduate Joblessness Is Mainly Affecting Men. Will That Last?,” *ibid.*, 18 July.

⁹⁰ Krein, “The Real Class War.”; Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, “Death of a Yuppie Dream,” *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* (2013).

⁹¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (Hachette UK, 1989).

⁹² Streeck, *Taking Back Control?*, 119.

⁹³ Richard Wike et al., “Economic Inequality Seen as Major Challenge around the World,” (Pew Research Centre, 2025).

⁹⁴ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2004), 53–60.

⁹⁵ See the studies by Martin Gilens: Martin Gilens and Benjamin I Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on politics* 12, no. 3 (2014); Martin Gilens, “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 5 (2005).

hollowing out of state sovereignty through fiscal consolidation pressures under public debt,⁹⁶ the centrist turn of left and right parties towards neoliberal globalism at the turn of the century,⁹⁷ reduced union organization and influence, and continued intrusion of capitalist interest through lobbying and media manipulation under lax regulatory policies.⁹⁸ This, under the *pathos* of hopeless desperation post-2008, led to the explosion of ‘populist’ energies, which will be explored in Chapter 6.

2.3. Hard Neoliberalism – Institutional Changes

Neoliberal forces did not stop at macro-socio-economic policies, as we shall see in this section, neoliberal norms of market competition have restructured institutions from within.

2.3.1. Shifting Workplace Cultures

One significant motor of the neoliberal shift in institutional settings and cultures begins within the organization of capitalist firms themselves. Tracing this shift, commentators note how corporations are transformed from centralised, hierarchical bureaucracies into *destabilised, flexible firms* in the neoliberal era.⁹⁹

Beginning around the 1930s and reaching heights in the post-war decades, the most exemplary organizational form of capitalist enterprises is Fordist – big, hierarchically organized firms with mega factories and long production lines.¹⁰⁰ At the level of management, these firms recruit “academically qualified managerial staff” not only to oversee and manage their workforce from above, but also to adopt and design long-term plans for the company. In such firms, workers occupy a defined role in the production process. Despite the monotony of working under

⁹⁶ Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End*, esp. ch. 4.

⁹⁷ *Taking Back Control?*, 131–34; Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, ch. 9.

⁹⁸ *Winner-Take-All Politics*, chs. 4–6; Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, ch. 2.

⁹⁹ See, most importantly, Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 386–89; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ Joshua Benjamin Freeman, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

hierarchical bureaucracies, these firms' scale and long-term planning accord workers security, as long-term employment is common and career paths are well-defined.¹⁰¹

Much had changed by the 1970s, as capitalist firms now faced new challenges. Notable amongst the shift is pressure from labour, as decades of post-war class compromise bred newer generations of labour that “rejected both the dreariness of their jobs and the pace of work” and searched for employment opportunities that better served as a mode of self-discovery and self-realization.¹⁰² Equally important is how firms, under gradual financialization, are increasingly pressured by impatient shareholders chasing capital efficiency and quick gains in share valuations.¹⁰³ These pressures gave rise to ‘flexible’ firms that adopt neoliberal ideologies of competition, leveraging their disciplinary effects on labour and their attractiveness to shareholders. Flexible firms eschew previous values of stability and long-term planning.

Under financial pressures, capitalist firms chasing higher company valuations now aim to ‘lean’ – i.e. cutting down on unnecessary inventories and workforce, externalizing less profitable ones through subcontracting and worker casualization, retaining only the most profitable parts within their organization. Within flexibilized firms, employment is less stable, as most workers can be replaced when they are no longer needed in the production cycle or no longer have the skillset required for fast-evolving market demands.¹⁰⁴ The leaning of firms plays into the earlier-discussed structural phenomenon of segregation of workers that aligns with social classes: on the one extreme are ‘elite’ classes of high-value producing members expected to demonstrate skill, adaptability, competitiveness, and innovativeness; on the other are lower-skilled, lower-productivity workers subjected to forms of disposable employment such as ‘zero-hour’ contracts, temporary work, and “bogus self-employment.” In the middle are people struggling to avoid falling by mimicking the virtues of the top.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 18–19.

¹⁰² Giddin and Panitch, *Making of Global Capitalism*, 135; Axel Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization: Paradoxes of Individualization," in *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 158–61.

¹⁰³ On effects of financialization on firms, see Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism*, Thing 2.

¹⁰⁴ Sennett, *Culture of the New Capitalism*.

¹⁰⁵ For the new segregation of labour, see *ibid.*, 72–130; Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 3–6. On characterization of ideals of the elite worker, see, Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New*

Especially within highly valued firms, planning is reoriented towards short-term policies aimed at boosting investor confidence.¹⁰⁶ To help firms live up to the whimsical changes to investment climate and trends in fashion, new management sciences reject hierarchical organizations and project more flattened, “networked” organizational design where a control centre oversees networks of task-oriented teams and commodity chains of subcontracted firms.¹⁰⁷ In such a design, in-house teams are project-oriented, relatively autonomous task units that can be adaptively assembled according to the firm’s needs. Control centres oversee giant networks of (in-house and outsourced) teams by imposing *outcome-based metrics*. Replacing Fordist bureaucracy, central management does not dictate the terms of the productive process (for this stifles innovation and self-motivation), but to surveil and audit the performance of subunits, rewarding efficient ones, while retraining, restructuring, or shedding underperforming ones.¹⁰⁸

Taking the neoliberal imaginary of competition as a panacea, flexible firms now competitively pitch project teams against one another, incentivizing innovations and productivity increases as teams compete to meet heightening performance targets.¹⁰⁹ The goal is to motivate workers and teams in competitive settings to better align themselves with the company’s evolving vision, to continually work on self-improvement, and to assume responsibility for reforming themselves when current methods fall short.¹¹⁰

Although such an ideal of self-motivation is sometimes considered to operate predominantly through soft seduction of the worker,¹¹¹ it is essential to note that intra-firm competition *imposes* responsibility for one’s performance on teams and their members *as the new*

Capitalism (New York: Norton, 1998), 61–63. For precarious workers, see Moody, “The Neoliberal Remaking of the Working Class.”; Crouch, *Will the Gig Economy Prevail?*

¹⁰⁶ Sennett, *Corrosion of Character*, 22–23.

¹⁰⁷ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, ch. 1. See also, Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 122–23.

¹⁰⁸ Sennett, *Culture of the New Capitalism*, 50–55; Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 80–81.

¹⁰⁹ Sennett, *Culture of the New Capitalism*, 52–54. There are similar shifts in supply chains, where apex retailers use competition to pressure subcontracted firms to increase productive and reduce their costs. See, Richard Appelbaum and Nelson Lichtenstein, “A New World of Retail Supremacy: Supply Chains and Workers’ Chains in the Age of Wal-Mart,” *International labor and working class history* 70, no. 1 (2006).

¹¹⁰ Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 259–64; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 131–34.

¹¹¹ See e.g. Byung-chul Han’s idea of “auto-exploitation” as beyond disciplinary powers. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8–11; *Psychopolitics*, chs. 1–5.

*imperative of survival within the firm and in the precarizing economy.*¹¹² Backed by threats of shameful retraining and unemployment, disciplinary audits, performance appraisals, and benchmarking practices of the central administration can generate even institutional and psychic pressure on the individual that exceeds Fordist organizations, due to the increased responsibility on individuals coupled with the system's heightened demandingness and the extent of surveillance involved.¹¹³

2.3.2. Neoliberal Colonization of the Public

The neoliberal remaking of corporations and supply chains is only one part of the neoliberal remaking of the world. Under various government initiatives, neoliberal institutional culture has also reached public institutions, from regulatory bodies and funding agencies to providers of education, medical care, and other public services. The intrusion of neoliberal culture into various domains is traceable, in part, to a fundamental shift in politics and jurisprudence, as the realm of political values (e.g. that of social justice and freedom) is increasingly recast in economized discourses of capital (with emphasis, for example, how such values contribute to efficiency, investor confidence, and competitive positioning in global markets).¹¹⁴ More directly is how elected officials become committed to (illusory) ideas that the performance of public institutions will be improved if they mimic the organizational forms of private enterprises.¹¹⁵ Through a collection of policy decisions of neoliberal governments referred to as “New Public Management,” “renewal of public service,” and the “Third Way”, initiatives

¹¹² Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 262–63.

¹¹³ See Paul Hoggett, "Shame and Performativity: Thoughts on the Psychology of Neoliberalism," *Psychoanalysis, culture & society* 22, no. 4 (2017); Sennett, *Corrosion of Character*, ch. 7.

¹¹⁴ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, esp. chs. 4–5. Echoing the case for private companies, there is also an important economic determinant to this phenomenon – that is the looming dangers of fiscal crises under sustained budget deficits, which pressures states themselves to fiscal consolidation: reducing the burden on the budget by privatization and outsourcing of public services, while attempting to increase the budget-efficiency of existing services. Streeck, *Buying Time; How Will Capitalism End*.

¹¹⁵ This is most apparent from observing how ‘left’ parties in the US and UK in the late 90s converged with their right-wing counterparts in glorifying neoliberal ideals in the form of the globalist “Third Way” and the “Washington Consensus.” See, Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch. 2; Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, ch. 5; Streeck, *Taking Back Control?*, 131–34.

began in the 80-90s to devolve various public functions to private and semi-private organizations while adopting new managerial practices in public administration.¹¹⁶

In the name of increasing administrative efficiency and accountability, Governments actively promote competition among public and private service providers, as well as within public organizations, to encourage the delivery of ‘better’ and more ‘efficient’ services, measured according to citizens’ perspectives as consumers and clients. Now, public servants and subcontracted public-service employees are similarly subject to the pressures of performance-based audits and metrics such as profitability, clientele satisfaction, and quantifiable efficiency.¹¹⁷ This generalizes cultures of competition across the social fabric, contributing to the penetration of neoliberal values and ideals into various life contexts, generating deep socializing effects on individuals.

As commentators have observed, neoliberalization of institutions can ‘demoralize.’¹¹⁸ This occurs when quantifiable outcome metrics enforced by administrators displace unmeasurable goods (and people’s commitment to them) endogenous to good practice, for where profit is a quantifiable end for private enterprises, many ends in *public services* are unquantifiable.¹¹⁹ Yet, under neoliberal performance cultures, public services are subject to similarly quantified requirements by governing bodies. This has distorting effects on such practices. For instance, emphasis on ‘impact’ and ‘prestige’ inclines researchers to pursue ‘hot’ topics and follow norms for ‘quality’ research within their discipline,¹²⁰ the striving for exam and placement

¹¹⁶ “Competition, downsizing, outsourcing, audits, regulation by specialist bodies, the individualization of remuneration, staff flexibility, decentralization of profit centres, performance indicators and benchmarking – these represent so many tools which zealous administrators and political policy-makers in want of legitimacy were to import and spread in the public sector, in the name of adapting the state to ‘market realities and globalization’.” Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 239.

¹¹⁷ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

¹¹⁸ Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 249–52.

¹¹⁹ Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 84–89. Here, Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of internal and external goods in ethical practices are relevant. For MacIntyre, practices cannot be sustained without institutional support and the pursuit of ‘external goods’ (such as money, success, and honour), yet, what defines the ethical nature of practices are good *internal* to practices that can only be grasped by those within. What neoliberal reforms do is to heighten institutional requirements for external goods so much that there remains little room for ethical practices and the pursuit of internal goods. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), ch. 14.

¹²⁰ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, ch. 6.

performance displaces critical and ethical ideals from education,¹²¹ metrics of measurable efficiency and surveyed client satisfaction engulf person-centred values in healthcare.¹²² At its worst, public services become dominated by ‘target cultures’ and PR, where metricized ‘performance’ deemed valuable by administrative bodies is optimized shamelessly without regard to validity in the hands of compliant institutional actors by fraud and gaming numbers, displacing ethical values of practices and those who care.¹²³

Perhaps more implicit under institutional pressures is the suggestive effects of institutionalized regimes of anxiety. The pursuit of accountability and performance under audit cultures can induce great anxiety amongst providers of care and education. The worries of not meeting targets and being held blamefully accountable for failures can produce self-protective, hardening effects on practitioners, stifling experimentation and receptivity to one’s objects (now reduced to the client role).¹²⁴ This not only makes clients feel alienated and depersonalized within systems. In spaces of education and familial socialization, the anxieties of adults may become the suggestion to neonates that failures are abject and compliance with system norms is mandatory.¹²⁵ The transmission of punitive anxieties from institutions to individual neonates – though never mechanical as I shall argue – may be the strongest murderer of our fantasy spaces.¹²⁶

2.4. Neoliberal Culture and the *Normative* Neoliberal Subject

The aim of emphasizing the coerciveness and repressiveness of the neoliberal remaking of social institutions is not to show that it *only occurs in repressive and precarizing ways*. Indeed,

¹²¹ Paul Verhaeghe, *What About Me?: The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle (London: Scribe Publications, 2014); Davies, *Sedated.*, ch. 6. Brown, *Undoing the Demos.*, ch. 6.

¹²² See Rosemary Rizq, "Perversion, Neoliberalism and Therapy: The Audit Culture in Mental Health Services," (Springer, 2014); Davies, *Sedated.*, ch. 4.

¹²³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2022).

¹²⁴ Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020), ch. 7.

¹²⁵ For clinical examples exposing where parental anxieties of failure are transmitted from parents to children, see Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, chs. 10, 14.

¹²⁶ It is interesting therefore to read part of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, which refocuses the Oedipal situation from infantile desire to parental *paranoia*. In this account, “Oedipal applications [...] depend on the determinations of the subjugated group as an aggregate of departure and on their libidinal investment (from the age of thirteen I’ve worked hard, rising on the social ladder, getting promotions, being a part of the exploiters). (125) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Paperback ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1972]), esp. ch. 2.

a strong argument for the insufficiency of class-based and structural accounts of neoliberalism is that, while they well account for neoliberalism's repressive beginnings,¹²⁷ they fail to explain the later hegemonic stability of the neoliberal order for more than two decades.¹²⁸ To explain how neoliberalism became *hegemonic*, we must account for how neoliberal ideas and institutions infiltrated subjectivity, transforming individuals into subjects with desires and self-understandings that align with the values of the neoliberal order. This requires a venture into neoliberalism's cultural remaking of subjects under the normative model of 'responsible entrepreneurs.'

But before we study neoliberalism's cultural side, it should be emphasized that cultural understanding should not replace structural understanding as some cultural commentators imply.¹²⁹ Whether people are successfully subjectivated as the normative neoliberal subject, precarity remains the 'hard' material basis determining the lives of the masses and their life options. Indeed, as I will argue, neoliberal socialization cannot be understood without reference to how maintaining the class power of oligarchs involved the repression of the neoliberal 'underclasses' and how this repression plays into the 'fears of falling' of middle and working classes. This 'hard' face of neoliberalization is proving ever more prominent in post-GFC and post-pandemic years as the neoliberal economic order faces deepening structural, financial, and legitimization crises. The 'hard' and the 'soft' dimensions of neoliberalism complement each other to create the neoliberal subject.

How can we best account for neoliberal subjectivation that brings together the economic structure and culture?

¹²⁷ The most notable instances are not in the global North but in Latin America and Africa – but the iron-handed approach towards labour in the early 1980s in UK and the US are also examples of the neoliberal state's willingness to use repressive means to crush opposition. See, Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007).

¹²⁸ 'Hegemony' should be understood in the Gramscian sense, as the project where interests of a particular class are universalized through 'intellectual' and 'moral' means to curb resistance of subordinated classes. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 1st ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 181–82.

¹²⁹ One remarkable example is Byung-chul Han, who reduced neoliberal subjectivation to a matter of "auto-exploitation" – subjects so activated to work on themselves, ridding the need for continued social repression by the 'Other.' See Han, *The Burnout Society*; *Psychopolitics*.

In his 1978-79 *Lectures on Biopolitics*, Foucault outlined how a new form of ‘political rationality’ and ‘governmentality’ was emerging as he speaks, where – in line with the projection of neoliberal thinkers – society is increasingly remodelled as a competitive market and individuals are shaped and expected to behave as ‘human capital’ and free ‘entrepreneurs of the self.’¹³⁰ Extending this account to encompass trends of *financialization*, Wendy Brown and Michel Feher describe how, like firms under neoliberal socio-economic realities, all human decisions (including lifestyle choices) are increasingly configured as investments in human capital, seeking returns not only in terms of income, but (short-term) appreciation of one’s “portfolio value” in the human capital market.¹³¹ Ideals of ‘freedom of choice’ so much championed by neoliberals are narrowed into ‘responsible’ (and ‘responsibilized’) conduct of agents in pursuit of survival through maintaining and elevating one’s financial standing across all aspects of life.¹³² She describes the operation of neoliberal governmentality thusly:

“[B]oth persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that *maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value*, and both persons and states do so through practices of *entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors*. Any regime pursuing another course faces fiscal crises, downgraded credit, currency or bond ratings, and lost legitimacy at the least, bankruptcy and dissolution at the extreme. Likewise, any individual who veers into other pursuits risks impoverishment and a loss of esteem and creditworthiness at the least, survival at the extreme.”¹³³

The normative model of neoliberal subjects expects subjects to demonstrate ‘*entrepreneurial virtues of responsibility, self-motivation, adaptability, and willingness to work on oneself to adapt to the requirements of one’s financialized social environment. These virtues, supposedly,*

¹³⁰ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, Lecture 9.

¹³¹ The significant difference here between non-financialized and financialized markets is that ‘valuations’ in the latter is less and less dependent upon intrinsic qualities (skills, virtues) of agents/products in question, and more dependent on trends in the financialized market, which is shaped by cultures of audit and PR image-production. This will be argued in coming sections. See, Michel Feher, “Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital,” *Public culture* 21, no. 1 (2009); Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33–45, 70–72.

¹³² “No capital, save a suicidal one, can freely choose its activities and life course or be indifferent to the innovations of its competitors or parameters of success in a world of scarcity and inequality.” *Undoing the Demos*, 41–42. This is already prefigured in Hayek, who considers competition and freedom not so much as an intrinsic goods, but for their effects on holding people “responsible for both the success and failure of their endeavours,” and in forcing the ‘idle’ to adopt more ‘rational,’ ‘socially productive’ courses of life. See Hayek, *Law Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. 3, 75–77; *The Constitution of Liberty*, 76.

¹³³ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 22, emphasis added.

*enable agents to deliver optimal performance and appreciate the financial value of themselves and their organizations, both of which have become essential requirements for survival under intensified market competition.*¹³⁴

The connection of disciplinary forces of the market and its social effects on individuals takes place through the concept of individual ‘responsibility’ for one’s ‘freedom.’ Most importantly, the discourse of responsibility deflects political concerns surrounding institutional and social design onto the realm of individual choice.¹³⁵ This, in turn, allows institutions to impose normative requirements of the social order *by evoking the language of responsibility*, demanding that agents make ‘good’ use of their freedom and take responsibility in meeting normative demands from institutions and the market.¹³⁶ Furthermore, it also allows neoliberal societies to blame failures of social policy (such as precarity, low social mobility) on individuals for their ‘failures in responsible self-investment.’ This pervades increasing areas of life from economic spheres to education and mental health, and partly explains how neoliberalism sustains its hegemonic hold – by delegitimizing discussions of better social arrangements and keeping people preoccupied with individual demands to innovate and self-invest.¹³⁷

2.5. ‘Soft’ Neoliberalism

We have seen examples of such responsibilization. As workplaces are remade according to the logic of networked organization, responsibility for innovation and increased productivity is devolved from administrative bureaucracies to teams and individuals under competitive conditions. Workers, instead of just following orders, are now increasingly expected to carry

¹³⁴ For related accounts, see Jason Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity," *Foucault studies* (2009); Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, ch. 9.

¹³⁵ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, esp. ch. III.

¹³⁶ Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization."

¹³⁷ Various aspects of responsibilization will be investigated in subsequent chapters. It is remarkable how powerful the psychopolitics of responsibilization is in depoliticizing precarization. An example is how, despite not couched in economic terms, working-class subjects turn their plight and misery into moralized talks self-help and self-responsibility under what Jennifer Silva calls “individual pain management.” See Jennifer M Silva, *We’re Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

the burden of innovating and optimising their performance. Indeed, especially in professional jobs, demonstrating one's *willingness to self-responsibly innovate* has become a normalized requirement of one's employability. What we described as the dissemination of neoliberal organisational forms across the social fabric becomes the basis for the generalization of quasi-economistic expectations of value appreciation, metric-based evaluations, and responsible self-investments "to every dimension of human life."¹³⁸

The Foucaultian picture of the normative neoliberal subject offers a good starting point for conceptualizing neoliberal subjects, but it leaves an important question open. If the neoliberal subject is *expected* and *exhorted* by circumstances to be the self-responsible "entrepreneur of himself," do they experience such expectations *as external compulsion* or with a degree of willingness and self-motivation? Does the financialized entrepreneur's "*is* and *ought*"¹³⁹ turn into their "wanting-to-become"?

In their study of the management discourses of the 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello argued that the organization of work in the form of networked teams is not only intended to improve productivity by tightening control, but also to cultivate a sense of "shared meaning," so that people would know "what they must do without having to be told," and diminish the feeling of restructurings as external impositions.¹⁴⁰ The goal of managerial reforms, argues Boltanski and Chiapello, is not merely to increase productivity, but to "transition from control to self-control" through softer means.¹⁴¹

While there is no shortage of people whose experience of work remains alienating, it is not uncommon to catch moments when such managerial innovations work themselves into us, when we do not see pressures of coercion but derive fulfilment and pride *from taking up responsibility for self-optimisation, or blame ourselves for failing to do so*. In these cases,

¹³⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 30.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁴⁰ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 76.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 81.

‘responsibility’ and ‘self-motivation’ function not merely as ideological excuses for precarizing economic conditions but also as moral and ego ideals.

The neoliberal order spends much energy seducing subjects to align themselves with neoliberal norms through technologies of seduction and psycho-activations. On this topic, Byung-chul Han arguably provides the neatest account of how social control can be internalized into self-control. He proposes that neoliberal imperatives are presented to the subject as *ideals* of the liberated self’s endless possibility to self-optimize. Instead of presenting only normative restrictions, neoliberal power effects control by presenting subjects with a series of attractive possibilities and convincing them that they “can” attain them if they work on themselves. Such power produces more insidious control than traditional discipline (which works through normative injunctions of “should”) because while the latter is negative and incites easy rejection, “can” is psychologically more invisible and *seductive*.¹⁴² Han writes:

“The neoliberal regime’s technology of power is not prohibitive or repressive but seductive. It uses smart power. [...] By consuming and communicating, even by clicking a ‘like’ button, we submit ourselves to this form of rule. *Smart power closely follows the contours of the psyche; it flatters the psyche instead of repressing or disciplining it.* It does not force us to be silent. Instead, it constantly prompts us to communicate, share, participate.[...] We are confronted with a technology of power that does not negate or suppress our freedom but that exploits our freedom.”¹⁴³

Han is certainly wrong in asserting that smart power outright *replaces* the need for repression and disciplining. Successful seduction removes the *feeling* of being disciplined, but discipline and repression remain in the backdrop of neoliberal power, enforcing its commands when seduction fails. This important caveat aside, Han’s description of how neoliberal power “follows the contours of the psyche” and functions by “*ingratiating*” the self while exploiting our freedom is insightful. Instead of coercively imposing the ideal of the self-entrepreneur,

¹⁴² Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 9–10; *The Burnout Society*, 8–9, 36. This echoes an important tenor in contemporary management literature, which argues that work is more effective if workers “love to do it,” instead of just ‘have to’ do it. But as Cabanas and Illouz also argues, there may be an neglected important class index to this – “[these] authors conveniently leave unaddressed the question of just exactly how someone can develop a calling when working as a pizza deliverer, a McDonald’s cashier or an office cleaner, but forcefully marshal the working and lower-middle classes to the ideal of the upper-middle classes.” See Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, 99–100.

¹⁴³ Byung-Chul Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021), 30–31.

seductive power aims to dissolve internal resistances by associating the adoption of neoliberal entrepreneurialism with various promised possibilities for ‘flourishing’, happiness, success, and relief from anxieties.

Thus, in addition to submitting workers to disciplinary benchmarks and audits (that work under ‘you should’), neoliberal institutions also present us with seductive *possibilities of self-realization*, inculcating the idea that the self *can* find themselves at work (however illusory in reality): meetings and assemblies may create feelings of ‘semi-democratic’ participation in a collective project; reward schemes provide workers with exemplars for envy and identification; while psycho-coaching ‘inspires’ people in finding themselves in realizing organizational goals.¹⁴⁴ Once the worker accepts such possibilities as their own, the organization can rely on them to *voluntarily control themselves and regulate their behaviour in accordance with the internalized ends specified by the organization*. Outside the workplace, there are more seductive practices in the media, in consumption, and in therapeutic spaces.

When seduction works, subjects are seduced into accepting their role as self-entrepreneurs both *for themselves and for the social setting in which they belong*. This, as Han argues, means that their socialized exercise of ‘freedom’ becomes the occasion for a more intense and insidious form of *exploitation* – “auto-exploitation.”¹⁴⁵ Working from within as an ego-ideal, exploitative aims of the organization can be integrated in the person’s psychological ‘calling’ in life and performed more in a voluntary, ego-syntonic manner.¹⁴⁶ As part of one’s calling, subjects are also more likely to undertake projects of self-optimization and self-investment outside the disciplinary gaze of the system across other aspects of life. This, though not the only mechanism, may be how the ideal of the responsible “self-entrepreneur” is motivated to “self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors [...] *across every sphere of its*

¹⁴⁴ Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, 97–100.

¹⁴⁵ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8–9.

¹⁴⁶ *The Agony of Eros*, 10; *The Burnout Society*, 10–11.

existence” as Brown puts it.¹⁴⁷ The following are two examples of how “auto-exploitation” functions.

2.5.1. Seducing and Marketizing the Consumerist Subject

To better grasp how the new psychopolitical power of neoliberalism takes root, the best model is perhaps not the workplace but the market of commodities, for it is in the latter that psycho-activation and seduction function without coercion. In the realm of consumerism, technologies of seduction are intensively developed across various research initiatives led by salespersons, “market researchers, designers and advertisers,” seeking ways to optimize the sales of their products.¹⁴⁸

It is essential that, when we refer to consumption, we do not limit ourselves to the model of a consumer seduced into buying a product out of sensual indulgence or vanity. Consumerism has been one-sidedly associated with sensual pleasures for hedonistic consumption (comfort foods, resort vacations) or objects for conspicuous show-offs (automobiles, haute couture).¹⁴⁹ While such modes of consumption exist, they overlook how consumers also utilize products to enhance their productivity and improve their competitive value as human capital. As any social media user may notice, we are often bombarded with advertisements for training courses (for the newest investment or business strategies, stress management, and successful romantic relationships), or productivity-enhancing gadgets and fitness/wellness apps. Even in ads

¹⁴⁷ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85; William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London: Verso, 2015), ch. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Consider the famous account of Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). Bell argues that consumerist marketing fosters “the sale of goods, packaged in the glossy images of glamour and sex” by promoting “a *hedonistic* way of life whose promise is the *voluptuous gratification of the lineaments of desire*.” This, according to Bell, would come into tension with a work ethic that valorizes “delayed gratification, career orientation, devotion to the enterprise” and create problems from the reproduction of capitalism (p. xxv, emphasis added). This is very far from our neoliberal realities: First, the neoliberal restructuring of the workplace have now long rendered obsolete a Weberian, ascetic work ethic See, e.g. Jiwei Ci, “Disenchantment, Desublimation, and Demoralization: Some Cultural Conjunctions of Capitalism,” *New literary history* 30, no. 2 (1999); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 155f. Second, modern consumerism, as I shall argue in this section, now *work to supplement* neoliberal (work) culture by providing means for people to augment productivity.

promoting the trendiest mobile games or the newest gum flavour, advertisers associate the products with desired images of success and imbue products with magical qualities such as stress relief, ecstatic enjoyment, or success at work and school. The way these ads are presented suggests that consumer commodities are often valued as *instruments for enhancing productivity and competitiveness or as goods that promise to allay the anxieties of living* in a suffocating social environment. These two functions connect the world of consumer goods with the neoliberal culture of performance.

Aside from the regular commodities on store shelves, we also consume ‘exemplars’ – people who publicize their achievements for a chance to educate us about their recipes for success. The proliferation of counsellors, life coaches, and exemplars in the marketplace has grown in proportion to the amount of responsibility delegated to the individual’s ‘life choices’ under neoliberal settings, and the anxiety evoked by making such choices in this setting.¹⁵⁰ Flooding the media with seductive, positive images of themselves, exemplars seduce us into adopting their recipes for success – rendering the know-how in making *life-choices* a saleable commodity. While Foucault argues the biopolitics involved secularized ‘pastors’ imposing identities on individuals in the name of scientific truth,¹⁵¹ these ‘pastors’ are now pluralized and marketized. The appeal of exemplars lies in how they bind the anxieties caused by multiple responsibilities within the neoliberal order and offer individuals a sense of direction in a disorienting world, all while respecting the subject’s ‘freedom of choice’ under the voluntary consumer contract.

But whether we consume commodities or exemplars, consumption often rests on a *paradox* – the promises behind the image seldom deliver. Not only is the stick of gum not going to help us secure a Google job offer or the bottle of detergent fix a broken marriage, but the gratifications, commodities and exemplars often prove transient and illusory. First,

¹⁵⁰ *Liquid Modernity*, 64f.

¹⁵¹ See, Michel Foucault, “‘Omnes Et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” in *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate* (New York: New Press, 2006); “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

commodities are often designed more for their *hype* than for their use. Marketing campaigns tap into our everyday anxieties and manufacture cravings for the object by promising relief through the image, meaning that marketing success lies in the *efficacy of the image in eliciting desire*, rather than in whether the promise finally delivers. In Lacanian parlance, the desire for a commodity is a function of the *gap* between the desiring subject and the object that is supposed – and *only* supposed – to fill the anxious void in our subjectivity. When the gap vanishes, so does desire.¹⁵² The delivery of the promise is not a constituent in the marketing *dispositif*. Second, even where commodities do deliver a moment's success, quick shifts in culture quickly condemn the object or life-plan to obsolescence. *Fashion* makes the present ephemeral, and heightens the desire for better, more, and less encumbered satisfaction.¹⁵³ Last but not least, to the degree that consumption of exemplars is restricted to the realm of life choices, the solutions they give often fail to address insurmountable challenges arising from structural failures in society.¹⁵⁴

Yet, to the degree that exemplars are products for voluntary consumption, the hopes of personal salvation can be endlessly deferred to the *following* exemplar or the next commodity, while the responsibility for failure is easily deferred to the individual for their inability to be the 'smart' consumer.¹⁵⁵ Paradoxical as it may seem, the failure of commodities on the individual level is not for the system. The accumulation of capital depends on consumption as a source of effective demand,¹⁵⁶ and for consumption to continue, dissatisfaction must somehow be perpetual. In Bauman's terms, perpetual dissatisfaction drives consumptive 'addiction.'¹⁵⁷ We will return to this paradox in Chapter 4, but for now, let us focus on an important aspect of consumerist seduction – the image.

¹⁵² For discussions of commodities and their illusory promises, see Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 139–41; McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, ch.1. For an introduction to the Lacanian theory of desire, see Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, ch. 5.

¹⁵³ Gilles Lipovetsky, Sébastien Charles, and Andrew Brown, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005).

¹⁵⁴ For the failure of personal solutions to system problems, see, Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, ch. 1.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 65–67.

¹⁵⁶ See, e.g. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192–98.

¹⁵⁷ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 45–48.

2.5.2. The Power of the Image in the Financialized Economy

Why is the image so enticing, and how does it become a medium for our identification with the order?

For Lacanians, the constitutive conundrum for every subject revolves around the Other, in particular, who one is to the Other, and what it is that one should do to overcome one's self-insufficiencies and be desired by the Other.¹⁵⁸ As the account goes, the questions are pressing and anxiety-ridden, but the answers given can only be elusive. It is here that identification with the *image* shows (illusory but tangible) substance to the Other's desire. The image – imbued with an illusory sense of possible fullness and completion¹⁵⁹ – seduces us by *condensing what being desirable looks like* under the gaze of the Other. To the degree that being desirable (or recognizable) by others is constitutive of our social being, the image always carries this seductive allure.

While we may hold reservations on Lacan's many ontological assumptions towards subjectivity,¹⁶⁰ his idea that the image's allure comes from the anxious need to be found desirable resonates well with our financialized present. As we have seen in previous sections, *financialization* has sensitized firms to demands from external shareholders who anticipate and seek quick appreciation in company valuations. In the domain of 'human capital,' financialization also means allowing the perception of potential employers and 'investors'¹⁶¹ of the self to shape one's life choices, conceptualised as self-investment decisions. This is one way to understand Bauman's claim that the "decisive purpose of consumption" now is "the commoditization or re Commoditization of the consumer: raising the status of consumers to that

¹⁵⁸ The two questions can be read as rephrased from Lacan's dictum "man's desire is the desire of the other" and "Che vuoi? (What do you want)" in his famous graph of desire. See, Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 793–827.

¹⁵⁹ This relates to Lacan's theory of the imaginary and the ideal ego, already present in his earlier paper on the mirror-stage as "the total form of his body by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage." Ibid., 93–100. For a psychosocial commentary that draws upon Lacan's theory of the imaginary, see Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too-Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2024), ch. 3.

¹⁶⁰ For an insightful criticism of Lacanian ontology, see Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), ch. 3.

¹⁶¹ 'Investors' is not restricted to providers of capital, but – under the generalization of financial norms across every aspect of life – networks, friends, and potential partners.

of sellable commodities.”¹⁶² The regime of financialized human capital forces individuals to become “attractive commodities” with the “utterly exhausting task” of “acutely watch[ing] the vacillations of what is demanded and what offered, and follow[ing] the market trends.”¹⁶³

But where do we get a reference point for bankability, marketability, and employability? In a financialised economy, what’s useful is fictitious and what’s valuable is ephemeral. The lid on the pot of boiling uncertainty perhaps lies, on the one hand, as we saw, in metrics, benchmarks, and audits, which offer quantifiable standards for administrators and investors to evaluate the performance of firms and employees.

On the other hand, there is the *image*. Under financialization, value is decided by investors in the market. It is insufficient for firms just to provide good returns on investment within acceptable risk; investors must *see and believe that firms are doing so*. Indeed, as evidence of failed start-ups and speculative bubbles shows, being ‘seen’ as having potential appreciates one’s value regardless of substance. (This echoes consumerist commodities not needing to deliver their promise.) The significance of brand images and PR for companies, echoed by individuals who display their virtues and potentials, testifies to the importance of presenting good images and appearances – of *being seen* as ‘bankable,’ ‘marketable,’ and ‘employable.’¹⁶⁴

If value depends on investors’ gaze, who sets the standards of the gaze?

Employees defer to employers, and employers defer to investors, but to whom do investors defer? It is here that Lacanians offer an incisive answer: no one.¹⁶⁵ At some point, the chain of deferral is plugged up by an attractive image embodying collective fantasy, although no one decided (or can decide) which image will prevail. Despite attempts to nudge market trends, no one can *decide* what they are – just as no one has decided that flexible organization arrangements will guarantee value appreciation, that the employable worker must look happy

¹⁶² Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 57.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶⁴ Feher, “Self-Appreciation,” 28.

¹⁶⁵ See, Colin Cremin, “Never Employable Enough: The (Im)Possibility of Satisfying the Boss’s Desire,” *Organization* 17, no. 2 (2010); McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 41–43.

and be communicative,¹⁶⁶ or that confessions about one's trauma will trend on social media.¹⁶⁷ Yet as trends go viral, producers, consumers, and investors gravitate towards them, and evidence that those trends lead to increases in asset valuation will accumulate and self-fulfil. Employees, employers and investors alike defer to whatever image is trendy, not necessarily because they think or have decided that image carries substance, but because others (also) defer to the same image.

If consumerist images are really rooted in nothing but their ability to command deferral and self-proliferation, nothing prevents the wind from changing direction. Yet, while trends are ephemeral and fictitious, they no less bind everyone dependent on our financialized economy for survival. For most, the cost of deviance or being deemed unmarketable looms large, for the price to pay is 'falling.' Under uncertain trends, uncertainties about adapting to ever-changing images of employability and marketability are superimposed upon structural precarities of indebtedness, insecure employment, and unstable income. In this way, financialised consumption, arguably, not only impels us to identify with images, but more importantly perhaps, it shapes the *form* of attachment to the order of transient images.¹⁶⁸

One upshot of the image is how it is in markets of transient images that the single imperative of financial value-appreciation becomes pluralized. In Han's parlance, the imaginized 'possibilities' are candidates for self-adopted 'ego-ideals.'¹⁶⁹ Like Freud's theory of the dream image, the image is a 'condensation' of many, sometimes contradictory thoughts.¹⁷⁰ The single image of a well-built, smiling man in a well-ironed suit endorsing canned coffee interposes ideals of fitness, masculinity, professionalism, and positivity – all of which carry endless possibilities for self-optimization and self-improvement.¹⁷¹ This is how the consumerized

¹⁶⁶ Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, ch. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Catherine Liu, "The Problem with Trauma Culture," *Noema*, 16 February 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Rosa on "situational identities" post 1970: "The self collapses into an, as it were, predicateless 'punctual self' that no longer identifies (without remainder) with its roles and relationships but instead takes on a more or less instrumental attitude toward them." Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, 147.

¹⁶⁹ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 45-47.

¹⁷⁰ Freud, SE 5.

¹⁷¹ I discuss positive psychology in the next section and in Chapter 5. For related discussions of fitness and wellness culture in relation to demands of endless self-optimization, see Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 76-80; Mark

financial order provides us with seductive localities for identification, although the same possibilities can also be coercively enforced from without by the market order we are dependent upon. We will return to the anxieties this produces in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.5.3. The Construction of the Psychological Subject

The account of ‘soft’ neoliberalism is arguably incomplete without a consideration of how neoliberalism is also psychologized under technologies in the sciences of ‘psychology’ and ‘psychiatry’. Like consumerist technologies, the psychological sciences have contributed necessary means for managing work pressures and enhancing productivity. This will be the topic of Chapter 4, so here I will just summarize key arguments.

In the first instance, the proliferation of the psychological sciences helps disseminate psychotechniques and activation practices aiming to activate self-appreciating, self-valorizing, entrepreneurial subjects. For instance, Alain Ehrenberg argues that cognitive neuroscience contributes to the individualization of the subject by constructing the subject as a “problem-solver” whose abilities are rooted in brain biology. Linking human potential with the idea of “neuroplasticity,” even subjects of psychopathologies and mental afflictions are rebranded under the neuroscientific discourse as subjects with special talents and potentials.¹⁷²

Relatedly, the concept of selves as potential entrepreneurial subjects is observed in *positive psychology*, which offers various practical recommendations for aspiring entrepreneurs.¹⁷³ Drawing from the cognitive-behavioural framework of psychology, positive psychology and the culture of self-help treat our emotional states as malleable and recast the problem of human suffering as faults in cognition and habits of thought, which can be easily and significantly

Coeckelbergh, *Self-Improvement: Technologies of the Soul in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 46–55.

¹⁷² Alain Ehrenberg, *The Mechanics of Passions: Brain, Behaviour, and Society*, trans. Craig Lund (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 9–11.

¹⁷³ On positive psychotechniques, see Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, ch. 4.

modified if the subject tries to practice habits of thinking positively, practicing gratitude, focusing on one's character strengths, and resisting temptations of procrastination.¹⁷⁴

Positive psychology becomes a useful apparatus of neoliberal governmentality to the extent that it provides techniques helping people '*switch off*' *bad feelings* that might stand in the way of the subject's entrepreneurial pursuits.¹⁷⁵ Equally importantly, as Sara Ahmed argues, positive psychology's unproblematic glorification of happiness as the ultimate end of one's life-pursuits can implicitly align subjects to normalizing life paths.¹⁷⁶ This is because pursuing happiness often involves recommending subjects to seek *goods* and "happiness scripts" (given courses of action that *society promises to reward*) deemed desirable and marketable by society, sidelining critical voices.

It is with the various promises of expertized knowledge that psychology has penetrated the workplace, deployed to problematize, understand, and resolve obstacles to optimal work performance.¹⁷⁷ This includes measures ranging from personality tests and emotional monitoring in HR management, psychological training to improve productivity and communication in the workplace, to the introduction of mental health awareness, 'mental health first-aid,' and suicide prevention workshops to redirect perturbed members of the workforce to expert psychotherapeutic help.¹⁷⁸

Aside from psycho-activation in positive psychology, an inevitable part of lifting the heavy psychological weights of the precarizing economy is done by medicalized psychiatry, which demonstrated its willingness to use chemical means of sedation and disciplinary means of

¹⁷⁴ Rodrigo De La Fabián and Antonio Stecher, "Positive Psychology's Promise of Happiness: A New Form of Human Capital in Contemporary Neoliberal Governmentality," *Theory & Psychology* 27, no. 5 (2017).

¹⁷⁵ Sam Binkley, "Happiness, Positive Psychology and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality," *Subjectivity* 4, no. 4 (2011); "Psychological Life as Enterprise: Social Practice and the Government of Neo-Liberal Interiority," *History of the human sciences* 24, no. 3 (2011); Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, Cambridge Studies in the History of Psychology (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Although Ahmed's studies mainly concern norms of race and gender, it also applies to the normative constitution of neoliberal subjectivity, as exemplars of neoliberal virtues on the market are often tethered with images of happy and successful careers.

¹⁷⁷ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 89–93; *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁷⁸ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007); Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 268–72; Davies, *Sedated.*, ch. 4

incarceration. Under widening diagnostic thresholds and proliferating discourses of psychological awareness, mental distress – regardless of their origins physiological abnormalities or psychosocial dysfunctions – have fallen into the realm of medicalized psychiatry and brain-based psychology.¹⁷⁹

With the new medical means, the need to confront the fundamental conflicts in the psyche becomes a choice.¹⁸⁰ Drugs can sedate whatever derails the subject's entrepreneurial course of self-realization, even if it involves chronic dependency.¹⁸¹ For those whose resistance proves too intransigent and whose presence proves too disruptive for society, psychiatrists in many cases have inordinate powers to discipline and lock up patients.¹⁸² Psycho-coaches are also tasked with hammering the illusion that poverty and unemployment are one's responsibility.¹⁸³

More fundamentally, psychology and psychiatry responsibilize the subject for harbouring bad moods, undercutting its potential for social expression. Positive psychology's cognitive-behavioural techniques implicitly suggest that subjects can always pursue happiness *on their own account and with their own efforts*.¹⁸⁴ Like in consumerism, the goals of happiness and psychological well-being here are not imposed from without, but configured to be a seductive object that people would (should) be driven to pursue for their benefit. However, once such an ideal hooks people, the prescriptions of the "psy-" discourses bring together hitherto uncolonized domains of life into regulation and neoliberal enhancement, as Nikolas Rose argues:

“Whether it be the worker in the workplace, the consumer in the marketplace, or the mother in the home, psychological vocabularies and values have enabled both political authorities and individuals to reinterpret the mundane elements of everyday life-conduct – shopping, working, cooking, as dimensions of ‘lifestyle choice’:

¹⁷⁹ Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, ch. 1.

¹⁸⁰ Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 213.

¹⁸¹ Davies, *Sedated*, ch. 8.

¹⁸² Rob Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required: The Rise in Psychiatric Detentions, Forced Treatment, and Abusive Guardianships* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2023).

¹⁸³ Philip Thomas, "Psycho Politics, Neoliberal Governmentality and Austerity," *Self & Society* 44, no. 4 (2016).

¹⁸⁴ Binkley, "Happiness, Positive Psychology and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality."

activities *in which* people invest themselves and *through which* they both express and manifest their worth and value as selves.”¹⁸⁵

Again, along with new managerial and consumerist cultures, the psychological sciences have broadened domains of the self, where the neoliberal subject is supposed to work on and optimize.

2.6. The Precarious Regime of Neoliberal Subjects/Objects

With the help of so many positive images, it is easy to be captivated by the promises of neoliberal ideologues and their practitioners. Hayek and Friedman were convinced that it is through unleashing the potentials of competitive markets (and the disciplinary effects and inequalities they produce) that the true movers and shakers of society can innovate and experiment to the benefit of all. The future of free markets, Hayek promises, is one where the “conservative peasants” will thank the rich for pushing societal progress.¹⁸⁶ Marketers, consultants, and psycho-activators promise that rewards await those who are patient and persist in undertaking responsible self-investment and cultivating habits of self-improvement. Indeed, the seductiveness of the ideal image of neoliberal success is so strong that it colonized imaginations of its critics, as accounts after accounts report our propensity to “auto-exploitation” and “voluntary servitude” under a culture of activation and positivity.¹⁸⁷

Yet, the promised future of our neoliberal architects never delivered, *and many now know this very well*. Decades into neoliberal reforms, the working class in advanced capitalist economies has borne the early brunt of stalled mobility and unequal development. This sparked rage at the humiliation and betrayal by ‘urban elites’ and a widespread sense of ‘nihilism’ – energies that

¹⁸⁵ Rose, *Inventing Ourselves*, 98.

¹⁸⁶ Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, esp. ch.3. His unabashed faith in the market system and the innovativeness of the rich shows best when he argues that “the conservative peasant [...] owes his way of life to [...] men who were innovators in their time and who by their innovations forced a new manner of living on people belonging to an earlier state of culture.” (p. 50)

¹⁸⁷ Han, *The Agony of Eros; Expulsion of the Other*; Anne Godignon and Jean-Louis Thiriet, “The Rebirth of Voluntary Servitude,” in *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, ed. Mark Lilla (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). See also, Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 77–80.

fuelled right-wing populist backlashes against neoliberal cosmopolitanism.¹⁸⁸ Aside from working classes, the aftershocks of 2008 witness how the professional classes, especially in the liberal and creative sectors, can also be subjected to similar forces of precarization and casualisation.¹⁸⁹ The nail in the coffin for the illusion of ‘voluntary servitude’ lies in recent worker-satisfaction reports proposing that – even in highly neoliberalized workplaces – 70% of workers are either “spreading misery” in the workplace or “wishing they didn’t have to work at all.”¹⁹⁰

Perhaps the growing disillusionment with the neoliberal fantasy-land is not so surprising if we remember that capitalism thrives only on the endless accumulation of capital through expropriation and exploitation of (potentially) all classes which are not capitalist.¹⁹¹ Capital’s constitutive nature is to ‘pillage’ and dispose of its waste.¹⁹² Yet, despite all its apparent ills, the majority of the victims of neoliberalization now still do not find universal emancipation from capitalist ills attractive. Middle-class actors remain committed to desperate individual solutions to stay afloat, while working-class actors resort to moralized, individualist ideals of resilience and racialized resentment to cope with suffocating realities of precarity.¹⁹³ Currently, right-wing paranoid mobilizations have elevated competitive individualism to a new level, where the economic order of inequalities is supplemented in socially-Darwinian interpretations of racial and sexual dynamics,¹⁹⁴ naturalizing neoliberal competition in biologicistic survivalism.

¹⁸⁸ Wolfgang Streeck, "Trump and the Trumpists," *Inference* 3, no. 1 (2017); Silva, "'This Thing Is a Joke'."; Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016); José Javier Olivas Osuna, Max Kiefel, and Kira Gartzou Katsouyanni, "Place Matters: Analyzing the Roots of Political Distrust and Brexit Narratives at a Local Level," *Governance* 34, no. 4 (2021).

¹⁸⁹ Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, "Death of a Yuppie Dream."

¹⁹⁰ Simon Kuper, "Europeans Have More Time, Americans More Money. Which Is Better?," *Financial Times*, 30 April 2024.

¹⁹¹ For capitalism’s expropriative and exploitative logics, see Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*; Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2018), ch. 1; Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It*, ch.8.

¹⁹² On ‘waste disposal’ and ‘pillaging,’ see Bauman, *Liquid Life*; Monbiot and Hutchison, *Invisible Doctrine*.

¹⁹³ Jennifer M Silva, *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Silva observes how even working-class subjects, who bore the first brunt of precarization, embrace individualistic therapeutic narratives when facing socio-economic obstacles, emphasizing virtues of resilience and independence. For general discussions of therapeutic cultures, see Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁹⁴ See, Slobodian, *Hayek’s Bastards*; Finlayson, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web."

There is much in these about the fundamental attractiveness of (moralized) individualism and the lack of collective visions of emancipation. But perhaps one significant factor cannot be overlooked – the psychopolitical functions of the ‘underclasses.’ From a structural and institutional perspective, the ‘underclass’ names the class of the most precarious under the neoliberal economic order, and who is the prime object of the most disciplinary and repressive practices of ‘Workfare,’ ‘Prisonfare,’ and psychiatricization.¹⁹⁵ As Loïc Wacquant powerfully argues, the conceptualization of the lower stretches of neoliberal societies as ‘underclasses’ also carries moral(izing) functions, both in *responsibilizing* poverty on the behaviour of the poor, and justifying the punitive treatments against them.¹⁹⁶ Here, (racialized) images of ‘welfare mothers’ and ‘ghetto criminals’/‘gang bangers’ perhaps not only evoke the ‘dangers’ these classes bring to society,¹⁹⁷ but also function as the ranks of the ‘abjected’ that neoliberal ‘subjects’ are supposed to avoid at all costs. As I argue in subsequent chapters, the social obsession with ‘object’ categories such as the ‘underclasses’ – as the social embodiment of destitution and shame – plays an oft-neglected structuring role in neoliberal subjectivation, sustains a psychic need to exclude, and thus may be an important psychopolitical obstacle in conceptualizing emancipation for all.

Although *neoliberalism has projected unified normative models of the neoliberal subject, individuals rarely adopt them fully and non-conflictually*. In other words, the normative model of the neoliberal subject creates various subject positions with different lived realities. (I detail this in the next chapter.) On one extreme are those who have made it or believe that they will make it to the elite class. (These are the ‘voluntary servile’ or auto-exploiting.) But beyond this extreme are individuals who harbour varying levels of identification coloured by cynicism, distance, and defeat. Progressive members of this group may try to exercise their freedom to ‘quietly quit,’ or resist the system. Yet, to the extent that they remain materially dependent on the neoliberal economy, they are still forced to grudgingly reckon with neoliberal expectations

¹⁹⁵ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*.

¹⁹⁶ *The Invention of the "Underclass"*.

¹⁹⁷ E.g., *Punishing the Poor*, 209–10.

– most likely through conflictual or compensatory identifications with the order. The fear and disgust of objects may also structure their identifications in a significant way. As I shall continue to show, neoliberal phantasies are often hoaxes, and people do see through them. Yet, despite their observable *failures*, neoliberalism still manages to stabilize itself against effective challenges to its reign – in part through commanding our conflicted identifications and abjections.

Neoliberal, psychopolitical power occasions the formation of “*symptoms*” in a properly psychoanalytic sense.¹⁹⁸ They should neither be understood purely as forceful impositions from without, nor as injunctions smoothly internalized. Instead, these symptoms are libidinally charged pathological organizations that generate intrapsychic conflicts. In other words, neoliberal culture has produced subjects who have come to enduringly and “woundingly attach” themselves to the normative images of the entrepreneurial subject, even if doing so imposes substantial psychic costs on themselves and causes them to reproduce a system that harms themselves and countless others. On this note, I examine the stresses and anxieties that neoliberal arrangements produce in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁸ One implication of Han’s over-estimation of neoliberal psychopolitics is his premature declaration of the obsolescence of the unconscious and psychoanalysis in Han, *The Burnout Society*, 31.

Chapter 3. Socialization under the Weight of the Neoliberal World

In the hubristic heyday of neoliberal capitalism, then CEO of chipmaker Intel, Andrew Grove, published a book with the evocative title – *Only the Paranoid Survive*.¹⁹⁹ The book is a classic example of neoliberal ideology turned into pragmatic manuals proposing that corporations and workers alike should cultivate the right mindset in themselves to stay atop and avoid falling behind in the fierce world of competition.

To be sure, Grove is of course not *seriously* arguing for paranoia, whose clinical forms involve displaced and excessive fear and hostility towards objects that distort realistic perception of the world.²⁰⁰ True paranoiacs are likely to function badly at work. The ideal mindset Grove envisages, thus, may not be paranoia proper, although it does still involve a great deal of *fear* – specifically, “fear of competition, fear of bankruptcy, fear of being wrong and fear of losing” – that he considers essential for motivating people to strive and succeed in a highly competitive marketplace. In this sense, Grove is arguing that fear is essential for success in the elite bubbles of the neoliberal world, where intense competition and high costs of failure demand players to be highly alert.²⁰¹

Whether Grove is right that elite corporations should actively cultivate a sense of fear in their workers and individuals in themselves, we will see in this chapter how neoliberal social-institutional changes have inculcated deep fears and anxieties of uncertainty and competition in the masses through precarization. In this sense, not only is it the elite bubble where “only the paranoid survives,” but – for the precarized masses too – *surviving in such a world almost always involves deep fears*, and that, for especially those at the bottom of the social ladder, *even paranoia does not guarantee survival*.

¹⁹⁹ Andrew S. Grove, *Only the Paranoid Survive: How to Exploit the Crisis Points That Challenge Every Company and Career*, 1st ed. (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1996).

²⁰⁰ We will return to the psychodynamics of paranoia in Chapter 6.

²⁰¹ For a recent account on intense competitive pressures in the elite class, see Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), ch. 2.

The persistence of chronic troubles with anxiety is well remarked in the recent literature: Literature on psychiatric epidemiology asserted that anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental disorder of the 21st Century, estimated to afflict one-third of the population in people's lifetime, indicating how the psychiatric establishments are registering the prevalence of anxiety.²⁰² Even if we may hold reservations about uncritical and medicalized understandings of anxiety held by mainstream psychology, the talk of anxiety and fears pervades the literature: Economic accounts point out how people experience greater anxieties of social descent and debt insolvency under the neoliberal economy. For instance, sociological accounts discuss anxieties surrounding job insecurities, disempowerment, and obsolescence.²⁰³ Cultural and psychological accounts discuss how people are inundated by amorphous fears of inadequacy, fears of not fitting in (in one's social class), fears of being found lacking, fears of losing control, and fears of being left behind.²⁰⁴

The aims of this chapter are twofold: First, I discuss the concrete ways in which neoliberal social arrangements generate large volumes of anxiety and difficult grief for their subjects. Second, and relatedly, I give a relatively panoramic and sufficiently differentiated view of *the different modes* under which neoliberal egos are subjectivated under norms that are normatively middle-class. To achieve these aims, the chapter is divided into three parts:

- The first, longest part discusses anxieties. Distinguishing first between *objective anxieties* and *ego-anxieties* (3.1), I show how shifting work cultures and increasing exposure to financial risks through debt produce large volumes of objective anxieties (3.2). Then, probing into the ego-anxieties, I reconstruct the psychoanalytic theory of the ego-structure around the concept of identification (3.3.1) and propose that existing accounts of neoliberal subjectivation fail to grasp the complexities of neoliberal identifications (3.3.2). This leads me to propose a panoramic view of neoliberal subjectivation comprising eight hypothetical subject positions, each with its particular share of ego and objective anxieties (3.3.3). In section 3.3.4, I look into the psychosocial

²⁰² Borwin Bandelow and Sophie Michaelis, "Epidemiology of Anxiety Disorders in the 21st Century," *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience* 17, no. 3 (2015).

²⁰³ Sennett, *Culture of the New Capitalism*; *Corrosion of Character*; Cremin, "Never Employable Enough."; Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End*; Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*; Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*.

²⁰⁴ See e.g. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2006); Han, *Expulsion of the Other*; Mari Ruti, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings: The Emotional Costs of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*; Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*.

functions of *social distinctions* under the lens of “abjection” and argue that the deepest anxiety of the neoliberal subject is the *fear of the abject*.

- In section 3.4, I discuss grief and argue that it is equally important in understanding the subject and its identifications. I propose that the neoliberal order also burdens us with difficult grief.

The upcoming discussion is extended since one goal of the discussion is to weave together the (macro-)sociological and (micro-)psychoanalytical perspectives to understand our chaotic world. The neoliberal world has grown so rapidly complex and chaotic, and the fact that the macro- and the micro do not work well together doesn’t help with the discussion either.

3.1. Psychosocial anxieties: Objective and Ego

In *Inhibition, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud characterizes anxiety-states as unpleasurable states of the ego when confronted with *danger*. Anxiety states are coupled with “acts of discharge” and contribute to the formation of symptoms to “bind the psychical energy which would otherwise be discharged as anxiety.”²⁰⁵ This is the precursor of the theory of ‘pathological organizations’ which we are drawing upon, as both Steiner and Freud placed anxiety in a primordial location in the aetiology of psychopathology – symptomatic formations are *ways to master and bind anxieties*. Hence, anxiety is a good starting point for our enquiry.

To begin with, the psychoanalytic theory of anxiety distinguishes between two subcategories, objective and psychoneurotic:

In short, ‘objective’ anxieties are continuous with folk accounts of (non-pathological) anxieties as responses to objectively dangerous situations (such as when one encounters a bear in the wild) that prepare for fight or flight. The psychoanalytic account adds to this category of anxieties specific to various development stages, such as painful experiences of birth, fears of punishment, and ‘castration anxiety’ (associated with fear of losing the love of attachment figures and fears of separation from our primary caregiver).²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Freud, SE 10: 44

²⁰⁶ See Freud, SE 10: 56-58; Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (Taylor & Francis, 2018).

In addition to the conventional account, the psychoanalytic account also proposes ‘psychoneurotic’ anxieties²⁰⁷ that emerge when ‘dangers’ are generated *endogenously* in complex and differing ways, such as from “instincts” and internalized psychic agencies bearing imprints of memories (such as past traumatic experiences).²⁰⁸ For the latter, the typical psychoanalytic example is ‘superego’ anxieties, which punish the subject with shame or guilt for transgressing internalised norms and self-ideals.²⁰⁹

At this point, we seem to have a good distinction between ‘objective’ and the ‘psychoneurotic’ forms of anxiety. However, this distinction is blurred when anxiety responses to *objective situations of danger* can equally be coloured heavily by endogenous factors. Freud believes that adult anxiety is never purely a response to the situation at hand. *Previous anxieties* (i.e. psychoneurotic anxieties sedimented in psychic structures) are also reanimated – meaning that our anxious reactions to danger carry historical imprints such as our infantile helplessness, or struggles with separation.²¹⁰ This interpenetration of objective and psychoneurotic anxieties is highly important in clinical work, as people use and even orchestrate *real situations of danger* to produce anxieties and enact their phantasmatic symptom formations.²¹¹

Insofar as psychoanalytic psychotherapy aims to *cure the subject* of its neurosis and not deal with real situations of danger, psychoanalysts generally focus more on psychoneurotic anxieties and downplay their objective counterparts. However, psychosocially, the collapse of the objective anxieties onto the realm of neurotic pathology is highly problematic, for it may *ignore the presence of objective (social) factors* in producing anxieties in their subjects. For the

²⁰⁷ I use the term ‘psychoneurotic’ to refer to both anxieties of the psychotic and neurotic kinds.

²⁰⁸ Freud, SE 20: 146-149; See also, Melanie Klein, who argues that the welling up of death instincts can create a “fear of annihilation of life” and Anna Freud who argues that the strength of instincts and create a “fear of being overwhelmed or annihilated.” Anna Freud, Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, 58-60; Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude, and Other Works, 1946-1963* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 27-30.

²⁰⁹ Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, 55-59. Freud, SE 21: 136-37.

²¹⁰ For a concise summary of Freud’s complex theory of anxiety, see Richard Wollheim, *Freud* (London,: Fontana, 1971), 208-16. The most significant difference between the psychoanalytic theory of anxieties and folk psychology is that anxiety responses of well-developed adults are objective responses to threats, while psychoneurotic anxieties are reserved for the pathological. In psychoanalytic theory, however, individuals vary in levels of pathology and anxiety states emerge from dispositional structures that always carry an ontogenic element.

²¹¹ This is the work of ‘transference,’ which involves the transferring of phantasies of object-relations and anxiety responses of the past to the present. (We will return to this concept in Chapter 7) For an insightful account of transference, see Jonathan Lear, *Freud*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), ch. 4.

purposes of our current study, therefore, I would like to propose the following distinction between the two types of anxiety for the purposes of this Dissertation:

‘Objective anxieties’ refer to the aspect of anxieties that originate from objective danger situations with identifiable environmental causes at the present.

Psychosocially, this includes anxieties from being placed in inescapable, precarious situations of poverty, debt, and oppressive surveillance. These situations count as ‘objective’ determinants of anxiety because they *generate anxiety in practically all agents with a realistic perception of their situation, quite regardless of the specifics of their life history, fantasies, and psychic constitution.*

In contrast with ‘objective,’ ‘psychoneurotic’ or ‘(psycho)structural anxieties’ refer to the aspect of anxieties relayed by *fantasies of internal and external objects*, especially those surrounding the ego and the superego.

This aspect of anxiety is most apparent when they act independently of objectively discernible threats, although most of the time this works implicitly to modify our responses to objective situations. Specific forms of psychoneurotic anxieties include: *paranoiac* anxieties, where phantasies cause the subject to project *inner* anxieties onto external objects, causing the latter to appear horrifying,²¹² and more ‘structurally stable’ psychoneurotic anxieties such as homophobic, gender, and class-status anxieties – which can be traceable to the internalization of norms in the ego/superego.²¹³ Ontogenic *psychic structures* determine how and when such anxiety emerges and its manifestations vary greatly depending on the phantasies that structure the ego in question.

In agreement with Freud, this account assumes no clear boundary between ‘objective’ and psycho-neurotic/structural anxieties. Theoretically, all perceptions of the world are mediated by phantasies, while all adult objective anxiety situations animate ego-anxieties of some kind. Socially, collective fantasies of our world shape the form we experience ‘objective’ threats.²¹⁴

²¹² See Melanie Klein on paranoid-schizoid mechanisms. Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 5–14. For a psychosocial account, see Chapter 6.

²¹³ We shall return to this in 3.3.4. For homophobic superegos, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 175–83.

²¹⁴ “Self-preservation” and “security” are examples of concepts that are overblown in our world. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Bauman, *Liquid Fear*.

Yet, despite all these reservations, I maintain such a distinction in the upcoming discussions to counter the tendency of psychosocial critiques to neglect the persistence of objective social determinants for anxieties.²¹⁵ Especially given systemic precarization, the tendency of theorists (sadly, well-established scholars often belonging to the professional classes) to blot out the distinction between the objective-conditioned and the psychosocially defensive is regrettable. It may well result in ‘socially weightless’ recommendations that ignore the insufficiency of pure psychological shifts – even collective ones – for emancipation. We cannot forget that socio-economic realities heavily condition people’s anxieties and pathological organizations.²¹⁶ Indeed, it is by *understanding the insufficiency of psycho-cultural shifts and the deep imbrications between psycho-cultural types and economic deprivation* that responsible recommendations can be made.

On this cautionary and theoretical note, we shall first look into the objective anxieties.

3.2. Objective Anxieties

3.2.1. Employability and the Gaze of the Market Other

Competition, according to the early neoliberals, incentivizes self-improvement for macroeconomic growth. What this misses, however, is how rendering everyday activities a competitive endeavour comes with significant emotional repercussions. For instance, the introduction of competition to the workplace produces changing and ever-heightening expectations on workers that result in important feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

²¹⁵ Probing as they may be, Lacanian critiques are particularly vulnerable to such a pitfall. In his famous “Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” Lacan in his tortuous style writes something that sounds almost neoliberal: “Experience proves that [Jouissance] has usually forbidden me, not only, as certain fools would have it, due to bad societal arrangements, but I would say, because the Other is to blame – if he was to exist, that is. But since he doesn’t exist, all that’s left for me is to place the blame on I, that is to believe in what experience leads us all to [...], original sin.” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 694–95.) Lacanian theory can overemphasize the extent to which the subject participates in its castration, and such an idea can be used as justification for subjects to ‘take responsibility’ for one’s so-called fantasmatic ‘enjoyments’ in the social order – even when some such ‘enjoyments’ are not necessarily psychically determined. Cf. Adorno as he argues for the “impossibility of giving any psychological explanation for what does not derive from the individual psyche.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology I,” *New Left Review*, no. 46 (1967): 74.

²¹⁶ I will return to the conundrums of psychological emancipation in chapters 7-8.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the neoliberalization of the workforce means the erosion of the social safety net, while firms are ready to discipline or shed workers according to market shifts. Sacking of large segments of workers has been more common during restructurings and systemic crises, while ‘underemployment’ and precarious employment have seen a sizable rise in the labour market.²¹⁷ All these inspire a sense of insecurity and fears for even those who remain employed, which exhorts them to attend to trends in the job market.

On this front, however, the ways of staying employed stably are becoming increasingly uncertain. For workers of high-paying jobs, heavy demands are placed on them to adapt their skill set to a fast-changing workplace, and to continuously prove their value to employers in order for them to stay employed. As Sennett argues, being old, which originally would allow agents to secure a standing in the workplace, now becomes a liability, as the new corporate culture values flexibility (generally a feature of youth) over accumulated skills.²¹⁸ For other occupations, robotization, automation, and other trends are making existing skills and tasks obsolete – leading to deskilling and a reduction in the quality of work. Currently, this means adapting to an environment where many skills are at risk of being replaced by machines.²¹⁹

Besides, with the rise of new management styles, workers are generally exhorted to perform amorphous go-getter, optimistic attitudes toward challenges.²²⁰ The majority of service employment requires workers to adopt certain (feigned) emotional attitudes to appease customers.²²¹ It is now common for HR experts to perform psychometric analyses in aiding employment decisions. Meanwhile, there is a trend of collecting data (including social media

²¹⁷ See Crouch, *Will the Gig Economy Prevail?*, ch. 4.

²¹⁸ Sennett, *Culture of the New Capitalism*.

²¹⁹ The general trend in the neoliberal labour market was the rise of more precarious service-sector jobs that hits particularly the lower-income groups. However, it is entirely possible that forms of precarious under-employment may soon befall medium-income, and semi-skilled workers in the near future. A study of Canadian corporates found that automation and robotization have contributed to a clear decline in “middle-skilled” managerial employments. Jay Dixon, Bryan Hong, and Lynn Wu, “The Robot Revolution: Managerial and Employment Consequences for Firms,” *Management Science* 67, no. 9 (2021). For prognoses of employments in the neoliberal age, see Jones, *Work without the Worker: Labour in the Age of Platform Capitalism*; Crouch, *Will the Gig Economy Prevail*; Moody, “The Neoliberal Remaking of the Working Class.”

²²⁰ Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens.*, ch. 3

²²¹ See the classic analysis in Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 20th anniversary ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003)..

and fitness tracker data) from workers to monitor their behaviour inside and outside the workplace.²²² Psychometric and performance data can be analysed in a non-transparent manner, meaning that employees often have to second-guess how they are being surveilled and put on an appearance of harbouring the right attitudes, emotions, and behaviours inside and outside work.²²³ In some cases, HR companies are developing black-box AI algorithms to “screen out applicants predicted to agitate for increased wages, support unionization or demonstrate job hopping tendencies.”²²⁴ The intrusion of surveillance into private realms of emotions and social behaviour can give rise to anxiety that they may be judged inadequate in ways that threaten their employment.

Heightened technologies of automated workplace surveillance provide novel means to discipline its workers and penalize underperformers. Amongst the higher-skilled, the networked structure of corporates makes it easier to shame underperformers. Digitalized platforms, major hubs of gig-workers, now employ automated algorithms to grade workers and nudge them into working more and more efficiently, reduce their pay when they underperform the set performance targets, and sanction those who ‘create trouble’ or fail to meet targets. The model of personalized wage, as some have argued, may even be extended into regular labour markets.²²⁵ Commenting on the experience of algorithmically controlled Uber drivers, some have employed the concept of “rational paranoia,” a situation where people are aware they are closely monitored but have no way to understand *why* a decision is made when it is made.²²⁶

In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan illustrates the scenario of supreme anxiety with a scene where one is confronted with a giant cannibalistic female praying mantis while wearing a mask with a face unknown to oneself.²²⁷ This scene is triply anxiety-inducing because you do not know

²²² Ivan Manokha, "The Implications of Digital Employee Monitoring and People Analytics for Power Relations in the Workplace," *Surveillance and Society* 18, no. 4 (2020).

²²³ Zephyr Teachout, "Algorithmic Personalized Wages," *Politics & Society* 51, no. 3 (2023).

²²⁴ Vivienne Ming, "We Don't Need an AI Manifesto - We Need a Constitution," *Financial Times*, 9 May 2024.

²²⁵ Jones, *Work without the Worker: Labour in the Age of Platform Capitalism*; Teachout, "Algorithmic Personalized Wages."

²²⁶ "Algorithmic Personalized Wages," 446.

²²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2014), 5.

for sure *who* you are to the Other (who is close enough to engulf you), *what* you can do to placate this Other, and you can't even resign to the fact that you are doomed because the Other is going after you (because she may not be). The neoliberal Other of the workplace – incarnated variously by employers, HR managers, and machine algorithms – is quite like the praying-mantis. It is too close (surveilling all our actions), its messages are too enigmatic (nobody can tell us what being employable amounts to), and one cannot know whether one happens to survive because of luck.

Furthermore, the gaze of the neoliberal mantis is *perpetually* anxiety-inducing, because the neoliberal norms of employability *change quickly and imperceptibly under shifting imageries of employability*.²²⁸ As Cremin argues, the forever anxiety-inducing gaze of the potential employer induces us to cover up the anxiety by identifying with the boss's desire as closely as possible and attaching ourselves to expert advice (and fantasies) that promise to give us the secrets and benefits of employability. These identifications, Cremin suggests, are essential for subjecting everyone to the endless reproduction of capital.²²⁹ As I will return later, Cremin may have inadequately distinguished the various ways anxiety leads to identification. But overall, his account of anxiety illustrates the socializing effects of workplace anxiety.

3.2.2. Indebted Selves

If labour, since the beginning of capitalism, has been expropriated to the point that they have nothing to sell but their labour power, as Marx argues,²³⁰ in the neoliberal age, this pressure to be employable is greatly intensified by the financial expropriations.

The deregulation of consumer lending, coupled with the decline of social benefits, wage stagnation and increased precarity, produced a sizable rise in household debt in neoliberal economies. This, so long as credit is freely available, delayed the challenges faced by the

²²⁸ See earlier discussions on the ephemerality of the image in Section 2.5.2.

²²⁹ Cremin, "Never Employable Enough."

²³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), chs. 6, 21

average household in financing their housing, schooling, and consumption needs.²³¹ Meanwhile, the financialization of healthcare and pensions has also injected new financial risks into the lives of the average worker.

The risks of indebtedness were creeping in, as financialization forced agents to make ‘responsible’ investment decisions or suffer its consequences. As people’s funds for consumption, healthcare, housing, savings, and pensions are exposed to flows of value in the global financial market, *proper management of one’s finances and exposure to financial risks in these markets becomes a necessary (but sometimes insufficient) way of staying afloat.*²³² At the top of the long list of *individual responsibilities* under neoliberal governmentality is the responsibility for managing one’s debt, job, and pension.²³³

To provide for themselves and their family, many have been compelled to take on debts and to take risks to improve their socio-economic standings. Like all other kinds of investments, the goal of all investments is to increase one’s value and make oneself “solvent” in the long run, to ascend the social ladder and have a stable source of income. However, the promises of the normative trajectories to solvency – purchasing a house, finishing a college degree, and getting a well-paying job – seem difficult to deliver, especially for those whose paths are blocked by a socio-economic structure skewed against them.²³⁴ Instead of lifting oneself out of precarity, many now find themselves submerged in chronic debt and without a steady and gainful source of income that can lift them out of perpetual indebtedness.²³⁵

²³¹ See discussions of “privatized Keynesianism” in Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism.*, ch. 5 Such ready availability of credit was also fuel to the hubristic decades of the 1990s and 2000s in the US, during which the Centre-Left celebrated marketized solutions to welfare by increasing private credit. For the US, see Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order.*, ch. 6; For the UK, see Will Davies, Johnna Montgomerie, and Sara Wallin, "Financial Melancholia: Mental Health and Indebtedness," (Political Economy Research Centre, Goldsmiths, 2015), ch. 5

²³² As Paul Langley argues, under financialized capitalism, “the choices confronted by ‘free’ individuals and households are not over whether to invest in the markets or to take on debt, but how best to do so.” Paul Langley, "The Financialization of Life," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Financialization* (Routledge, 2020), 70.

²³³ With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that the ‘nudge’ economists – what we will see in chapter 5 as one important tenet of neoliberal psychotechnology – seem obsessed with ‘responsible’ financial decisions. (The discussion *Nudge* spends four chapters on money and personal finances!) Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: The Final Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), chs. 9–12.

²³⁴ Silva, *Coming up Short*, 36–41; Davies, Montgomerie, and Wallin, "Financial Melancholia," [42–43].

²³⁵ Lazzarato, *Making of the Indebted Man.*

The global financial crisis of 2008 is the most explicit demonstration that the prosperity of the credit-financed ‘welfare’ is built on sand, as the crisis in the global financial economy produced devastating repercussions in the private sphere, resulting in foreclosures, bankruptcies and other financial troubles. It also demonstrated how exposed the general public – whether self-responsible or ‘irresponsible’ private lenders – is in a financialized economy. Like firms, when *debt* is a significant part of one’s life, one becomes particularly subject to the constraints of liquidity.²³⁶ Debt repayments are timed, meaning that when one’s inflow of cash does not come in time, the ‘survival’ of the debtor is threatened: creditors can file to liquidate the debtor’s assets at fire-sale prices, confiscate them, and force debtors into bankruptcy. This constraint is the harshest during crises, where employment and the usual means of resolving liquidity issues (e.g., lending, asset selling, refinancing, debt restructuring, and rollovers) cannot be relied upon. This way, especially under the systemic instabilities of the neoliberal order, indebted subjects are constantly at risk of *expropriation* due to liquidity pressures – regardless of their long-term solvency.²³⁷ On the social-institutional level, financial crisis is also a signal to the public that when a man-made tsunami hits the economy, states are going to help bankers and investors over the survival of their citizens.²³⁸ Those who collapse under such pressure may get therapy and support backed by punitive individualist ideologies of responsibility, adding insult to their injury by responsabilizing people for their system-induced fates.²³⁹

Nietzsche once outlined the intimate relation between debt, punishment, and the socialization of a moralized self with a (bad) conscience.²⁴⁰ There is much overlap between Nietzsche’s idealized sovereign subjects who have the “capacity to make promises” – i.e. those who have a degree of control over one’s future – and the indebted subject who is (normatively) supposed

²³⁶ This is what Hyman Minsky calls the “survival constraint.” See, Perry Mehrling, “Minsky and Modern Finance,” *Journal of Portfolio Management* 26, no. 2 (2000).

²³⁷ For a discussion of expropriative dynamics under neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *The Anti-Capitalist Chronicles*, Red Letter (London: Pluto Press, 2020), ch. 12.

²³⁸ While individuals are on their own, large financial institutions have greater institutional support in forms such as quantitative easing from central banks – which involve central banks buying up securities to provide liquidity to banks and prevent the latter from collapsing.

²³⁹ E.g. Davies, Montgomerie, and Wallin, “Financial Melancholia,” ch. 6.

²⁴⁰ *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay II, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992).

under neoliberal ideologies to be able to make responsible investments, and to pre-plan cash flows to avoid bankruptcy. Yet, in our neoliberalized world, the primary socializing function of debt is neither the sovereign, nor self-berating subjects Nietzsche imagined. Rather, it is a way for capital to lure agents into ‘freely’ selling their future through debt, then binding and *continuously* sensitizing debtors to the minute shifts in the demands of the market.²⁴¹ So long as one is indebted by one’s ‘own choosing’, one is *personally responsible* to repay at regular intervals until the debt is fully repaid. Repaying can last decades if they do not accrue to future generations. During that time, one would have to continuously *work, borrow further, or depend on punitive welfare* to generate the requisite amounts of cash for repayment while maintaining one’s subsistence needs. Compelled by debt, debtors are subject to constant pressures of the labour and financial markets.

As employees, one has to be employable; as debtors, one has to be creditworthy. That, in an age of flexibilization and accelerated cultural shifts, means anxieties about whether one will remain employable and marketable from one moment to the next. With debt, there is little breathing space for us to escape the menacing Other. But even responsiveness is not enough: in ways that no individual can control, markets are becoming increasingly punitive – labour markets are flexibilized and underpaid, while financial markets are becoming more volatile. The fate of the indebted subject is anxiety and defeat – anxiety about coming payments, and defeat/depression for one’s sold-off future.²⁴²

3.2.3. Other Objective Anxieties

We have selected anxieties of the labour and financial markets because these anxieties are attributable to clear *socio-economic factors*, and such factors are, for most, inescapable and would most indisputably lead to psychic tensions and anxiety. I do not dispute that people can come to make a virtue out of their necessities, forming wounding attachments to neoliberal

²⁴¹ Lazzarato, *Making of the Indebted Man*.

²⁴² Davies, Montgomerie, and Wallin, "Financial Melancholia."

norms and ideologies that contribute to creating their (objectively) miserable lives. However, one aspect of such anxieties is not so much psychological as economic. *Changing one's subjective attitude* and ego-identifications often has limited effects in alleviating such anxieties.

However, objective anxieties are not limited to these two areas. Other areas of objective anxieties include our education under the neoliberalized education system, consumerized internet cultures that seduce everyone to publicize their achievements and happy lives online,²⁴³ and romantic cultures that are consumerist and unrealistically idealized.²⁴⁴ The pervasiveness and inescapability of such cultures can generate worries, even if one does not form enduring identifications with their norms. Besides, urbanization in city centres, forcing large populations to meet their survival needs in crowded urban spaces and to survive claustrophobic living spaces can generate anxieties of 'there's always another who's too close to us and potentially judging us.'²⁴⁵ These are the anxieties that envelop neoliberal subjects, regardless of how they psychically negotiate their neoliberal identities.

3.3. The Neoliberal Ego and Its Anxieties

The collapse of the social welfare system and the entrenchment of crisis through debt in the financialized economy subjects all individuals to systemic risks, while social-institutional conditions inspire little confidence in society and collectives to buffer the catastrophic effects of risk and individual failures. It is such realities of chronic exposure to (objective) risks without means of collective support and redress that many suffer. But this was not the only thing neoliberal reforms did. As Margaret Thatcher famously proposed, her neoliberal reforms were "to change the heart and soul."²⁴⁶

²⁴³ See, e.g. Coeckelbergh, *Self-Improvement*, ch. 3.

²⁴⁴ E.g. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, ch. 3.

²⁴⁵ From personal experience, places like Hong Kong are a living testimony of this. People living in tiny apartments, subdivided flats (and sometimes even 'cage' housings) constantly need to negotiate noise, waste disposal, and hygiene problems. Once they leave their home, they are greeted with hordes of irascible and impatient people on the streets and cars, often impatiently trying to overtake one another. For an account of anxiety generated by another who is 'too close', see Ruti, *Penis Envy*, 184–89.

²⁴⁶ Margaret Thatcher, interview by Douglas Keay, 23 September, 1987.

There is relatively little psychology in the works of neoliberal economists, and where critical theorists do provide deeper accounts of the neoliberal subject, they are limited in covering various intricacies of neoliberal subject/object positions. In this section, I construct a comprehensive psychoanalytic account of neoliberal subject positions. To grasp how hearts and souls have been changed, we must examine how the world of institutions and norms is *psychically interpreted in fantasies*. Psychoanalysis begins with the presumption that the human mind is *imaginative*, and that we, since birth, weave phantasmatic meanings about our bodily processes and interactions with the world.²⁴⁷ These fantasies (some conscious, some unconscious) are shaped by our interactions with real social others (especially figures of authority), often through imaginatively *mimicking* them and setting up internal(ized) representations of them through “identification.” But once they enter our imaginative realm, they have an independent psychic existence – hence the idiosyncrasies of our responses to the objective world.

3.3.1. Socialization Through the Superego and the Ego-Ideal

Taking inspiration from Freud, we shall investigate neoliberal socialization by seeing how ego and superego structures are formed through *identificatory* processes, although their origins must be thought beyond familial spheres.²⁴⁸ To elaborate on this thesis, I rely on object-relations psychoanalytic theory, which supposes that our psyche is constituted from our phantasy-mediated interactions with objects and social others. Especially under threats of loss or objective anxieties of sanctions and punishments, we internalize phantasies of good and bad objects from interactions with objects and authority figures in the real world. Sometimes, when introjected figures are too anxiety-inducing, we phantasmatically project them outwards onto

²⁴⁷ See Susan Isaacs, "The Nature and Function of Phantasy," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 29 (1948).

²⁴⁸ Freud, SE 19: Ch. 1.

objects to allay psychic tension.²⁴⁹ These introjective and projective processes are most chaotic and violent in infancy, but they continue throughout one's entire life, albeit usually in lower intensity.²⁵⁰

Internalized figures function in different ways in our psyche – some playing functions of the ego and others playing functions of the super-ego.²⁵¹ The “ego” consists of the collection of phantasies of the “I” as one represents oneself to oneself, and as distinct from the world of objects (and “abjects,” as we shall see) that are *not-I*. This phantasmatic representation of the ego can be good or evil, full or hollow, stable or precarious, depending on the quality of such ego-identifications and their relations to one's drives and superego identifications. This agency is also where conscious reasoning and rationalizations of symptoms are formed.

In contrast to the ego, the “superego” is a collection of identifications functioning in a *third-person* mode to the ego, and tries to “observe” the I, to (in cases of psychopathology) *punitively judge* it, to *forcefully shame* it to work towards an ideal state, or (in healthy individuals) to *praise* its achievements or *support* it in its strivings and stress.²⁵² Following Loewald, the

²⁴⁹ See Wilfred R. Bion, “The Differentiation of the Psychotic and the Non-Psychotic Personalities (1957),” in *Melanie Klein Today: Volume 1*, ed. Elizabeth Bott Spillius (London: Routledge, 1988).

²⁵⁰ Adults' psyches remain shaped by new object relations. Loss and traumatic experiences in adulthood can still shake our personalities and self-conceptions. Good relationships can heal past psychic wounds and lower the severity of self-blame and anxieties. Object-relations clinical practice, in important senses, depends on the existence adult projections and introjections. The analyst is capable of reshaping the person's psyche, insofar as the analysand *projects* his internal objects onto the analyst (what is usually referred to as “transference” in the clinical literature) so that the analyst can work through their deadlocks, and subsequently allow the analysand to (*re*)introject a *less sickening* form of the object as the analyst. For an object-relations account of how adult relations can repair past trauma, see Klein's papers on mourning and reparation. Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works, 1921-1945* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 306–69. For remarks on how internalization can have therapeutic effects, see “Hans W. Loewald, *The Essential Loewald: Collected Papers and Monographs* (Hagerstown, Md: University Pub. Group, 2000), 69–86. I return to psychoanalytic cure in Chapter 7.

²⁵¹ For the superego and ego as products of introjects, see Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 25–42. For a related account of how psychic structures (id, ego, superego) should be understood as organizations of processes and mental activities as a result of internalizations, see “Instinct Theory, Object Relations, and Psychic Structure Formation.” In Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 207–18, esp. 07–12.

²⁵² Judith Butler highlights the punitive function of superego's gaze: “the super-ego is lived as the psychic activity of “watching” [... it] stands for the measure, the law, the norm, one which is embodied by a fabrication, a figure of a being whose sole feature it is to watch, to watch in order to judge, as a kind of persistent scrutiny, detection, effort to expose, that hounds the ego and reminds it of its failures.” Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 134. Softer accounts of the superego is mostly absent in Freud, but Klein describes how internalized objects can also be loving, while Loewald also outlines how the superego can embody (more positive) hopes, promises and aspirations. Both Klein and Loewald believe that the severity of the superego can be reduced to the point that the split between it and the ego can be largely reduced. See, Loewald,

superego views the ego “from the viewpoint of the *future ego*,” and as such becomes “the agency of inner [i.e. internalized] standards, demands, ideals, hopes, and concerns” through which the ego can be “rewarded” or “punished.”²⁵³ Similar to the ego, the punitive/supportive quality of the superego depends on whether our identifications are constituted with phantasies of ‘extremely bad’ internal objects or milder/loving ones.

If our socialising environment is benign, we tend to introject more benign objects, both because our objects are more benign, and because anxieties and fantasies of bad introjects have a chance to be contained, and destructiveness repaired with benign others. Under more adverse socializing environments, inner turmoil heightens and phantasies are generally more extreme, likely resulting in more punitive superegos, and deeper splits between the ego and the superego.

We now have the elements of engaging neoliberal socialization. Insofar as the formation and maintenance of the ego-structures (through processes of internalization) are not completed once and for all, we can extend the account of familial socialization to include cultural and institutional influences.²⁵⁴ Loewald argued that the superego includes “hopes, expectations, demands, promises, ideals, aspirations, self-doubt, guilt, and despair of past ages, ancestors, parents, teachers, prophets, priests, gods and heroes.”²⁵⁵ Applied to the neoliberal present, the hopes, ideals, and aspirations encompass a combination of ideals, including the *hyper-individualist, omnipotent* individual, the *responsible, entrepreneurial* worker and financier, the *desirable* commodity, and the *positive, resilient* self. Associated with these, we have futural promises of success, happiness, and recognition enforced by authority figures including employers, teachers, expert ‘marketers,’ ‘counsellors’ and ‘coaches’ exhorting us to perfect aspects of our lives, ‘followers’ whom we depend on for ‘likes,’ and digital algorithms surveilling our performance and worth.

Essential Loewald, 257–76. Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 87. For a general overview of the superego, see Elizabeth Bott Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2010), 145–65.

²⁵³ Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 45.

²⁵⁴ Following Judith Butler, we may say, instead, that superego socialization is not completed once and for all, but is sustained only by the socially compelled, ceaseless repetition of external social norms by the superego within the psyche. See e.g. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, esp. ch. 3

²⁵⁵ Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 273.

For Freud, we develop oedipal identifications early because childhood is when we are most helpless, and securing our caregivers' *love* seems to be a matter of survival.²⁵⁶ In our neoliberal present, this threat of survival is heightened, as many have, since childhood, been subjected to heightening expectations of what we can and should achieve.²⁵⁷ Meanwhile, our socio-economic order produced well-founded concerns about survival for many. In our survivalist economy, being *recognisable, desirable, and employable* in the eyes of neoliberal authorities is essential for social and material survival.²⁵⁸

Generally speaking, I believe neoliberal social realities occasion psychic conflicts as market forces infiltrate people's ego and superego structures. These conflicts stem from (i) the strengthening of the rational, self-optimizing ego making use of external means to respond to accelerated market pressures, (ii) the seductive pull that dissolves the ego into endless consumptive, self-optimizing flows, and (iii) the increasing severity of the superego that shames the self for deviations from transiently internalized ideals.²⁵⁹ Here, (i) mainly derives from demands from neoliberal order in responsabilizing individuals for survival in changing and precarizing conditions, (ii) from digitalized consumptive technologies of seduction luring us into self-optimization through ideal images, while (iii), the neoliberal superego, derives from the sustained and traumatizing weight of objective survivalist pressures (in (i)), the impossibility of ego ideals (in (ii)), and the continued failure of such an environment to help individuals contain and metabolize wounds and terrifying identifications accumulated from the past.

²⁵⁶ See SE 10, Ch. VIII.

²⁵⁷ Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, 220–21; Peltz, "The Manic Society."

²⁵⁸ Relevant here is how Judith Butler, going beyond Freud, extends that the passionate remaking of oneself to fit norms – what she calls "passionate attachment to subjection" – beyond the phase of early childhood, as the desire for love continued in adulthood as the desire for social recognition and survival. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, esp. Introduction, ch. 3.

²⁵⁹ For (i), see Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, 148, 231–50; Anastasios Gaitanidis, Fabian Freyenhagen, and Polona Curk, "New Forms of Self and Psychic Suffering Today and Their Implications for Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2025). For (ii), see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), Part III; Mireille Hildebrandt, "Profile Transparency by Design? Re-Enabling Double Contingency," in *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn* (Routledge, 2013), 233–38. For (iii), see Hoggett, "Shame and Performativity."; Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (MIT press, 1992), 100–03.

3.3.2. The Conflictual and Varying Internalizations of Neoliberal Ideals

To say that neoliberal ideals are forced onto our psyches does not mean that we are *always fully and unproblematically neoliberalized*. Psychodynamically speaking, adults are less amenable than children to forcible internalizations, as new identifications have to interact with past ones. Besides, once internalized, fantasies and ideals have an inner life, meaning that *refusal of and disidentification with* the socially imposed is always possible.²⁶⁰

In addition to ontogeny, an obstacle to smooth socialisation also comes from how the heterogeneity of the normative neoliberal subject position is a *knot of many injunctions to identify*. At its core, neoliberal institutions may exhort people to embrace ideals of *self-sufficiency and take responsibility for their lives*. However, its implications are many. In the political realm, individualism may more involve the desire for impossible self-sufficiency coupled with the desire to discipline ‘entitled,’ ‘dependent,’ and ‘trouble-making’ subjects by supporting a strong carceral state.²⁶¹ In the workplace and the market, individualism is more continuous with ideals of financialized *homo oeconomicus* and entrepreneurialism.²⁶² Under consumerist culture, people are exhorted to *consume* wisely to achieve endless pleasure and vain recognition, and to commodify oneself by presenting the most ‘likeable’ profile online.²⁶³ In the realm of psycho-activation, individualism exhorts people to help themselves, stay *positive*, embrace life’s challenges, and develop resilience.²⁶⁴

It is conceivable that some subjects may take these ideologies all in and identify with all such ideals, despite their tendency to conflict in reality. After all, as ideals, neoliberal dreams are

²⁶⁰ See also the critical theories of Negt and Kluge, who argues that the “obstinacy” of fantasies is a constant – though often suppressed and diverted – source of disturbance to the reproduction of capitalist relations. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, trans. Richard Langston (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2014).

²⁶¹ See Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*.

²⁶² Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

²⁶³ Bauman, *Consuming Life*; Coeckelbergh, *Self-Improvement*.

²⁶⁴ Binkley, "Happiness, Positive Psychology and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality."; Dana Becker and Jeanne Marecek, "Dreaming the American Dream: Individualism and Positive Psychology," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 5 (2008); Davies, *Happiness Industry*.

phantasies surrounding *futural and idealized* images of the self. That the ideal is futural means that, at least within certain limits, the material impossibility of realizing such ideals is no absolute obstacle in dreaming them up.²⁶⁵ In the words of Mari Ruti (who borrows the concept from Laurent Berlant), successful neoliberal socialization always involves some “cruelly optimistic” dreams – dreams that people hold dearly as ego-ideals, despite the “cruel” impossibility of realizing them given our institutional and material reality.²⁶⁶

However, it is quite unlikely that such identifications work seamlessly together. Moments of friction and diversity, if not disidentification, will likely affect one’s identification with dominant neoliberal norms – and hence it is essential to be aware of diversities and infelicities. Importantly, diversity in socialization has been observed across class boundaries. The mode of ‘softer’ and more individualist familial socialization²⁶⁷ which treats children as ‘delicate flowers’ in need of meticulous (sometimes suffocating) care is more a feature of middle-class families than working-class ones.²⁶⁸ Sociologists have observed that communicativeness and tolerance in middle-class contexts of socialization generally shape subjects into more *expressive, confident, and independent* characters, whereas the more hostile and authoritative modes of working-class education tend to mould subjects into *compliant, resilient, and*

²⁶⁵ Relatedly, in discussing the generalized neoliberal hatred of government, Jason Glynos argues for a distinction (“orthogonality”) between people’s ideological attachments (based on the psychic currency) and the justifiability of such ideologies from normative and descriptive points of view (which depends upon the *actual, implications* of such ideologies). This distinction, for Glynos, shows us that ideological identifications are “radically contingent.” Jason Glynos, “Hating Government and Voting against One’s Interests: Self-Transgression, Enjoyment, Critique,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 19 (2014). While I do not dispute the fact that social ‘reality’ (e.g. social class) does not *determine* people’s identifications, and that people can hold ideologies that harm their material interests, I am suspicious of views that overplay the radicality of such contingency. As will be more apparent in upcoming discussions, I suppose that the ordinary functioning of the ego generally checks against overly radical splits in identifications and lived experiences. In fact, as interviews with working-class subjects show, what may appear as blatantly “irrational” ideologies to hold to some interpretations will likely be more rational when seen through parts of the lived experiences of the subjects in question. Only in extreme cases of piling, unmitigated anxieties, do such rational checks of the ego break down into radical formations such as collective paranoia (see Chapter 6). In this sense, “radical contingency” is hardly the norm, but only names extreme situations of the *breakdown of rationality*. (For related clinical discussion of breakdowns in ego’s reflective functions, see Lear, *Freud*; Wilfred R. Bion, “Attacks on Linking (1959),” in *Melanie Klein Today, Volume 1*, ed. Elizabeth Bott Spillius (London: Routledge, 1988).

²⁶⁶ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Ruti, *Penis Envy*.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Lasch “Almost everyone agreed that the family promoted a narrow, parochial, selfish, and individualist mentality and thus impeded the development of sociability and cooperation.” Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 187.

²⁶⁸ Kusserow’s concept, as quoted in Nicole M Stephens, Hazel Rose Markus, and L Taylor Phillips, “Social Class Culture Cycles: How Three Gateway Contexts Shape Selves and Fuel Inequality,” *Annual review of psychology* 65 (2014): 317.

interdependent characters.²⁶⁹ Yet, despite the difference, the ideal model of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject remains middle-class, and the inability of neoliberal institutions to accommodate the working-class emotional habitus has created troubles for working-class subjects to ascend in a world where middle-class “expressive independence” is branded as the standard of excellence and employability.²⁷⁰

Furthermore, even if subjects are squarely within the middle-class model of entrepreneurialism, the operations of various social norms may conflict. Especially in the age of flexibilization and accelerated cultural shifts,²⁷¹ people’s sedimented identifications may conflict with new ones, such that even if the new ones are more apt for social survival and recognition, they may find change difficult. In our present, where boundaries between the middle/professional classes and the working-class are blurring, we may also expect more conflicts and troubles to emerge in the terrain of identifications. Here, Freud’s remark on mourning is equally applicable to identifications: that people may be “unwilling to abandon a libidinal position [here one may read identification, F.Y.] even when a substitute is already beckoning to them.”²⁷²

Aside from the above challenges, the rapidly deteriorating institutional and material environments of neoliberal norms can be so hostile that it would prove difficult for people to not only *realize* the neoliberal ideals, but also *to find them plausible in the first place*. Here, we can name workers who are so pressured to find it implausible to hold onto positive ideals of entrepreneurialism, unemployed welfare subjects for whom job-seeking is so difficult that they *cannot* plausibly hold that unemployment is their responsibility,²⁷³ or students who find exam cultures just too overwhelming.²⁷⁴ Under precarity, social conditions can indeed worsen so badly that neoliberal ideals can appear so utterly *implausible*, disrupting identifications at least

²⁶⁹ Antony SR Manstead, "The Psychology of Social Class: How Socioeconomic Status Impacts Thought, Feelings, and Behaviour," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 57, no. 2 (2018); Stephens, Markus, and Phillips, "Social Class Culture Cycles: How Three Gateway Contexts Shape Selves and Fuel Inequality."

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Sennett, *Corrosion of Character*; Bauman, *Liquid Life*, ch. 6; Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*.

²⁷² Freud, SE 14: 244.

²⁷³ Sharon Wright, "Conceptualising the Active Welfare Subject: Welfare Reform in Discourse, Policy and Lived Experience," *Policy & Politics* 44, no. 2 (2016).

²⁷⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, ch. 4

in some domains. Here, the radical implausibility of ideals *can* lead to near-delusional compensatory identifications with ideals, but the implausibility can also lead to moments of *disidentification*. So long as the latter happens, positive identification with systemic norms is disrupted, and subjects are left with cynicism, defeat, or active disidentification.

3.3.3. Neoliberal Subject Positions

In light of the above complexities, we can speak of different “*degrees of internalization*” as a hypothetical measure of how well neoliberal norms and ideals are internalized. The greater the degree of internalization, the more relevant identifications function in ego and superego functioning. The lower the degree of internalization, the more superficial or conflictual the identifications operate in the ego-structure. High degrees of internalization generally correspond to neoliberal imperatives operating in *ego-syntonic* or *compulsive* ways, while low degrees of internalization come with neoliberal imperatives working in *ego-dystonic* and *repressive* ways. With this in mind, I propose eight possible neoliberal subject positions.

Positive identification

Starting with the highest degree of internalization is *positive identification*. Such a subject position is arguably what lies behind Byung-chul Han’s proclamations of how neoliberal norms of “positivity” have blotted all traces of negativity, homogenizing all values into indicators of performance and ‘likes’ – thus rendering psychic and conscious resistance to neoliberal norms impossible.²⁷⁵ These descriptions best fit striving workaholics, manic investors, and life-coach personalities. Concerning this group, Han describes how the neoliberal culture of infinite possibilities manufactures subjects whose *ego-ideal* is fully assimilated to positive ideals of individual achievement, so that everyone unreservedly and (self-) compulsively strives for capital until they burn out. For Han, the drives of the achievement subject are fully identified with the system – implying that resistance can no longer be psychically registered as the ego-ideal that is fully aligned to market norms.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ See earlier discussions in 2.5. Han, *Expulsion of the Other; The Agony of Eros; Psychopolitics*.

²⁷⁶ See, esp. *The Burnout Society*.

Narcissism was named as the characteristic structure of the age.²⁷⁷ Yet, contra authors who see narcissism as a *general* characteristic of neoliberal subjects, I propose understanding it as one neoliberal subject position. Like positive identification, narcissists' psychic organization aligns with neoliberal norms, but they differ because this collusion involves idiosyncratic pathological organizations.

Narcissism, as a clinical category, is defined by traits such as a strong but precarious sense of grandiosity, coupled with strong needs for others' approval, manipulateness and lack of concern for others. These characters emerge from a distinctively anxiety-ridden ego that requires a precarious phantasy of a grandiose self as support.²⁷⁸ Lasch suggested that the pathological narcissists may have grown "prevalence" among the most successful "gamesmen," "in business corporations, political organizations, and government bureaucracies."²⁷⁹

It is easy to identify superficial parallels of narcissistic diagnosis with people who positively identify with neoliberal norms.²⁸⁰ Grandiosity and showiness aid portfolio building, the readiness to manipulate others to prop up one's illusory grandiosity is rewarded well under neoliberalism's valorization of *images*, while impairments in interpersonal relationships may help subjects meet market demands for flexibility and adaptability. However, despite the superficial matches, we should caution against inflating the relevance of narcissistic pathologies in understanding neoliberal subject positions. In understanding the neoliberal subject, it is essential to distinguish *how* 'narcissistic' social expectations are internalised:

1. people performing outwardly narcissistic acts,
2. people incorporating narcissistic defences in response to neoliberal environments; and

²⁷⁷ Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*.

²⁷⁸ Otto F. Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Scribner, 1985). See also, Rosenfeld, "A Clinical Approach to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Life and Death Instincts: An Investigation into the Aggressive Aspects of Narcissism."

²⁷⁹ Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 57–59.

²⁸⁰ "[Narcissists] have many traits that make for success in bureaucratic institutions, which put a premium on the manipulation of interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep personal attachments, and at the same time provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem." Ibid., 57.

3. the socially sanctioned traits being internalized into a stable narcissistic pathology.

Only (3) qualifies in the narcissistic subject position.²⁸¹ Indeed, our “culture of narcissism” stops at levels 1 and 2 for many.²⁸² Most people exhibiting narcissistic behaviour may be classified as narcissistic only as a function of group identifications, or strategic calculations, and definitely do not involve the narcissistic pathological organization.²⁸³

Manic Subjects

For the third neoliberal subject position, I draw upon theorists who proposed connections between neoliberalism and bipolar disorder. Darian Leader has characterized our age as the “bipolar times,”²⁸⁴ while Mark Fisher argues that capitalism is “fundamentally and irreducibly bipolar”.²⁸⁵ Similar to how Lasch argues for social narcissism, Leader contends that the culture of self-help and “nothing is impossible” is inviting subjects to exhibit manic behaviours and attitudes, whose manifestations include restlessness, self-preoccupation, confidence, and recklessness. We will discuss cultural mania, but for now, let us look at mania as a subject position.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ Of course, not all clinical narcissists are *neoliberal* narcissists. The alignment of narcissistic pathologies with social performance can be accidental. For one, individual narcissistic and manic pathological organizations involve rigid modes of object relating that can overshoot what is useful in neoliberal contexts. Besides, in different social contexts, neither narcissism (nor mania) would – insofar as they existed – be about neoliberal ideals. This shows that there is no intrinsic connection between narcissism or mania and neoliberal ideals can be accidental.

²⁸² In Lasch’s defence, Lasch’s diagnosis of society captures such nuance when he defines “narcissistic society” as “a society that gives increasing prominence and encouragement to narcissistic traits” Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 5. However, Lasch’s account often conflates the clinical account with his cultural commentaries for rhetorical effects, and hence it is important for us to distinguish the two more clearly than Lasch does.

²⁸³ Indeed, the most prominent diagnosis relevant to the culture of self-presentation and competition is not narcissism, but diagnoses such as social anxiety and depression. Categories such as ‘*social anxiety*’ may well point to the *infelicities* of neoliberal culture in producing narcissistic subjects. See, R. C. Kessler et al., “Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication,” *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 62, no. 6 (2005); Mark F Lenzenweger et al., “DSM-IV Personality Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication,” *Biological psychiatry* 62, no. 6 (2007). As I return in chapter 5, prevalence studies of ‘mental disorders’ based on existing diagnostic categories should be taken with a grain of salt – but the trends nevertheless prove the point in the current context.

²⁸⁴ Darian Leader, *Strictly Bipolar* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 1.

²⁸⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 35.

²⁸⁶ Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*.

Leader paints vignettes of creative workers who describe how manic highs not only allow them to feel elated, but also aid them in their fast-paced creative processes. The superficial parallels are pronounced between clinically manic states and the demands of creative careers.²⁸⁷ However, like narcissism, it is unlikely that many (even in the creative industries) are pathologically manic – hence the need to treat it only as a subset of positive identifiers. Manic or bipolar subjectivities are among the neoliberal subject positions, but caution is required to avoid over-generalizing.

Cynicism: Positive, Phoney, and Negative

All subject positions noted so far do not explicitly call the neoliberal ideals into question. Yet, despite the pretensions that neoliberal ideals made about self-making and entrepreneurial freedoms, a scientific study in the 2000s has found that the feeling of control amongst American college students over their lives had declined since the 1960s, leading to “greater cynicism and alienation” and the “blaming [of] others for negative events”.²⁸⁸ Workplace disengagement and cynicism are also more visible in workplace studies in meme culture alike.²⁸⁹ The idea that people are positively motivated by neoliberal ideals of self-control and entrepreneurialism ought to be viewed with great suspicion. Specifically, I want to suggest that there are three neoliberal subject positions that can be loosely collected under the heading of cynicism.

The first of these is *cynical identification*, and the idea comes from the early work of Žižek. There, following Peter Sloterdijk, he argues that contemporary capitalist ideology often operates in the form of *cynicism*. For Žižek, cynicism occurs when people consciously dispel the ideological guise, but continue to act *as if* the truth of the ruling ideology is held. In Žižek’s terms, cynical subscribers to ideology “know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it anyway.”²⁹⁰ Probing into cynicism, Žižek gives a model of how cynicism can give rise to a

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 32.

²⁸⁸ Jean M Twenge, Liqing Zhang, and Charles Im, "It's Beyond My Control: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of Increasing Externality in Locus of Control, 1960-2002," *Personality and social psychology review* 8, no. 3 (2004).

²⁸⁹ See, Kuper, "Europeans Have More Time, Americans More Money. Which Is Better?." See also relevant accounts in chapter 5.

²⁹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008).

type of *positive psychic identification* (attachment) to the order, not despite, but through conscious disavowal and critique. Attachments to an ideological community can depend not so much on positive identifications with the virtues glorified by the order, but *through* others who, in a way, hold the (positive) identifications for them.²⁹¹ These others can be cynically mocked, and criticized for holding for the disparaged ideologies, or they can play the role of the evil/authoritative “big Other” coercing subjects to act supposedly against their (conscious) will.²⁹² Their presence allows the cynics to hold up the appearance that they are only *compelled* (*externally*) to perform the system’s functions and do not identify with the system’s norms.

Critics of cynicism, such as Žizek, argue that the cynical repudiation of ideology is illusory. Indeed, the subjects’ *outwardly ‘compelled’* actions are, in fact, eroticized with forms of “*obscene*” enjoyments of the superego that link them much more intimately to capitalism than they avowedly do.²⁹³ In this sense, people’s critique and ridicule of ideology is only a façade behind which the attachment and enjoyment of one’s complicity in the capitalist system. Echoing Žizek on this point, Fisher argues that “the abjection of evil and ignorance onto fantasmatic others” allows us to obfuscate our complicity in the current system, offering a space for us to live out our collusive desires without needing to avow them.²⁹⁴ As such, cynical critiques of others provide *distance* between the subject and the system that supports the system and the perverse enjoyments of the subjects in question. We can see why cynicism can be more stable than positive identification – for unlike the latter, the psychic costs for upholding cynical identification are lower, as such identification sustains *distance* from ideologies and offers a disparaged other against whom frustrations with the system can be expressed.

²⁹¹ See e.g. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 317–18.

²⁹² Consider also Koning’s account of how neoconservative and populist attachments to capitalist “signs” can be sustained through critique of others in what he calls an “idolatry critique”: “idolatry critique comes to serve more and more as a means of externalization, a way to legitimate and sustain our own emotional investment in the sign by disavowing our issues with it, contrasting our own beliefs and commitments with the imagined superstition of others and attributing social problems to their irrational practices.” Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism*, 7.

²⁹³ See e.g. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008), 285–87; *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 74–92. There is some parallel between Žizek’s description and that in the post-Kleinian theories of pathological organizations, which also describes how psychological insights are perversely blocked and destructiveness is eroticized. See e.g., Joseph, “Addiction to near Death.”

²⁹⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 14–15.

Žižek intends this model of cynical yet positive attachment to the system to be the constitutive mode of capitalist subjectivation, but there are reasons to think that this is partial. Unless we stretch the concept of ‘enjoyment’ to breaking point, it is hard to claim that people *enjoy* capitalism throughout. Indeed, this claim may even be insensitive to the lived experience of those who are struggling under the coercive and disciplinary realities of our age of precarity.²⁹⁵ Once again, my strategy is to accept that there is something to the phenomena that Žižek describes, but to deny that such a phenomenon is exhaustive of all neoliberal subject positions. Moreover, I think Žižek misses a trick by restricting cynicism to identification alone. I think there are two other related phenomena, *phoney identification* and *cynical disidentification*.

In speaking of “phoney identification,” I borrow from Adorno’s account of fascism, where “people do not really identify themselves with [the leader and his ideology] but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader’s performance.”²⁹⁶ We may connect this with Adorno’s idea that capitalist subjects who egolessly act like “automatons” that “mirror objective [social] trends”²⁹⁷ or to Winnicott, who argued that people can be ill from being *too much in line* with social reality.²⁹⁸ The phoney identifier with the system goes with the flow of the neoliberal norms without deep identification or extreme pathological formations. A shallow identification, rooted in *indifference* about the objects, characterizes such identification. Unlike cynical identification, phoney identification is, thus, less about enjoyment.

There are important parallels between phoney identification and Christopher Bollas’s characterization of “normopaths” he met in his clinical practice. Bollas characterizes normopathic selves who are “abnormally normal” – “too stable, secure, comfortable and

²⁹⁵ Žižek is wrong when he objects to Foucault’s with idea that disciplinary and confessional mechanisms *must* be “sexualized” and “gives rise to a satisfaction of its own.” (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 299–300.) In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault does not indicate how subjects will come to assume the disciplined position – and as such he can articulate the mechanicity and repressiveness of disciplinary institutions without barring the possibility that some may come to “enjoy” discipline as Žižek argues. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

²⁹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2001).

²⁹⁷ “Sociology and Psychology II,” *New Left Review*, no. 47 (1968): 95.

²⁹⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 87–90.

socially extrovert” in a way that renders them uninterested in and subsequently *lack* an internal world. In some cases, these might be so strong as to prevent them from experiencing intense emotions such as grief.²⁹⁹

Besides normopathy, phoney identification takes the form of *shallow group identifications*. In the mid-20th Century, pioneering psychoanalysts tried to study how psychic mechanisms (such as identification and projection) function in organizational and group settings.³⁰⁰ Common to these studies are ideas that organizational and group culture not only adapt to the ‘hard’ functional requirements for existence, they also play significant roles in maintaining *group* belonging in the form of shared group cultures. Like individuals, groups can variously contain the narcissistic, manic, idealizing, paranoid elements of their members, and induce their members to exhibit group traits more readily.

Although some members really “*enjoy*” their group membership, group identifications are often enforced by the desire to belong and *the fears of sticking out and being targeted by group sanctions*. In many cases, individuals only reluctantly participate in groups and do so under feelings of disaffection, demotivation, or a conscious sense of the loss of individuality.³⁰¹ Referencing these accounts, it is arguable that people can attach to neoliberal norms in similar ways – *as a function of* membership in neoliberal organizations.

In ordinary instances, despite their group membership, individuals maintain a sense of their individuality, and a *split* between individual ideals and group-sanctioned ideals prevents the complete internalization of said norms. The more the individual psychically resists, the more the *anxieties* involved in group belonging become salient. Indeed, such anxieties about non-conformity can be regarded as *objective anxiety*. Contemporary neoliberal institutions are psychosocially quite efficient: norms of achievement are often propped up by cultures that audit

²⁹⁹ Christopher Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia: Life in the Age of Bewilderment* (New York: Routledge, 2018), ch. 6.

³⁰⁰ Susan Long, *The Perverse Organisation and Its Deadly Sins* (Routledge, 2018); David Armstrong, ed. *Social Defences against Anxiety: Explorations in a Paradigm* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018). See further discussions in 6.1.3.

³⁰¹ See, most notably, the study of Turquet and Menzies. Pierre Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group," in *The Large Group* (London: Routledge, 1975); Isabel E. P. Menzies, "A Case-Study in the Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety: A Report on a Study of the Nursing Service of a General Hospital," *Human Relations* 13, no. 2 (1960).

and *shame* the underperforming and uncooperative.³⁰² The persistence of the group dynamics of shaming arguably testifies to the fragility of group memberships, at least for some.

Last in the category of cynicism is *cynical disidentification*. Cynical disidentification involves disidentification with the neoliberal ideals, but is not so strong as to lead to defeat or resistance. On this, we can associate the many workers who wished they did not have to work.³⁰³ Here, cynicism mainly results from how people conform to neoliberal norms despite harbouring grudges. In some instances, cynicism and humour are also recruited to separate and downplay the psychic effects of the *external coercions* to comply and the *self that does not want to comply*.³⁰⁴ In relation to group membership, we may use cynical disidentification for those who disidentify with organizational norms, on the one hand, but, on the other, have to participate in organization out of material reasons, and so are under pressures to perform. They neither derive enjoyment from their cynicism nor are indifferent, but their negative emotional reactions only extend as far as a cynical form of disidentification, short of experiencing full defeat or engaging in active forms of disidentification.

Defeat and Disidentification

We now reach the opposite end of the spectrum in the levels of internalization. The first category is the defeated. This includes those who are chronically depressed and demoralized under the harsh neoliberal discipline.³⁰⁵ Despite being a *psychological* category, defeat is also

³⁰² Hoggett, "Shame and Performativity."

³⁰³ Under the category of cynical dis-identifiers, we can also name the figure of *SpongeBob SquarePants* character Squidward Tentacles, whose dissatisfaction at work, sarcasm at his overly enthusiastic colleague SpongeBob and, in one instance, an act of initiating a strike have been a source of influential internet memes. SpongeBob SquarePants Official, "Squidward Doing Anything but His Actual Job at the Krusty Krab," (2023).

³⁰⁴ There is arguably much of this in meme and internet cultures, where people mock not only entrepreneurial ideologies but also themselves for being compliant workers. In Hong Kong, for example, memes surrounding typhoon holidays paradoxically juxtapose the awareness of one's obedience to work culture, the influence of oligarchs on work culture, and people's wish to skip work.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Honneth's formulation "Compelled from all sides to remain open to the psychological impulses of authentic identity-seeking, subjects are faced with the alternative of feigning authenticity or fleeing into depression; they are forced to choose between staging originality for strategic reasons and pathologically shutting down." Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization," 166. This should be distinguished from the "depressed" or burnout which various authors, following Ehrenberg, have interpreted as a 'pathology of inadequacy.' (Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self*.) The latter category of depression is often read as a result of overwhelming social *stimulation* (as opposed to repression) and/or *identification* with the norms of performance, leading to exhaustion. I should warn against reductively explaining the epidemic of 'depressive disorders' with sweeping generalizations about the neoliberal power and unitary aetiologies of depression. As I argue in Chapter 5, existing classifications of psychiatric 'disorders' by

largely conditioned by socio-economic circumstances. For instance, Jennifer Silva's interviews demonstrate how heightening socio-economic adversities have generated in working-class young adults in the US a strong feeling that they are "prisoners of the present," barred off from any possibility of success and stability under existing norms.³⁰⁶ Many articulate in interviews a sense of doom and nihilism.³⁰⁷ Aside from the working-class, defeat is also more likely with people in *abjected* social groups (such as those racialized as non-white, welfare-dependent, homeless, or diagnosed with a severe mental disorders.) These are populations for whom social recognition/identification with prevailing norms is demeaning. They are those for whom, in Butler's words, assuming a legible subject position requires a certain "effacement," and assumption of an "injurious name" – more on this in the later sections.³⁰⁸

Finally, we have active disidentification, where people do not just fail to identify, but actively resist or sabotage the regime of neoliberal norms and institutions. In a way, this is increasingly gaining traction across the world: from the ideas of "quiet quitting" in the West, and the joys of "saboru" (”サボる”, Japanese for ‘sabotage’) and “射波” (Cantonese for “kicking the ball” as a metaphor for malingering at school or at work) in the neoliberalized East, to comprehensive *rejections* of the neoliberal, competitive way of life in the form of “low-desire society” and “lying-flat” (“躺平”).³⁰⁹

symptom clusters are themselves questionable, and are unlikely to have a unified aetiological basis. Sadness and inactivity can be responses to overstimulation and burnout, as they can be responses to overwhelming repressive and disciplinary pressures.

³⁰⁶ Silva, *Coming up Short.*, esp. chs 1-2

³⁰⁷ "“This Thing Is a Joke”."

³⁰⁸ Describing the mode of subjection in the context of law, Butler describes how the “demand to comply with the norm that governs the acceptability and intelligibility of the subject can and does lead to the deconstitution of the subject by the law itself.” Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 77. See also, Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997)., Introduction

³⁰⁹ Ivana Davidovic, "‘Lying Flat’: Why Some Chinese Are Putting Work Second," *BBC News*, 16 February 2022.

Sara Ahmed describes how people who challenge prevailing norms can be branded as “affect aliens” – “killjoys” and “melancholics” who fail to give up unrealistic ideals.³¹⁰ Extending Ahmed’s analysis in her discussion of neoliberal, positive culture, Mari Ruti writes:

“people who complain about their disenchantment can be seen as social irritants, as trouble-makers who intentionally seek to deplete the happiness of those who haven’t yet lost their faith in the happiness scripts that govern their choices. [...] In this manner, those who fail to live up to dominant ideals of happiness end up carrying the burden of bad feelings whereas those who prosper push these feelings aside, sometimes even accusing those who try to express them of sabotaging social progress.”³¹¹

Active disidentification is fraught with great psychic costs from social misrecognition. The heavy pressure placed on such affect aliens – arguably, a feature of how society *affectively* excommunicates those who are defeated and resist – may lead many to re-attach themselves to dominant ideals through “identification with the aggressor.”³¹² Yet, however precarious such positions are, it may be important for critical theories to attend to the defeated and the obstinately resistant, as it is the only everyday source of rebellion that theories can tap into to articulate emancipatory hopes without falling back to grand-sounding but ‘socially weightless’ prescriptions.³¹³

Summary of Subject Positions and Remarks

A summary of the key features of neoliberal subject positions is presented in Table 1. Before moving on to abjection, three further remarks can be made:

First, a note on the quality of anxiety experienced in these subject positions. The general idea is that as we move down the table from positive identification to defeat and active disidentification, there is a corresponding reduction in the degree of internalization: At the top of the spectrum, neoliberal norms – enforced by institutions and organizations – are *congruent* with the subject’s psychic structure. This implies that subjects are more likely to perceive stress

³¹⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

³¹¹ Ruti, *Penis Envy*, 10.

³¹² Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, ch. 9.

³¹³ We return to emancipation in Chapters 7-8. On social weightlessness of critical ontologies, see Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political : Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014).

and anxiety *in ego-syntonic ways*. So long as identification is complete, anxiety issues from the superego's internal gaze primarily from the *distance between the present ego and the internalized ego-ideals*. Falling short in the system is experientially no different from falling short of oneself. On the opposite side, we have those where psychic socialization has failed. Here, social norms do not disappear; instead, they act on the subject in a more coercive and *ego-dystonic* manner. In other words, as the subject disidentifies with norms, they will experience the demands and the socio-institutional reality that enforces such demands as *external coercion*. Anxieties will be experienced in their predominantly *objective* aspects. Most people, arguably are located in the middle of the two extremes, forming partial identifications in some aspects of neoliberal socialization. As such, we may expect varying proportions of objective and ego-anxieties.

Second, the subject positions discussed should not be read as a device to categorize individuals. As I have remarked, neoliberal norms and demands are multiple, and, therefore, a person who firmly identifies with the ideals in one aspect (say on social media) can be completely defeated in another (say work). More fundamentally, psychosocial subject positions are better categorized not as things, but as *psychodynamic (identificatory/disidentificatory) processes* proper to that position. As we see in psychoanalytic work, identifications are often complex and multilayered. They are *dynamic*. They can change in the course of people's lives, especially during periods of grief and loss.

Third and finally, we can now give a better account to discuss the relationship between *objective*, socio-economic position and *psychological* subject positions. Macro-sociologically speaking, we may expect the difficulty in sustaining high levels of internalization to scale with the degree of objective precarity. (It is no accident how Occupy Wall Street protests and "Lying-flat" occur in the recent decade, and not before.)

This, of course, does not mean that continued precarization leads directly to disidentification and de-legitimation of the order. Many mechanisms can work *against* disidentification. For instance, the attractiveness of the ideal of the self-responsible subject, relayed through

neoliberal therapeutic discourses, has proved useful in giving some a wounding sense of agency to persist individually despite the gross insufficiency of individual means of coping.³¹⁴ Besides, as Anna Freud famously observed, subjects will identify with the aggressor under strong environmental pressures.³¹⁵ Instead of bearing the anxiety the threat the outside aggressor poses, subjects can *act to deflect their perceived aggression*, making the self more aligned with the threat, and *others* bear the wrath of the punitive environment in place of them. Building on this, Chernomas names the “Kansas syndrome,” under which people “identify with and act on behalf of their exploiters (aggressors), lie to themselves and attempt to conquer their fear by becoming more like the exploiters, and then project this same exploitation on others, turning it back onto the rest of the world.”³¹⁶ Relatedly, Jessica Benjamin also identifies the fear of retaliation from the aggressor as a factor that disposes people to identify with economic elites rather than to challenge the injustices perpetrated by them.³¹⁷

The convergence of compensatory individualism and identification with the aggressor is nowhere more apparent in the marked rise of right-wing ‘survivalist’ ideologies, which naturalize social hierarchy and normalize elite predation by representing society as predatory “only-one-can-live” struggles for survival.³¹⁸ In the words of Cabanas and Illouz, survivalist culture recommends “a highly individualist mentality of constant preparedness, full self-sufficiency and excessive self-concern for one’s safety in a world, where society is perceived as crumbling, and the worst is expected to be around the corner.”³¹⁹ Equally importantly, in right-wing survivalism, is their reference to naturalized identity groups based on parochial ideas of race and gender. This has a sizable effect in derailing the resistive energies of the order,

³¹⁴ Ruti, *Penis Envy*, ch. 1. See also Silva’s description of “individual pain management” in Silva, *We’re Still Here*.

³¹⁵ Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, 109–21.

³¹⁶ Robert Chernomas, “Kansas Syndrome?,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 19 (2014).

³¹⁷ Jessica Benjamin, “Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma: Reflections after the Plague Year,” *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (2021).

³¹⁸ For the psychodynamics of survivalism see, *Beyond Doer and Done To*; “Wolf’s Dictionary.” For survivalism’s origins in far-right circles, see Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World without Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2023), ch. 5.

³¹⁹ Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, 197n60.

fostering psychic alliance between the elite/capitalist classes and the precaritized, and is the key to understanding “paranoid politics” in Chapter 6.

Neoliberal Subject Positions		Characterization
Identification	Positive Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Near-complete alignment of ego-ideal with ideals projected by neoliberal norms, and ego-ideal issues ego-syntonic demands. Suffering still exists but is interpreted as signs of inadequacy in the face of one's (self-imposed) ideals.
	Narcissistic Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narcissistic personalities as described by Kernberg: Precarious phantasy of a grandiose self-supported by continuous need for external recognition. Patient can exhibit showiness, manipulateness, aggressiveness, and disturbed relations with others. Narcissistic traits allow functioning in competitive neoliberal culture, especially in leaders of protests and capitalist institutions.
	Manic Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manic states: restlessness, euphoria, accelerated speech and thinking, optimism and uninhibited from any sense of guilt Manic states allow optimum functioning especially in creative work, which requires speed, adaptability, and recklessness.
Cynicism	Cynical Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ego actively disidentifies with prevailing ideologies, and mocks/demonizes people who take ideologies seriously, despite acting in ways that conform with the same ideology. Apparent cynical disparagement of norms and ideologies functions to conceal complicity and enjoyment under existing ideological arrangements.
	Phony Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Normopathy</i>: selves hollowed of interiority, fully responding to demands of external world without any resistance. <i>Group culture</i>: Identifications with neoliberal norms as a function of membership in neoliberal institutions. Such identifications are often not enduring, and mostly supported by the fear of group sanctions.
	Cynical disidentification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subjects generally <i>disidentify</i> with neoliberal norms but utilize cynical distance to protect themselves from experiencing defeat.
Disidentification	Defeat (Passive disidentification)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification with neoliberal norms breakdown so much that even cynical distance cannot be mobilized, possibly due to the oppressiveness of circumstances and other psychosocial problems. Maybe highly correlated with social class, and prevalent amongst those diagnosed as depressed.
	Active disidentification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active refusal to comply with neoliberal norms – this includes refusal at work, low-desire lifestyles, social activism.

Table 1 Neoliberal Subject Positions

3.3.4. Abjection

I have tried to establish the various ways in which a subject can be constituted (and de-constituted) as a neoliberal subject through socially compelled identifications. However, the story of neoliberal subjectivation goes deeper.

For one, it is quite important to realize that the neoliberal order is not only supported by *positive* exhortations to perform, nor only by the imposition of disciplinary norms that regulate our actions, but is intrinsically repressive towards the bottom of the social ladder. I have earlier proposed that a proper understanding of the neoliberal order cannot just focus on middle-class ideologies of achievement and ignore class-specific milieus of lower classes and the ‘underclasses.’ Especially in the US, the rise of neoliberalism came along with amped funding for the police, prisons, and the “mental health system” driven by misguided and moralizing understandings that the poor are trouble-makers who require close surveillance, discipline, and repression.³²⁰ As I will argue further in Chapter 5, poverty and homelessness have been “psychiatricized,” while psychiatric categories and practices remain racialized.³²¹

There are various ways to account for why identity divisions persist under neoliberal capitalism. Foucault traced how the construction of an “*abnormal*” outside has, since the rise of disciplinary power, accompanied the modern mode of governance.³²² Marxist economic analysis would argue that the maintenance of *racialized* and *gendered* distinctions is a constitutive feature of capitalism.³²³ Such distinctions justify differential treatment and *expropriation* in a world where the rights are guaranteed for the centre. These accounts are illustrative, but how these distinctions function psychosocially remains unclear.

³²⁰ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*.

³²¹ Jonathan Metzl, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); China Mills, "The Psychiatrization of Poverty: Rethinking the Mental Health-Poverty Nexus," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9, no. 5 (2015); Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*.

³²² Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège De France 1974-1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti, Antonella Salomoni, and Arnold Ira Davidson (London: Verso, 2003).

³²³ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (Verso, 1991), ch. 2; Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, ch. 2.

To explore the psychoanalytical significance of social distinctions, we can examine how the ego is formed through *abjection*. Psychoanalytically, the ego begins forming as the subject *expels* parts of the self and renders it the unreachable *not-I*. Later, in its anxious encounter with the authoritative other, the authority not only provides the budding ego with positive ideals for identification, but it also *prohibits*, renders ‘unlivable’ specific desires and subject positions. Julia Kristeva famously argues that the ego capable of (narcissistically) measuring oneself from an ideal is only possible after psychic abjection – a process in which certain ‘objects’ (objects) are repudiated as radically other. In her words, “abjection[...] is a precondition of narcissism” of the ego.³²⁴ Abjection constitutes the subject through the object, and the latter’s reappearance can induce *disgust* and *phobia* in the mature ego.

While Kristeva considers the object mainly in the form of the maternal body, Judith Butler unambiguously construes the concept psychosocially. On the psychological level, Butler argues that subjectivating and objectivating processes co-occur during socialization: The process of making oneself “lovable” and “recognizable” in the face of social/familial norms requires the subject to not only *identify* with the normative model of the recognizable object in the formation of the ego-ideal, the subject is also forced to *renounce* (*i.e.* lose) drives, desires, and wants that are *prohibited by social authorities*. Indeed, as Butler suggests, (positive) identifications can be so formed not so much because the ego-ideal it involves is attractive, any more than an attempt to *disidentify* with objected/prohibited social positions “that seems too saturated with injury or aggression.”³²⁵

Butler highlights how norms distinguishing the ‘livable’ and the objected are *social* as well as psychological. What is objected psychologically often aligns with normative social categories. In one place, Butler argues that ‘the object designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless *densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject*.’³²⁶

³²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13.

³²⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 64.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii., emphasis added

Butler best illustrates the psychosocial complexities of subjection/abjection with their account of gendered socialization. In their writings on gender, Butler traces the operation of a heterosexual matrix that at the same time socially excludes gender-nonconforming agents, and constitutively prohibits homosexuality to prop up sexual difference. Socialized within such a matrix, subjects are forced to renounce (lose) all traces of their homosexual desires and attachments early on, so as to avoid falling into the abjected category of the homosexual and secure the recognition and love essential for (symbolic) survival.

Yet, as forcefully as such norms are enforced, heterosexualist prohibition falters: not only do gender non-conforming people exist, even those who come to form gender-conforming, 'straight' identities are not *stably* straight. As Butler explains, heterosexualist prohibitions enforce a disidentification with homosexual positions to the degree that they enact an *abjective splitting-off* of homosexual desires from identification. Yet, the *spectre* of such homosexual parts of the self *remains as unrecognizable but powerful "melancholic bodily remainders"* that continue to haunt the heterosexualized subject, threatening their dissolution.³²⁷ This melancholic instability of the heterosexual subject is made apparent *socially* in the disgust, fear, and rage people harbour against the gender non-conforming.³²⁸ In Butler's account, the *social* affects people hold against abjected others are testimony to their psychic need to stabilize identity in the face of its instability – the need to continue to *deny* the melancholic losses that sustain the subject.³²⁹ In other words, to the degree that socially abjected others are a reminder of such identity-dissolving losses, their continued *social* disparagement restabilizes the subject's *precarious* sense of identity:

"Certain forms of disavowal do reappear as external and externalized figures of abjection who receive the repudiation of the subject time and again. It is this repeated repudiation by which the subject installs its boundary and constructs the claim to its 'integrity' [...]. This is not a buried identification that is left behind in a forgotten past, but an identification that must be levelled and buried again and again, the

³²⁷ "The subject produced as continuous, visible, and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation." *Psychic Life of Power*, 29. On gender melancholia, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*; *Psychic Life of Power*, ch. 5

³²⁸ For Butler on AIDS deaths as stigma against the non-conforming, see *Psychic Life of Power*, 27–28.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182–85.

compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary.”³³⁰

Here, we see an essential way in which social and psychic exclusions reproduce one another: *Exclusionary social norms compel the psychic abjection of undesirable parts of the psyche, which, in turn, causes subjects to socially reinstate the exclusionary norms by socially abjecting those that remind them of their inner melancholia.* This melancholia/exclusion is passed on to the next generation when normalized subjects enforce a similar type of prohibition on neonates – that is, until the cycle is broken by systematic changes that affect both the psycho- and the social.

Neoliberal Objects

Although most of Butler’s work is on gender (sometimes race), they sharply highlight the potential imbrication that can occur between psychic abjection and social forms of exclusion, which is very useful in understanding neoliberal socialization.³³¹ Butler’s account of subjectivation is echoed by Lynne Layton, who uses the concept of “normative unconscious processes” to describe the psychic functioning of neoliberal socialization:

“[normative unconscious processes are] those processes that are produced by social hierarchies of various kinds and that, in turn, work to reproduce and secure a hierarchical status quo[...] One could say that class identities are formed via a defensive splitting off of parts of self too closely associated with anything felt to characterize other, especially lower but also upper-class fractions. One distances oneself from the lower class’s closeness to necessity, but that very splitting creates a haunting anxiety about necessity that is ever-present and must be vigilantly guarded against.[...] These processes make class, like gender, a melancholic structure.”³³²

³³⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 76.

³³¹ In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler warns against the psychoanalytic tendency to reduce everything to sexual differences and argues for the need to study gender identifications in dynamic and non-reducible interactions with class and racial norms/prohibitions. This is best illustrated in her reading of *Paris is Burning*, where she suggests. That suggests that racial and class norms also compel “embodiment [...] reiteration [...] and impersonation” as gender norms do, and suggest gender can be “the vehicle for the phantasmatic transformation of that nexus of race and class, the site of its articulation.” Ibid., 88–89.

³³² Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*.

Behind the cosmopolitan pretence in neoliberal culture is psychosocial disdain and fear of the lower classes. Despite neoliberal attempts at obfuscating class,³³³ the model of neoliberal subject remains normatively middle-class. Replacing the historically more privileged representation of blue-collar workers in the war economies³³⁴ are images that mock the poor as “chavs”.³³⁵ The flipside of glorifying entrepreneurialism is responsabilizing welfare ideologies that rebrand the poor as ‘lazy,’ ‘irresponsible,’ and their misery ‘deserved.’³³⁶ If one falls so low as to need support from the government, one is almost always suspected of being ‘cheats’ or ‘free-riders.’ Those who fight for the poor and push for greater social justice are criticized for naïve socialist sentiments, stealing people’s hard-won income, or sabotaging economic progress for selfish political gains. Such is the cultural abjection of the lower classes – but what of its psychic repercussions?

As early as the 1960s and 70s, psychiatrists working with children have reported that wealthier children hold paranoid feelings that their abode is besieged by “greedy and criminal masses.”³³⁷ More recently, Layton’s clinical explorations of her middle-class analysands demonstrate how rising inequalities in the neoliberal era are correlated with the presence of class-based status anxieties pervading familial socialization.³³⁸ As Layton powerfully shows, middle-class upbringings during the neoliberal age involve elitist demands for upward social mobility and *class differentiation*. Acting since childhood, these demands cause individuals to fixate upon their class membership and split off dependent parts of the self in return for social and paternal recognition. Through selective identification and abjection, middle-class egos then come to assume the subjectivity idealized under neoliberal norms, with the effect that the “unwanted”

³³³ On class-lessness of neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*, see Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 65.

³³⁴ Freeman, *Behemoth*, ch. 5

³³⁵ Imogen Tyler, ““Chav Mum Chav Scum” Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain,” *Feminist media studies* 8, no. 1 (2008).

³³⁶ See 5.5.

³³⁷ See Alford, who is referring to the interviews by psychiatrist Robert Coles. C. Fred Alford, *Melanie Klein & Critical Social Theory: An Account of Politics, Art and Reason Based on Her Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 85–86.

³³⁸ Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, esp. chs. 8–10.

parts of the self – those signalling dependency and vulnerability– are projected onto lower-class and racialized ‘underclasses’ and remain disavowed as parts of the self.

Layton offers clinical vignettes of how the class-based splitting off of dependency needs can create deep troubles in relating in her middle-class patients, promoting hyper-individualist and “somasochistic patterns of relating” to others. For some middle-class subjects, the return of the melancholically abjected as a “fear of contagion by contact with the lower classes” is especially pronounced when entering ‘lower-class’ spaces.³³⁹

There are fewer clinical vignettes of lower-class members.³⁴⁰ However, interviews with working-class subjects also reveal abjections shaping their life narratives. In these accounts, many working-class interviewees draw “stark moral boundaries between the deserving and undeserving,” trying to place themselves in the former by building narratives of hardened, independent selves who are resilient in the face of adversity.³⁴¹ Quite similar to their middle-class counterparts, their neoliberalized ego’s seemingly *independent, autonomous* image is maintained by projecting *unwanted* parts onto (racialized) figures such as “welfare cheats” and “ghetto criminals” – the *chosen abjects* in neoliberalized media.³⁴²

As Hochschild observes, many of her white working-class interviewees were racists in that they “believe in a natural[ized] hierarchy that places blacks at the bottom, and [...] judge their own worth by distance from that bottom.”³⁴³ This kind of racist prejudice can also be held by people of colour who come to maintain their individualist identifications by downplaying the significance of racism in their lives and blaming ‘ghetto blacks’ for manufacturing their own misery.³⁴⁴ Being heavily disadvantaged and abjected themselves, working-class narratives of

³³⁹ Ibid., ch. 9.

³⁴⁰ This is in part because of the price barrier therapies are for lower classes. Daniel G. Butler, “Falling through the Cracks: Precarity, Precocity, and Other Neoliberal Pressures,” *Fort da* (San Francisco, CA) 21, no. 2 (2015). As Walkerdine argues, “psychoanalysis as a practice has been largely available to clients with money, and as a theory therefore executed also by those with a bourgeois and upper-class background.” Valerie Walkerdine, “Neoliberalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*, ed. Yannis Stavrakakis (Routledge, 2019), 382.

³⁴¹ Silva, *Coming up Short; We’re Still Here*. Quote from *We’re Still Here*, 3.

³⁴² Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, 225; Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 143–50.

³⁴³ Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 147.

³⁴⁴ Silva, *Coming up Short*, 105–08. Layton describes the challenge of abjected blacks when she writes: “black sadness is sustained not only by continuing inequalities but also by living out the result of what black people had to split off

selfhood presented in these accounts are often more conflict-ridden than their middle-class counterparts. But, normative unconscious processes of abjection also occur in working-class *fears of being contaminated by and identified with* abjected ‘underclasses,’ and are sometimes combatted by *confirming and sharing upper-class stereotypes of the lower and under-classes* on the one hand, while compensatorily inventing working-class ways of aligning with neoliberal ideals of the self-made subject on the other.

Subjectivation is not only sustained by identifications with middle-class norms. Much as subjectivation occurs within a complicated terrain of contesting calls to identify, the formation of neoliberalized egos also involves norms of exclusionary abjections along classist, racialized, gendered, or psychiatric lines. The examples of working-class subjects above show that *class* abjection can enforce racial (racist) identifications. In other instances, class identifications can also be sustained by fantasies of assuming the normatively masculine by abjecting the (dependent) feminine³⁴⁵, assuming the proud, happy, ‘homonormative’ gays by abjecting queers.³⁴⁶

In all these cases, the assumption of neoliberal subjectivities is tied to *abjections* – the *socially-sanctioned* splitting of unrecognized parts onto social others. As holders of melancholic remainders of the ‘properly’ neoliberalized subjects, the abjected others are relegated to unlivable zones of society deprived of material and symbolic supports, receiving time and again the hostility and disgust of the supposed ‘subjects.’ Yet, as long as subjects need to prove their identity against the abjects repeatedly, they demonstrate the constitutive instability of their identities. Arguably, this need to maintain abjected identities and the horror at them is the best testimony to the deepest fears of the subject and the enduring motor for our wounding attachments to the neoliberal order – the *fear of the abject*.

to become ‘proper’ black subjects in a white world that casts them as the inferior ‘Other.’” (Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, 190.) This certainly does not mean that *everyone who is abjected* will come to counter abjection by forming compensatory and injurious identifications to the prevailing normative order.

³⁴⁵ See *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, ch. 8.

³⁴⁶ See Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo, et al. (2002); Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, ch. 3.

3.4. Neoliberal Grief and Melancholic Subjects

Having discussed neoliberal anxieties, we can turn to neoliberal grief. Grief and loss are as fundamental concepts to psychoanalysis as anxiety. While grief is not generally associated with anxiety, in psychoanalytic theory, a significant aspect of grief is ‘depressive anxiety,’ which is anxiety surrounding the survival and persistence of an object of dependency.³⁴⁷ This type of anxiety can powerfully shape our identifications and abjections, and motivate the formation of pathological organizations as much as other kinds of anxiety.

Freud, while arguing that *anxiety* is the key to uncovering symptoms, also placed *loss* at the centre, as early experiences of anxiety are almost tethered to threats of the loss of a loving object. I noted, in passing, the role of loss in subject formation in earlier sections, namely that the threat of *losing* love induces the subject to identify with its objects and *abjectively* disown whatever is deemed undesirable (by the Other). Indeed, for Freud, identification with the lost object is the *constitutive step by which loss is psychically registered*, for identification partly reverses the loss of the object-relation.³⁴⁸ In object-relations psychoanalysis, our experiences of and reactions to *loss are crucial* to psychic structuration, particularly in the constitution of the ego and the superego.³⁴⁹ Some analysts go so far as to argue that the fundamental goal of psychoanalytic therapy is to allow subjects to live through our finite human life of inevitable losses with love and meaning, without resorting to defences that lead to melancholic withdrawal, rageful blaming, or unrealistic idealizations.³⁵⁰

In this theory, loss traumatizes and disorients,³⁵¹ and the psyche’s first response to loss is to protect itself by taking its object inside and identifying with it to preserve the lost external bond.

³⁴⁷ This is most famously elaborated in Melanie Klein’s theory of persecutory and depressive anxieties. See Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*.

³⁴⁸ Freud, SE 19: Chapter III, which generalizes the account of melancholic identification in Freud, SE 14: 239-258. See also Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, ch. 6.

³⁴⁹ See, Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 344–69.

³⁵⁰ Joel Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022); *Wisdom Won from Illness*.

³⁵¹ Klein, in her account of mourning, argues that intense feelings of hatred in the process of mourning can – at times – lead the subject to feel that the loving and good parts inside the self are extinguished, leading to great despair, while at other times, the subject may experience elation because internal objects are compensatorily idealized. Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 355.

The caveat is that the loss's traumatising effects also magnify one's destructiveness and hostility, and as such, the first identifications/introjects are imbued with destructive powers – a ferocity appropriate to the superego that emerges from it. At this point, the mind has two options: either to deny or to accept loss.

The first option – referred to as *melancholic*³⁵² – involves the knitting of a network of compensatory unconscious fantasies to displace the *pain of having lost* into substitute pathological organizations.³⁵³ In melancholic responses to loss, the psyche internalizes a snapshot of one's traumatic loss and endows the lost object with the full ferocity of one's destructiveness.³⁵⁴ Superego identifications stemming from this snapshot are severe, omnipotent and vengeful, with destructiveness threatening to wreak internal chaos. Out of fears of unleashing the destruction onto cherished objects, the melancholic psyche unconsciously produces omnipotent and narcissistic compensatory fantasies to counter destruction, often resulting in pathological organizations.³⁵⁵ At the same time, the ego grows *defensive* to avoid upsetting the precarious balance of the internal world. This way, the melancholic's *identifications are frozen, while repressive barriers between self and objects have to be forcefully policed to prevent internal havoc*. Fixated, the self becomes less able to respond and interact with the world in rewarding and self-transforming ways, and can only rigidly interact with objects with fear and vengefulness.

³⁵² The term 'melancholia' is ambiguous in psychoanalysis. In the broad understanding used here, it refers to (a) the family of psychic defences used to *evade the psychic reality of loss*. In its narrower understanding, however, it refers only to (b) clinical syndromes now more commonly referred to as depression or pathological grief. The two understandings converge in Freud's early essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, where (b) is understood as an instance of (a). See Freud, SE 14: 237-258.

³⁵³ This includes phantasmatic formations that reproject inner ferocity to external objects (paranoid defence), manically crowd out the mind with omnipotent thoughts and acts (manic defence), repeat self-reproaches to dramatize internalized conflicts (melancholia), or obsessively act and think to undo losses (obsession).

³⁵⁴ As Freud and object-relations theorists argue, what is identified/introjected after loss is not the *object* as such, but one's fantasies of the object. This is why the severity of the introject (as superego) reflects not merely the objective qualities of the object (though this also plays a role), but the severity – heightened by the trauma of loss – of one's *fantasies* associated with the object. See e.g. Freud, SE 21: 137-39.

³⁵⁵ Cf. the presence of "extremely bad and extremely perfect objects" in the melancholic internal world in Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 268. On pathological organizations and the failure of mourning, see Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, ch. 5.

The alternative to melancholia is mourning, which is more energy-expedient but psychologically rewarding. Where melancholia freezes introjects in their ferocity, mourning unweaves the frozen image in a painful quest to sort out what the loss means. Taking the model of normal grief reactions, psychoanalysis considers loss to be metabolized in the *work* of mourning where one's many broken connections to different facets of the lost object are reiteratively and painfully evoked then consciously let go.³⁵⁶ As this happens, the ferocity of internalized figures is attenuated, as superego identifications move from omnipotent and vengeful to potentially understanding and realistic,³⁵⁷ reducing the need for compensatory phantasies of narcissistic and omnipotent kinds. With reduced vengefulness and omnipotence, the ego can also better recognize its finite inability to resurrect the lost object and begin to make realistic amends to damaged interpersonal relations while repairing one's damaged internal world.³⁵⁸ The ego, moving on from the trauma of loss, thus gradually becomes less rigid and can better appreciate, receive and learn from its objects. Here, the need to abject can at least be partly mitigated by empathetic understanding and tolerance of difference of the now more receptive ego. Through mourning, the trauma of *loss* can be transformed into an occasion for growth and moral development.³⁵⁹

Environmental and social factors play a role in deciding whether losses are responded to melancholically or mournfully.³⁶⁰ Whether the developmental work of mourning can take

³⁵⁶ For Freud, the object of attachment has "a significance reinforced by a thousand links" and in mourning, "[e]ach single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists." Freud, SE 14, 255-256.

³⁵⁷ Klein describes how internal objects, at a later stage of mourning, can be "sorrowful" and "share [the mourner's] grief" Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 359.

³⁵⁸ Melanie Klein conceptualizes internal aspects of mourning thusly: "It is by reinstating inside himself the 'good' parents [i.e., objects of earliest identifications] as well as the recently lost person, and by rebuilding his inner world, which was disintegrated and in danger, that he overcomes his grief, regains security, and achieves true harmony and peace." Ibid., 369. For the external acts of reparation, see *ibid.*, 311-13. As Spilius et al. notes, external acts of repair can only work partially, meaning that true reparation involves the reconstitution of the internal world despite "the sad recognition of damage [and loss F.Y.] that cannot be repaired." Spilius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 471. Compare also Steiner's remark that successful mourning depends on the recognition that some damages cannot be undone, reparative wishes are not omnipotent, and the object must be allowed to die. Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, esp. ch. 5.

³⁵⁹ See e.g. Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness*, ch. 11.

³⁶⁰ The social dimensions of mourning is not always highlighted by psychoanalytic theorists. Kleinians, for example, emphasize how the handling of childhood analogues of grief in the 'depressive position' conditions how well individuals can cope with adult losses. Factors affecting the early resolution of the depressive position include (i) the extent of the child's instinctual destructiveness and (ii) whether their caregiver can contain the infant's grievances

place depends on whether there is time and space for griefers to mourn, and whether there are good ‘containing’ others and collectives with whom their sorrows and grievances can be shared. Grief processes that are not socially recognized and supported are likely to turn into melancholia, with difficult and pathogenic consequences.³⁶¹

In subsequent chapters, I describe how neoliberal cultures of acceleration and medicalization crowd out, sedate, and disrupt people’s work of mourning, invariably pathologizing grief as a liability and a ‘mental disorder.’ But for now, we will list the extent to which experiences of loss are amplified in the neoliberal order:

On the most basic level, grief is occasioned by the death or the irrecoverable loss of someone, as long as we are finite and fragile human beings who will age, death is inevitable. What matters socially is not *whether* people die, but whether they die *prematurely* from social circumstances, and whether their losses are ‘*grievable*,’ *recognized as dignified losses*. The latter two factors can have a significant impact on the difficulty of mourning.³⁶² Here, we may say that the neoliberal epoch witnessed the deaths from overwork (“過勞死”) and “deaths of despair.”³⁶³ Especially in America, racist killings of racialized individuals were direct effects of the neoliberal carceral state.³⁶⁴ Under punitive systems of welfare, “slow deaths” and suicides of welfare recipients who face the threat of their benefits being cut off were also highly stigmatized.³⁶⁵

and affirm their child’s early reparative wishes. (See, Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 262–369; D. W. Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 262–77.) The emphasis on early-childhood and drive factors can downplay the importance of social factors. In particular, mourning remains a lively issue of adults, and the parent’s ability to help children with the depressive position depends on how well adults themselves handle their own anxieties and grief.

³⁶¹ See e.g., V. D. Volkan and Elizabeth Zintl, *Life after Loss: The Lessons of Grief* (New York: Collier Books, 1993), ch. IV.

³⁶² Deaths that are unexpected (e.g. death of those who are young) and deaths that are stigmatized (e.g. those of AIDS and racial killings) create excessive burden for mourners, in no small part due to the greater volume of painful affects involved with their deaths. See *ibid.* ch. IV; Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010). esp. Introduction, ch. 1

³⁶³ Case and Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*; Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 231–33.

³⁶⁴ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*; Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 262–65.

³⁶⁵ Mills and Pring, “Weaponising Time in the War on Welfare.”; Mills, “‘Dead People Don’t Claim’.”

Aside from the death of persons, grief can also be induced by the loss of important objects, fantasies, and meaningful time. The catastrophe created by the unregulated financial system resulted in the loss of a secure place of abode for many.³⁶⁶ Out-of-bounds expectations of a flexibilized work culture can also lead to failures to honour obligations in relationships and families. This can mean, for parents, the loss of various valuable occasions to witness and participate in their child's growth, or for children, the loss of valuable time with ageing and dying parents.³⁶⁷

Inasmuch as neoliberal education has socialized youths into dreaming about the free entrepreneurial self with great potential, the same group may well have to grieve their dreams of success, achievement, and family in the face of entrenched precarity.³⁶⁸ Besides, as fast shifts in market trends command idealized attachments to the ephemeral image, it also exhorts us to leave our 'outdated' attachments behind in rapid succession – to get rid of things deemed no longer worthy (whether commodities, relationships, skills, or life plans) to adapt to the latest demands of the financialized market.³⁶⁹ The loss of such attachments often goes unmourned. The "fear of disposability," as Anthony Elliott argues, disposes subjects to "turn to reinvention" and taps deeply into loss and "*melancholic* aspects of identity."³⁷⁰

Lastly, as the prospects of climate catastrophe draw near, youths of the present are now confronted not merely with the loss of an individually viable future, but the tangible loss of a collective future in the literal sense. In Lear's words, we are "confronted with the prospect of the end of mourning itself [...] Insofar as there is any mourning left to be done, we have the last chance."³⁷¹ This is complicated grief, as usual work of mourning involves reparative efforts

³⁶⁶ Rebecca Diamond, Adam Guren, and Rose Tan, "The Effect of Foreclosures on Homeowners, Tenants, and Landlords (Nber Working Paper 27358)," (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020).

³⁶⁷ For an illustrative case vignette, see Peltz, "The Manic Society."

³⁶⁸ See Silva, *Coming up Short*.

³⁶⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 1–9. See Section 2.5.

³⁷⁰ Anthony Elliott, "On the Melancholia of New Individualism," in *The Unhappy Divorce of Sociology and Psychoanalysis: Diverse Perspectives on the Psychosocial*, ed. Lynn Chancer and John Andrews (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 328.

³⁷¹ Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, 6.

that make good one's inner destructions with the feeling that "life inside and outside will go on after all."³⁷² But what happens if the continuation of life outside cannot be assumed?

3.5. Conclusion

In the past two chapters, I outlined the ways neoliberal structural and cultural reforms have remade the conditions and terms under which individuals live their lives, generating anxieties and grief. I also showed how, despite mounting socializing pressures, people assume normative models of life in differing ways. In the upcoming chapters, I argue how, despite the diversity, neoliberal culture has channelled the psychic pressures it creates into its motor for its perpetuation, displacing emancipatory energies.

³⁷² Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 360.

Part II – The Symptoms

Chapter 4. Manic Culture

“Hong Kong taxi driver

Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Citizen Kane” - Hyukoh

I began my workday rushing out of the door, news podcast playing on my headphones and a copy of *Capital* in my hand. Rushed as I felt, the lift – as usual – goes to the top floor, until it slowly descends to the 10th. The door opens, and a tense-looking food delivery worker gives you the look that you are wasting their time. (The best illustration of the effects of algorithmic management – delivery workers send lifts to the top floor to minimize waiting time after picking up delivery.) On the ground floor, we rush out, flooding into the 34-degree urban heat.

The street was one of the busiest – in just 300 meters stand 14 industrial buildings, housing 60 eateries and countless offices. Under dripping aircon and smoky kitchen exhaust vents are beeping cars, people pushing trolleys and mobile pedestrians navigating the crowd to get to work. We see why it is customary for pedestrians to jaywalk and cut others off, and why people who walk too slowly or shoulder-to-shoulder are side-eyed. Politeness gets you nowhere in rush-hour Hong Kong.

After skilfully navigating against mass migratory flows, finding the best spots to cut into the unending current in the most ‘Daoist’ manner, I entered a parallel universe in the form of the train cabin. Air-conditioners brought the temperature down by 10 degrees, as crowded passengers sat still, their gazes fixed quietly on their screens. Between boarding and alighting, one was brought into a space with a different sense of temporality. The conflict between two temporalities – inside and outside – is best illustrated when those on the train are so captivated by the digital parallel universe that they block walkways, leading to conflicts and occasional physical fights.

After the train ride and more walking, a different, more disciplined space opens up. Now students line up to register for attendance. A few times, there was a struggle of whether I should turn on transparent-hearing and greet my students, but much of this was avoided as they rushed to the unreasonably long queue for the lift, whereas I, the fitness subject, walked up the stairs, two steps at a time. Sweaty like the delivery worker, I begin my lecture.

The course was “Our Manic World” – the topic of this chapter. Ironically, the most vivid illustration of mania always occurs outside – on the streets, on the train, and at the lifts – not in the classroom where students were half-asleep.

There is much to say about mania on Hong Kong streets. On one level are socio-economic factors – Friedman’s exemplary neoliberal society³⁷³ featured urbanized environments and a deeply financialized, competitive economy fuelled by the supposed virtues of entrepreneurialism at the top, ‘self-motivation,’ ‘hard-work,’ and ‘efficiency’ at the bottom. But this is more than just institutionalized normative expectations. As a participant, I see how much people across social classes fetishize speed and efficiency – not only in how we *enjoy and take pride in being quick and efficient*, but also how a slight hiccough in the speedy flow of events can lead to explosive rage.

Why is it that with neoliberal cultures, people rush, enjoy rushing, and feel compelled to rush?

Manic society is the topic of this chapter. After clarifying what I mean by “cultural mania” in our study (4.1-2), I shall discuss how broader ‘objective’ socio-economic trends condition the rise of manic activity characterized by accelerated speed and outward-oriented performativeness (4.3). This is followed by a psychodynamic account of the manic *functions* provided by such activities (4.4) and a discussion of how these functions can encourage the formation of psychosocial *symptoms and defences of a manic type* (4.5). 4.6 concludes by showing how manic culture – despite its diverse manifestations and complexities – undermines

³⁷³ Slobodian, *Crack-up Capitalism*, ch. 1.

knowledge and understandings essential for emancipatory social action, while re-entrenching us into a complex of irresolvable anxieties and grief.

4.1. 'Manic' Society: Clarifications

4.1.1. How not to define Manic Societies

What, if anything, is a manic society?

For one, we may call a society “manic” when there is a pandemic of manic-depressive disorders (what is now called bipolar disorder), and such a pandemic is significantly attributable to social causes. A manic episode is in mainstream psychiatry defined as “a distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood and abnormally and persistently increased activity or energy.”³⁷⁴ Subjects in a state of mania often feel elated, capable of everything, and willing to accept (often irresponsibly) obligations and promises, with observable acceleration of speech, thought, and activity.³⁷⁵

The best support for calling society “manic” in this sense comes from the marked increase in prevalence of bipolar disorder diagnosis.³⁷⁶ The social determinants of diagnosable bipolar disorder (of which manic states are constitutive) can be diverse, and two important cited factors are (i) the lower diagnostic thresholds agreed upon by mainstream psychiatry, and (ii) the surface affinity between mildly “hypomanic” traits and neoliberal society’s normative expectations of positivity, speed, and self-presentation.³⁷⁷

While “manic” in the above definition is primarily an attribute of ‘sick’ *individuals*, another use of “manic” culture concerns *cultural and collective phenomena*. This attribution is usually made by extending the clinical manifestations of manic patients to cultural tendencies and group phenomena – for example, accelerated activity, an ungrounded sense of omnipotent

³⁷⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5-TR* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association 2022), 140.

³⁷⁵ Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed. (London, England: Penguin Books, 1995), 97; Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*.

³⁷⁶ *Strictly Bipolar*.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* We will discuss medicalization in Chapter 5.

control over oneself and the environment, and utter disregard for the responsibility and consequences of actions to themselves and others. For instance, Christopher Bollas uses the term “the manic moment” to refer to the “grandiose selves and imperial nations” in the early 20th Century, cultivated by the rapid and accelerating industrial developments of the prior century.³⁷⁸ Hanna Segal locates a *manic-defensive* “triumphalism” in America’s military operations in the Middle East, after the collapse of the Soviet Union – America’s long paranoid enemy.³⁷⁹ Mark Stein analyses the euphoric activity of financial institutions in the US financial market before 2007 under the title “culture of mania,” as he tried to show that a culturally ingrained omnipotent denial of systemic risks (despite indications from similar earlier crisis tendencies) has undermined the consciousness of the vulnerability of the financial system in state and non-state institutions alike.³⁸⁰ Neil Altman picks up on similar themes, commenting on America’s manic response to the September 11 bombings, consumerism and the “manic days of Wall Street,” emphasizing how manic social phenomena can undermine our sense of social responsibility and care for others.³⁸¹

Meaningful as accounts under the two approaches above may be, these two uses of mania are questionable. For the first, it seems that only *individuals* are manic, and culture derives its sense of the ‘manic’ from causing the increased prevalence of ‘manic’ patients. But even if we grant that ‘mania’ is more prevalent in recent decades, and such prevalence has causes attributable to neoliberal socialization, there is a question as to *how much we can* read from the surface convergence between social norms and pathologically manic presentations in some individuals. After all, the *clinically* manic remains rare, and however ‘manic’ our social norms are, their relations to clinically manic/bipolar patients are vexed.³⁸² One also wonders what the

³⁷⁸ Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*.

³⁷⁹ Hanna Segal, "From Hiroshima to 11th September 2001 and After," *Psychodynamic practice* 9, no. 3 (2003).

³⁸⁰ Mark Stein, "A Culture of Mania: A Psychoanalytic View of the Incubation of the 2008 Credit Crisis," *Organization* 18, no. 2 (2011).

³⁸¹ Neil Altman, "Manic Society: Toward the Depressive Position," *Psychoanalytic dialogues* 15, no. 3 (2005). Altman’s analysis is more nuanced than can be presented in this introduction, as aside from attributing “mania” to cultural trends, he also analyses how such “manic” culture sanctions manic defences in individuals (which is very much in line with the approach I am taking in the current chapter.)

³⁸² An important puzzle is at stake here: if society’s norms and practices are increasingly ‘manic,’ then it makes more sense to assume that manic activities are normalized. This is likely to lead to a *decrease* in the prevalence of mania

advantages are of calling a society “manic” in this sense rather than “autistic,” “depressive”, or “anxious” – given similar increases in prevalence of these psychiatric diagnoses.

The culture-centred approach overcomes the individual-pathology-centred focus of the former approach, but a different challenge arises when we ask *how far we can talk about the “mania” of a culture* without somehow referring back to how such culture shapes the psychodynamic dispositions of individuals. When Freud made the passing suggestion of civilizations becoming “neurotic,” he warned that he may only be “dealing with analogies” and warned against tearing psychoanalytic concepts “from the sphere in which they have been originated and been evolved.”³⁸³

Likewise, when we move down from a ‘manic’ culture to individual psychodynamics, what looks uniformly ‘manic’ may be plurally realized. The neoliberal ‘market’ of available practices and ideologies is vast, and in every practice, people participate in them under various modes of identification and disidentification, with some being implicated in certain manic practices from purely strategic motives. How far, we may ask, can the average American be held subject to the ‘manic’ moods driving the Wall Street speculative craze, or indeed can be attributed to the anxieties of systemic collapse that some accounts are assuming that their mania is a defence against? Even for those working in the hot kitchen, how far can we describe their activities as “manic,” rather than adaptive or even ‘rational’ under political, military, and economic logics? Ideas of a properly cultural conception of mania can run the risk of overgeneralizing, missing how pluralistic the neoliberal market of values and ideologies has become and the complexities in *how people differentially* identify with any particular ideology.

diagnosis, or, if not, at least a raising of diagnostic thresholds for mania. However, the reverse has happened – *more people are diagnosed with* bipolar disorder, while bipolar disorder diagnosis thresholds are lowered. (See Chapter 5.) In line of the interpretation I give in this chapter, I suppose neoliberal societies are manic not in the sense that they normalize and encourage *mania* (the purported pathology), but only “manic activities” and “*manic defences*” that are syntonetic with social practices. Full-fledged, clinical mania may become more prevalent as a side-effect of such a social order, but it remains outcast as clinical mania can also impair (rather than enhances) social functioning.

³⁸³ Freud, SE 21: 144. Freud also pondered about a question central to later critical theory, that is how we can form a sense of civilizational “normality” and health, on the basis of which the “pathology of cultural communities” can be judged.

4.1.2. My Approach

In light of the above limitations, I will pursue a different approach to “manic society” here, seeking to build a bridge between cultural practices and individual psychodynamics while avoiding the dangers of overgeneralization across different subject positions. As a first step, I shall distinguish between *manic practices and manic activities*, on the one hand, and *manic defence, manic-defensive functions, and manic pathological organizations*, on the other:

Manic practices are practices under neoliberal culture that embody ideals and expectations of hyper-individualism, performativity, speed, and positivity,

while *manic activities* are activities individuals undertake when they participate in manic practices.

People’s accelerated social activities often play psychodefensive functions for the agent:

Manic defensive functions refer to the psychological functions manic activities play for the individual. These defences are psychically *useful* for the agent as they enable agents to, for example, crowd out and avoid the experience of psychic pain.

Although, as a psychosocial phenomenon, manic culture often produces the convergence of manic activity and manic defences, the two are distinct. Manic practices highlight the social and normative dimension of manic culture, while manic defences highlight the psychodynamic dimension. These two dimensions, though often synergistically contributing to the phenomenon we call manic culture, follow different logics.

Manic defences can function in ways other than those within the limits of manic culture’s social expectations. This is the case with people clinically diagnosed with manic disorders. Likewise, manic activity – embodied in social practices of accelerated work and consumption – can be undertaken in consciously painful ways, without the agent reaping psychic utility from it. Even where manic activity does serve some manic-defensive functions, such functions can be produced passively with little psychic participation of the agent in question, or they can be produced with active involvement through phantasies of triumph and control, causing the agent to fixate on manic activities and actively seek them out. In the latter case, I shall refer to ‘*manic pathological organizations*.’

In the coming sections, I will show that our neoliberal society, as a whole, is ‘*manic*’ *insofar as its accelerating practices of work, consumption, self-presentation, entertainment etc. capture our attention and efforts, crowd out our mental and physical spaces, and, in doing so, provide us with means to and induce us to seek manic defences against our mental pains.* Once captivated by its psycho-defensive functions, manic defences have a tendency to develop into manic pathological organizations. *Manic pathological organizations*, while providing temporary relief to experiences of anxiety, grief and trauma, paradoxically reproduce these experiences intrapsychically, causing agents to form wounding attachments to manic practices and manic activity.

In making these distinctions, I hope to give a reasonably representative physiognomy of manic culture without relying purely on clinical diagnostic patterns or on surface resemblances between cultural trends and manic symptomatology.

4.2. The Psychodynamics of Manic Defences

While the “mania” of neoliberal culture cannot be reduced to clinically manic individuals, we can still glimpse what ‘mania’ is like as a pathological organization by broaching clinical examples. Clinically, patients in manic states characteristically exhibit rapid speech and thought, along with feelings of euphoria, lightness, and garrulousness. They also show a “sense of unreality about external reality, or unconcern about serious things,” especially of things that evoke depressive feelings.³⁸⁴ Beneath the surface, though, something darker looms. Garrulous speech can feel to its receiver like attempts to ‘freeze’ them in place, as if delaying the emergence of some ‘unbearable meaning’ that eludes control if speech turns into depressive silence.³⁸⁵ In various clinical vignettes, analysts detail how manic lightness comes along with disparagement and contempt towards the other, suggesting that the vulnerable, dependent parts of the self are deflected and disowned through rituals of sped-up speech and activity. This way,

³⁸⁴ Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 132–33.

³⁸⁵ Christopher Bollas, *Three Characters: Narcissist, Borderline, Manic Depressive* (Oxfordshire: Phoenix Publishing House, 2021), ch. 3; Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*, 15–31.

manic unconcern is also likely a denial, a disavowal of inner vengefulness and destruction that is simultaneously its enactment.³⁸⁶

According to Klein, the manic organization is suspended between full-fledged (psychotic) turning away from external reality and mature object-relating. Manic organizations find themselves in a “torturing and perilous dependence on its loved objects,” since, while their attachment (identification) to their objects is “too profound to be renounced,”³⁸⁷ they do not – so to speak – entrust themselves and others enough to sustain a bond without idealizing the self as the “omnipotent source of life”.³⁸⁸ In other words, manics – as compared to psychotics – do somehow register dependence, loss, and guilt towards objects, but find such feelings too unbearable – hence the need to deflect and deny such feelings.³⁸⁹

The frozen position analysts find themselves in therapy with manic patients points to the core of manic defences – the use of the external object relationships “to decrease the tension in inner reality” and make “external reality express [omnipotent] fantasies.”³⁹⁰ The manic’s strategy to inner realities of pain and guilt is to deflect attention from it, disown it, and even to do away with the inner world altogether omnipotently.³⁹¹ Although seemingly light and elated, manic object relations are often characterized by subtle dramatizations to take “control of,” “triumph over,” and express “contempt towards” objects – all so that the feeling of dependence, guilt, and loss can be denied.³⁹² In other words, *manic defences are at work when an agent engages in accelerated activities involving external objects, and these activities allow the agent to avoid the pains of depression, guilt, and dependency by feigning omnipotence through fantasies of control, triumph, and contemptuous detachment.*

³⁸⁶ Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, ch. 7.

³⁸⁷ Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 277.

³⁸⁸ Peltz, “The Manic Society,” 351.

³⁸⁹ Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, New enl. ed. (New York,: Basic Books, 1974), 83.

³⁹⁰ Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 131, 33.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 130; Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 83.

³⁹² Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 350–51; Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 82–84; Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 132.

Yet, manic defences can be self-reinforcing. This is because, as a form of denial, the manic suspension of object relations only delays the consciousness of negativity at the expense of maintaining and reproducing inner deadness.³⁹³ Worse still, continued omnipotent attempts at control and triumph only heighten the felt destruction of the object and threaten one's dependence on it, while making it harder to perform the necessary repairs and reconciliations that may pave the way towards more loving, less anxiety-ridden modes of object-relating. Manic defences amplify feelings of guilt and loss, which, beyond a certain point, can only be alleviated by repeated attacks on the object out of desperation.³⁹⁴ This is how manic defences (when overused) tend to form a “vicious circle” locking the subject into a manic pathological organization.³⁹⁵

4.3. The Psychodynamic and Objective Aspects of Social Mania

Having clarified different senses of mania and looked into the psychodynamics of manic pathological organization, how are we to account substantively for manic culture? The strongest link, perhaps, is the potential convergence between the manic's need to use *external activities* to deflect inner troubles and neoliberal social expectations to endlessly perform while downplaying people's inner world.

4.3.1. Social Practices as Manic Defences

The possibility that social arrangements manifest manic defences was hinted at in Winnicott's 1935 paper on manic defences, where he asked the psychological significance of “the wireless that is left on interminably” and of “living in a town like London with its noise that never ceases and lights that are never extinguished.” The answer he gave was that those were “normal” uses of a manic defence, a “reassurance through [external] reality against death inside.”³⁹⁶ Winnicott identifies *manic defence's* tendency to use the external world for its flight from anything heavy,

³⁹³ *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 131–32.

³⁹⁴ Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 90.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.* For mania as a potential “pathological organization,” see Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 10–12, ch. 7.

³⁹⁶ Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 131.

painful, guilty, depressive and “dead.” His idea is that we can utilize our society’s hustle and bustle to counteract our inner deadness.

Although we cannot affirm – as Winnicott did – that (neoliberal) capitalism is just providing us with “normal” manic defences against inner deadness, we *can track our contemporary cultural mania to the accelerated hecticness of our neoliberal world and the diverse psychic functions it provides us.*

4.3.2. Socio-Economic Determinants of Manic Culture

But this is not the whole story of cultural mania. The psychodynamics of manic pathological formation is but *one* logic driving the formation of manic culture. What Winnicott did not cover in his suggestive remarks is how the *objective, socio-economic/capitalist logics of acceleration and performance* also govern the emergence and persistence of manic social practices, quite apart from the strictly psychosocial functions they serve. To understand how society is obsessed with time, speed, and harbours an inherent drive for acceleration, one must look beyond psychology.

Hartmut Rosa, in his work on social acceleration, described how modernization since the 17th Century featured a strong drive towards accelerated activity, as societies become organized around the principle “dynamic stabilization” where stability requires constant material growth and technical and cultural innovations.³⁹⁷ Being at the most recent point of modernization, neoliberalization witnesses the insane acceleration of the pace of our social. Changes in technology and social organization have enabled capital, goods, people, and information to move in much higher volumes and speed than a century ago. In place of Winnicott’s “wire,” the insertion of digital devices into our homes and private lives over the recent two decades – constituting an integral part of what is now called the “Internet of Things” – allows individuals

³⁹⁷ Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*; Hartmut Rosa, Klaus Dörre, and Stephan Lessenich, "Appropriation, Activation and Acceleration: The Escalatory Logics of Capitalist Modernity and the Crises of Dynamic Stabilization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 1 (2017).

to be connected anytime and anywhere, enabling us to be working, consuming, and producing for society even during our leisure and idle times. Such ready availability of connections and communication has transformed people's lives, such as forcing them to respond to contingencies more rapidly and readily.³⁹⁸ The rise of digitalized means of connection has also created various channels for private and public powers to 'nudge' people towards increasing their productivity, responsiveness, and consumption, as we shall see.

In Rosa's reconstruction, people's cultural and psychological expectation of speed is but one motor amongst three in driving social acceleration. The other motors of accelerated activity actually come from the economic and structural-institutional dimensions.³⁹⁹ For the interest of space, I will not reconstruct Rosa's full story here. But any account of the genesis of social acceleration, and of the social expectations for people to live up to the speed of its environment, must attend to the logic of capital.

One lesson in Marx's *Capital* is how capital's self-valorization provides inherent *incentive in speeding up the duration of its production and realization* – its “turnover time.” This is because the quicker capital can make in one cycle of turnover, the faster the capitalist can recuperate its investments with profits in money form for accumulation on an expanded scale.⁴⁰⁰ The quicker the capitalists receive their returns, the greater their rate of profit (per unit time) and the less likely they are to be outcompeted. Hence, for producers, there is a strong incentive for measures to be taken to speed up the “circulation” and idle production times.⁴⁰¹ The capitalist imperative of acceleration and expansion has driven radical changes ranging from transport infrastructures, urban design, and communication technologies to social discipline and lifestyles.

³⁹⁸ See Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, ch. 3.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ See esp. the discussions in Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. David Fernbach, vol. 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

⁴⁰¹ *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 628–32.

4.3.3. Deregulation of finance and the Speeding up of Work Rhythms

In the neoliberal age, the greatest drivers of acceleration are revolutions in technology, finance, and consumerist culture.⁴⁰² In Marx, the financial market not only smooths out transactions by providing liquidity, but leads to the rise of what Marx calls the “fictitiousness” of capital.⁴⁰³ In the neoliberalized, financialized economy, much of the ‘investment’/accumulation processes are relayed through the exchange of financial assets, whose prices are very sensitive to short-term fluctuations in the overall investor confidence (the ‘investment climate’) concerning the *promises* held in the asset. Gains in value (and hence of capital accumulation) can become largely untethered from the so-called ‘real economy’ based on production, but more tethered to temporary *expectations/promises* of future valuations that reflect quickly in ups and downs of market prices.

As I argued in Chapter 2, one institutional implication of financialization is that corporations now have significant incentives to marketize brand images to secure immediate gains in their stock prices by producing *hype*.⁴⁰⁴ Financialization sensitizes firms to rapid shifts in investor confidence and fashionable imageries, which, in turn, cascades into pressure on managers to adapt to market trends or be considered obsolete. Historically, the shift to a more networked-like corporate organizational structure was partly driven by the dynamics of financialization, and such institutional shifts cascade into the deskilling and precarization of many, while producing organizational/work cultures that highly value flexibility and adaptability.⁴⁰⁵ More recently, the cultural equation of AI and machine learning with ‘innovativeness’ seems also to be exhorting companies to adopt such technologies in their work processes and organizational structures.⁴⁰⁶ This has resulted in experiments with automated management systems that

⁴⁰² See, Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, 161–74.

⁴⁰³ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 1.chs. 21-29

⁴⁰⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 288. One example of this is the recent boom around tech-companies, which some argued, had led to a new techno-feudal organization of the economy. See Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*.

⁴⁰⁵ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, ch. 4

⁴⁰⁶ For corporate views on AI and automation, see e.g. Sam Ransbotham et al., “Winning with AI,” *MIT Sloan Management Review* (2019).

enhance the company's surveillance and auditing capabilities to extract 'efficiency gains' from workers.

4.3.4. Immediatist "Image Production" and Circulation

What David Harvey describes in the 1990s as the rise of the "image production industry" to speed up turnover times is very much present both in the market of commodities and human capital alike.⁴⁰⁷ Marketing campaigns tap into anxieties and create desirable images of entrepreneurial selves to shape instantaneous desires for the products on display. Besides, products also gain a transient character. Displacing products that are built to last and satisfy needs, objects are valued for the imaginary values and the promises they congeal. Indeed, under the culture of images, objects are like placeholders to which the idealized images and promises are attached.⁴⁰⁸ Goods are designed to be discarded the moment they prove 'unfashionable,' while subjects – as responsible investors – are socially expected to make and remake their portfolios repeatedly during their lives to remain relevant.⁴⁰⁹

In the recent decade of AI, the digital apparatus augments the image production industry by giving marketers to provide deeply personalized recommendations which "nudge" us into sinking more time, money, and energy into purchasing and consuming.⁴¹⁰ These dynamics are in no small part the effects of capital's need to speed up consumer spending in the realization of profits.

In *Immediacy*, Anna Kornbluh proposed how accelerated circulation has precipitated the rise of "immediatist" cultural and media styles. Immediatist cultures reject mediation – it is sceptical of art's claims to 'elitism,' depth, abstraction, and distancing, as it emphasizes the "imaginary" of images as models for ready identification,

⁴⁰⁷ Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*.

⁴⁰⁸ Bauman, *Consuming Life*; McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, ch. 1.

⁴⁰⁹ On accelerated demands on the self and flexibilization, see Sennett, *Corrosion of Character*; Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 1–6; Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, ch. 6.

⁴¹⁰ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*.

“eddies ‘the stream’ of increasingly homogenous customized content in a continuous loop of deformatted genre-fluid absorption, propelled by you-are-here experientialism, intimate confessionalism, and periodic surges.”⁴¹¹

Kornbluh describes how literary works liken themselves to memoirs written in a first-person, presentist, direct, and even confessional tone⁴¹², and how videos, hugely massified as video streams on platforms, feature “specularized” visual aesthetics, drawn-out but repetitive narratives, and “cinematographies of interpellation” featuring “direct address, levelled gaze, face framed, tight shot” – designed to capture viewers’ attention into binge-watching.⁴¹³

The recent rise of the aesthetics of “immediacy,” also structures broader trends of digital influencer culture.⁴¹⁴ Enabled by comments, reposts, direct messages, and live chat, interactions between viewers and streamers, podcasters, and influencers have grown intimate. This encourages self-commodifying influencers to address viewers directly, performing ‘pseudo-authentic’ emotions and reactions to happenings around them. Despite the artificiality and normalizations behind such performances (as I argue below), such new modes of ‘pseudointimate’⁴¹⁵ interactions can increase, at once, the felt engagement and intimacy of viewers to influencers and the possibility of *identifying* with them on the one hand, while endowing platforms with revenue streams on the other. Furthermore, the use of digital profiling for the reduction of ‘friction’ and increase in viewer retention means that viewers (who are most of us) are spoon-fed with content that matches and confirms our preexisting viewing preferences.

What Kornbluh refers to as viewers swimming and binging in a safe space produced from the “shitstream of our own excretive analytics” in the context of VOD streaming platforms,⁴¹⁶ is equally applicable to media consumption on social media platforms. Viewer and producers/influencers are brought together by algorithms not to create a world of open – let

⁴¹¹ Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, ch. 1, 3, quote from 115.

⁴¹² Ibid., ch. 4.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 133.

⁴¹⁴ On influencer culture, see Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2024), ch. 7.

⁴¹⁵ Liu, “The Problem with Trauma Culture.”

⁴¹⁶ Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, ch. 5.

alone emancipatory – possibilities,⁴¹⁷ but in enclosed safe echo-spaces that encourage immediacy, sameness, identification, binging, and, above all, rapid and continuous consumption and confirmation of neoliberal values.

4.4. From Manic Activity to Manic Functioning

Having outlined how objective capitalist dynamics generate accelerated forms of economic and cultural practices, I shall now describe three broad ways agents can use them psycho-defensively. This includes active *strivings*, passive *crowding out*, and medio-passive *binging*.

4.4.1. Manic Strivings

The prime example of active forms of defensive manic activity is an entrepreneurial individual or a financial trader/investor in their professional role. Neoliberal workers are supposed to embody norms of competitiveness, positivity, and self-optimization proper to their work tasks and strive to achieve gains for themselves, their teams, and their clients through *triumphing and overcoming 'obstacles.'* Success in such endeavours brings satisfaction and 'meritocratic' achievement, which comes with material rewards and symbolic recognition, that can reinforce self-idealizing phantasies of *self-control, mastery, and triumphalism against those who achieved less.*

The speed and achievement aspects of neoliberal work culture map remarkably well to the fantasies of 'aliveness,' 'lightness,' 'movement', and 'growth' characteristic of manic defences.⁴¹⁸ There are also quite significant resemblances between the joy of manic strivings at work and the gratification of Nietzsche's "will to power" as "a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs."⁴¹⁹ The feeling of triumph, mastery and control from repeated successes – core features of manic defences – can reinforce the person's (and the group's) sense of omnipotence to the point where

⁴¹⁷ For a general discussion of profiling practices and the closing off of human possibilities, see Hildebrandt, "Profile Transparency by Design? Re-Enabling Double Contingency."

⁴¹⁸ Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 134.

⁴¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Basic Writings of Nietzsche (New York: Modern Library, 1992 [1887]), I.13. Consider especially the reading of Nietzsche in Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), ch. 3.

troubles in psychological and external realities are ignored and (falsely) considered to be life-enhancing.⁴²⁰ Where this happens, stress and anxieties emerging from working in an unpredictable, risky environment can be experienced as thrill.⁴²¹

Where workplace examples may be most salient as examples of manic culture, their scope is restricted. ‘Mania’ in this sense depends on fantasized understandings of a supportive economic system that, in reality, is prone to systemic catastrophes,⁴²² and, even in moments of its ordinary functioning, its rewards and tokens of recognition are reserved only for a select few and those optimistic enough to be able to identify with them despite high chances of failure.⁴²³

In this sense, more inclusive forms of manic activity are to be found in *consumption* practices. This is noted by many psychosocial commentators,⁴²⁴ although we should not exaggerate its powers.⁴²⁵ If the ‘real-world’ culture of marketized success is too unforgiving and exclusive,

⁴²⁰ Although misleading if overgeneralized, Stein’s analysis of the West’s financial mania is a very good illustration of how manic defences functioned pre-2008. Stein, “A Culture of Mania.”

⁴²¹ See, e.g. Larry Hirschhorn and Sharon Horowitz, “Extreme Work Environments: Beyond Anxiety and Social Defence,” in *Social Defences against Anxiety: Explorations in a Paradigm*, ed. David Armstrong (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

⁴²² Cf. Stein’s statement that the manic culture of the pre-GFC West to be “underscored by a shared assumption that, in contrast with the Japanese situation, the boom–bust cyclical nature of Western financial markets had been contained and could be consigned to the annals of history, replaced by a bountiful ‘new economy’ of endless success.” Stein, “A Culture of Mania,” 182.

⁴²³ For a socio-economic account of the decline of “professional-managerial class,” see Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, “Death of a Yuppie Dream.” For accounts of how the GFC melted the sense of mania, see, for example, Hirschhorn and Horowitz, “Extreme Work Environments.”; Leo McCann, “Managing from the Echo Chamber: Employee Dismay and Leadership Detachment in the British Banking and Insurance Crisis,” *Critical Perspectives on International Business* 9, no. 4 (2013).

⁴²⁴ See, e.g., Altman, “Manic Society,” 331–32; Ruti, *Penis Envy*, ch. 1; McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*.

⁴²⁵ For instance, Todd McGowan’s otherwise incisive analysis of consumptive culture argues that “every act of consumption has its basis in an attempt to access the lost object, to find the perfect commodity that would provide an ultimate and lasting satisfaction.” Although McGowan does hedge by saying that “we see easily through the [commodity’s] illusion,” (p. 191) such remarks fail to recognize that (i) *there are forms of consumption primarily driven by use-values* (contra, McGowan, we buy toilet paper to wipe things, not to ‘access ultimate and lasting satisfaction’), and (ii) *participation in capitalist activities can be mainly driven by material needs rather than identification/desires*. (This is, indeed, Marx’s sharpest observation concerning expropriation and the coerciveness underlying the ‘double freedom’ of the labour contract – logics that also underlies neoliberal precarization.) I do not dispute that identification with capitalist ideologies can permeate our concept of the ‘purely useful’ – this is definitely a worthy object of analysis. But to assimilate all consumption activities under the model of identification with images is to ignore the diversity of people’s motives. See *Capitalism and Desire*, esp. chs. 1, 9, 10.

then the world of fitness, cosmetics, and games may provide supplemental cultural spheres for people to strive with a certain degree of manic success.⁴²⁶

‘Fit’ subjects are people who actively undertake self-responsibility for becoming and appearing ‘fit,’ as they undertake training regimes, care routines, and consume responsibly in ways that bring about a supposedly fit body, desirable physique, and attractive appearance.⁴²⁷ In recent decades, digitalized self-tracking and monitoring practices, enable the fit subject to receive personalized feedback on their progress, and gain satisfaction from seeing themselves and letting others see themselves meet fitness targets. Though triumphalism is less pronounced in the pursuit of the desirable appearance than in ferocious work-environments, its manic performances also seek self-control and achievement.⁴²⁸ Indeed, as Anthony Elliott remarks, the contemporary manic obsession with youthful appearances and sleek bodies likely hides the abject repudiation of the old and unfashionable. Such abjection underlies the constant fitness and cosmetic work in many, which bespeaks the redirection of aggression and triumphal energies towards “our selves and bodies”⁴²⁹

Similarly, and perhaps in connection with the ‘gamification’ of fitness, the world of video games is a realm where manic strivings play out. Working alone or with friends to complete the storyline and then fulfil achievements can require much effort and time, but as most gamers can testify, there is some thrill during the ‘grind’ and always celebrations of triumph in *defeating* the game. Indeed, gaming also embodies manic values of triumph, achievement and speed. On game platforms such as Steam, players may strive to get rare “achievements” in

⁴²⁶ For fitness as a compensatory practice for under-achieving lives under neoliberal austerity, see Jamie Hakim, “‘The Spornosexual’: The Affective Contradictions of Male Body-Work in Neoliberal Digital Culture,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 2 (2018).

⁴²⁷ For fitness as a neoliberal practice of self-optimization, see Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 77f.

⁴²⁸ See e.g., Deborah Lupton, “Self-Tracking Cultures: Towards a Sociology of Personal Informatics” (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 26th Australian computer-human interaction conference on designing futures: The future of design, 2014).

⁴²⁹ Elliott, “On the Melancholia of New Individualism,” 331–33. Cf. also Winnicott’s observation that manic activities can take place through the body in the exploitation of “every possible physical aspect of sexuality and sensuality.” Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 133.

games,⁴³⁰ while some may find enjoyment in repetitive ‘speedruns’ – practices that involve repetitive striving to complete game goals in speed through flawless optimization.

4.4.2. Manic displacement or ‘crowding out’

Of course, manic activities need not work through stimulating people to compete with one another and act on themselves. Indeed, the mere performance of accelerated activity – whether voluntary or compelled – is often sufficient to crowd out the internal world. Here, I am using ‘crowding out’ to refer to how focusing on tasks and being kept busy can occupy one’s attention, blocking out the emergence of disruptive thoughts. In this sense, *crowding out* may be the most accessible of manic functions, for it demands no identification at all.⁴³¹ Even for those who find neoliberal practices meaningless and dehumanizing, going along with accelerating work pressures can itself numb, preventing ‘intrusive’ thoughts from ever arising.

This crowding-out effect is also operative in consumptive activities undertaken voluntarily. People seem to be voluntarily crowding out their time. Statistically, time spent on the consumption of digital media has been on a marked rise.⁴³² The phenomenon of “revenge bedtime procrastination” involves people delaying their sleep times under intrusive work and school rhythms just to consume more.⁴³³ Daily commutes in cities offer the best evidence of smartphones as the modern-day rosary, to borrow the analogy from Han.⁴³⁴ Regardless of age, people often find themselves drawn to passive fascinations on their phones. As I asked my students to report on their activities during free time, more than 90% of them reported scrolling

⁴³⁰ I recall it was during my MPhil years that I was in a four-person group which one day carried a garden gnome named “Gnome Chompski” in a level from start to finish dodging zombie attacks in *Left4Dead2* and how we pulled an all-nighter completing *Overcooked 2* with 3 stars on all levels – a game of frantic cooperative ‘cooking’ to meet food orders in quick succession. At some point, it dawned on me how much like a factory worker we were, and yet how much we enjoyed putting the effort in grinding.

⁴³¹ Although not often conceptualized as a psychological defence in the literature, the idea of ‘crowding out’ has appeared in Freud’s earliest work on hysteria when Freud explains how his patient’s need to take care of their father delayed the onset of hysteria. (See, e.g. Breuer and Freud, SE 2: 161-12)

⁴³² Simon Kemp, “Digital 2025: Global Overview Report,” (Datareportal, 2025).

⁴³³ Lu-Hai Liang, “The Psychology Behind ‘Revenge Bedtime Procrastination,’” *BBC News*, 26 November 2020.

⁴³⁴ Sergio C Fanjul, “Byung-Chul Han: ‘The Smartphone Is a Tool of Domination. It Acts Like a Rosary.’,” *El País* 15 (2021).

on their phones – an activity they engage in even though they find it meaningless. Perhaps consuming digital media is today’s most widespread ‘hobby’ – the kind of things we are, as Adorno puts it, “mindlessly infatuated with only in order to kill time.”⁴³⁵

4.4.3. Binging and Manic gratification

We have looked at how participation in manic activities can gratify agents as they *actively* strive for external achievements, or have their consciousness of troubles *passively* crowded out. But these are not the only ways manic activities work. The third mode of manic function is the ‘binge’⁴³⁶ – the gathering, consuming, and enjoying of objects provided by neoliberal culture.⁴³⁷ Binging works by drowning inner emptiness with transient gratifications given by specific objects. As sources of gratification, accelerated work and consumptive activities here not merely ‘kill time,’ but become means to somehow gratify us and fill our psycho-somatic void.

For the well-to-do, the accumulation of money and luxury goods often translates to esteem.⁴³⁸ As Altman argues, “large quantities of money [can] provide enough omnipotence” and can lead to an escalating pursuit of “more omnipotence” through accumulating more money. Money is the socially ‘real’ embodiment of potency and enviability, those who come to chase it to a degree of success can even come to see it as a potential embodiment of “absolute freedom.”⁴³⁹ Alternatively, as Bollas argues, mania can also be “stored in certain objects” such as race cars

⁴³⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, ed. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 168.

⁴³⁶ A related, suggestive usage of “binging” can be found in Han, *Expulsion of the Other.*, esp. ch. 1.

⁴³⁷ I believe that binging is often a type of “mediopassive” activity. While binging cannot occur when the agent is completely passive, it neither require conscious intentions of the agent to binge. The common experience of social-media binging, binge-watching, or binge-buying is one where people (perhaps due to designs of online platforms) *find themselves* doing what they do and, yet, going on and minimally participating in it (e.g. by scrolling and pressing skip buttons). For a philosophical discussion of medio-passive agency, see e.g. Béatrice Han-Pile, “‘The Doing Is Everything’: A Middle-Voiced Reading of Agency in Nietzsche,” *Inquiry* 63, no. 1 (2020).

⁴³⁸ For an account of the command of material resources as a basis of social recognition and esteem, see Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003), 147–50.

⁴³⁹ Altman, “Manic Society,” 331.

and, say, luxury watches and bags.⁴⁴⁰ The successful pursuit of ever more money and related status goods *gratifies the psyche's desire for power and recognition*.

While gratifications of social esteem are often tied to competition for status-conferring goods accessible to the few envied by the masses, manic culture also gratifies through consumerism of the masses. Encouraged by the consumerist economy, repeated, accelerated consumption gratifies and displaces inner emptiness. Binging here can mean binge buying (addiction to the moment of purchase, feeling the need to own everything new), binge collecting (hoarding and wanting to build collections), or binge-consuming (eating, watching, and listening).

Salomon Resnik offered an interesting example of his analysand, who confessed that she needed “peace” - to “calm [her] stomach” and “quieten [her] mind” as she does so by trying to eat and “work in the same way that [she eats] – to fill an empty space.” Commenting on this realization of her analysand, Resnik writes:

“This is another way of filling mental space: by means of displacement, we can go from a space in the mind that is impossible to fill up to something much more concrete, and in so doing we experience the mental vacuum as a somatic void. If the emptiness in the stomach is not tolerated, bulimia will fill a mental vacuum that, thanks to displacement, is experienced as a somatic (body) phenomenon.”⁴⁴¹

The psyche and the soma are connected. What Resnik describes in her patient *working* and *eating* to fill the “mental vacuum as a somatic void” alludes to this. When the mind is traumatized by the environment, a psychosomatic void opens. One mindless way to fill the pain of the void is to turn to the world of goods and *binge*. It is possible to see binging – accumulating achievements at work or in games, spamming purchase buttons, hoarding objects in our tight abodes, and compulsive consuming – as working in the similar ways - ravenous searches for gratification to fill an inner void.

4.4.4. Binging Identifications, Consuming Ideals

Psychoanalytically, the reason why *food* can fill mental emptiness is that *bodily processes* are also psychic. What is consumed can be satiating to our bodies, but consuming objects is, at the

⁴⁴⁰ Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*, 11.

⁴⁴¹ Salomon Resnik, *Mental Space*, trans. David Alcorn (Routledge, 2018), 34.

same time, our way of identifying with the psychological and social meanings imbued in them. One of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis is the intimacy of psychic and somatic processes. Psychological growth is, since birth, inseparable from and achieved through somatic processes of eating, seeing, breathing and defecating. Our bodily experiences always already carry psychic significance, and, as Winnicott even argues, the mind can be understood as nothing but the “imaginative elaboration of somatic parts, feelings and functions.”⁴⁴²

Eating is the paradigm expression of mental processes of *introjection and internalization*, but internalization can also be done through seeing, sniffing, listening, and, symbolically, consumption in general. We use objects to gratify our bodily needs, and at the same time we claim part of the world that gratifies us as ours. As we do this, part of us begins to relate to and become more like the object we have consumed.⁴⁴³ In ideal cases, we process those objects we have identified with to get a differentiated but integrated sense of self and a harmonious internal world which can respond adequately to the ‘challenges of reality.’⁴⁴⁴ However, as beings in a world of manic insanity, we can also become so *obsessed* with identifying indiscriminately at manic speed and volume, that we *hoard* and accumulate objects in the external and internal worlds without them contributing to any solution to our troubles.⁴⁴⁵ In manic culture, we can become “empty selves” to be filled by external objects.⁴⁴⁶

In the world of endless consumption of commodities, we often consume the aura of consumerist products as we do the product itself. Buying and consuming objects imbued with promises of identity and therapeutic ‘quick fixes’ to our misery, the agent may gain the thrill of a transient

⁴⁴² Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 243–54. See also Isaacs, “The Nature and Function of Phantasy.”

⁴⁴³ I am following through here, as in previous chapters, the connotations of Freud’s idea that internalization forms the key to understanding the structures of the psyche in his later works such as *Ego and the Id*. (Freud, SE 19) In Lear’s terms, psychoanalytic agency begins with internalization, and the claiming of a part of nature as ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ See, Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), ch. 6

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 170–76.

⁴⁴⁵ Consider Klein’s account of children’s desire for “obsessional taking in” – collecting things and accumulating them, as a repetitive defence against the feeling of being short of good objects inside. Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 246–47.

⁴⁴⁶ See, Philip Cushman, “Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology,” *American Psychologist* 45, no. 5 (1990).

identification with idealized images of the successful self, frictionless living and so on.⁴⁴⁷ These identifications with goods temporarily calm the chaos within and placate the various fears we hold.⁴⁴⁸

As part of mania, these identifications seldom endure. Yet, in some sense, they don't have to work enduringly, as the utter *plurality* of enticing objects and ideal selves available on the shelves may keep people busy enough by inducing consumption sprees. With the sheer volume of transient enjoyment we get from the purchase button to the unboxing, there is plenty to do until one realizes that everything is a hoax.

Aside from goods, identificatory mania is also apparent in the consumption of intangible cultural objects such as music, videos, comics, and novels. As Kornbluh highlights, the rise of media platforms enables all-time streaming of diverse content ranging from bite-sized reels, memes, 'tldr' podcasts, or listicles to long-drawn-out drama series, mangas, and novels. As platforms profit from capturing our attention, they are highly incentivized to design algorithms that capture our attention and make us binge. Fragmented, seemingly incoherent media objects, such as 'reels', not only crowd out our senses during the daily commute, but they can also affect our emotional states and subsequent actions – especially when curated by profit-driven algorithms intended to experiment on us and nudge our behaviour.⁴⁴⁹

Binge-consuming longer-form “media objects” such as novels and Netflix series require longer time commitments and can produce a comparatively deeper engagement featuring still-temporary but intense identifications, as characters in stories and others who appear to be sharing the story can serve as elaborate alter-ego models for identification.

Across formats and genres, the “immediate” – often privatized, confessional and (pseudo-)intimate – style in the production and presentation of media objects readily solicits

⁴⁴⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, ch. 2.

⁴⁴⁸ For an account of how the *anxieties* predisposes neoliberal subjects to transient identifications with cultural goods, see Hoggett, "Shame and Performativity."

⁴⁴⁹ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, chs. 9 - 10.

“readerly recognition, identification, and empathy.”⁴⁵⁰ These identifications can be powerfully cathartic in the short run. As Bainbridge argues in the context of television:

“Television [...] fosters a particular kind of intimacy for viewers, filling up the field of vision, and heightening the propensity for identification and entanglement with the narrative. Psychological mechanisms of projection are modelled in the narrative as a means of coping with unmitigated psychic disintegration, and the intimate relation to the screen and its content enables viewers to do the same thing. Through its invitations into identification, and particularly into projective identification, televisual intimacy offers relief to those viewers for whom [the protagonist’s] experiences resound with both personal (lived) and ideological experience.”⁴⁵¹

Identification is a primitive response to traumatizing anxieties of losses, but it is also the essential first step in the mournful working-through of traumas and psychic growth. As psychoanalyst Hanna Segal argues, the unity in good aesthetic works, identified with in its totality, can demonstrate to the mourner that, however chaotic and distraught our internal and external worlds are, there is a possibility of the recreation of a “whole, complete, and unified.” In experiencing good works of art, we gain a glimpse not only of the protagonist’s life, but also of the artist’s arduous work of mourning and his eventual success in *integrating* his psyche.⁴⁵²

Yet, in contemporary modes of binge consumption, the use of aesthetic objects likely takes a less therapeutic form. Prioritizing closeness and direct address, the immediatist aesthetics which Kornbluh describes inclines us to identify with protagonists, which may be the hero of the film, the influencer confessing their recent struggles, or the random person posting their video reactions to the latest video. As our gaze passively wanders with the protagonist’s, more often than not, we are led to also see the world under tropes of black-and-white, good-and-evil, and our life narratives under some version of individualized scripts of striving/success or trauma/overcoming. As neoliberal consumer culture opens private places and techniques for

⁴⁵⁰ Kornbluh, *Immediacy*.

⁴⁵¹ Caroline Bainbridge, “Box-Set Mind-Set: Psycho-Cultural Approaches to Binge Watching, Gender, and Digital Experience,” *Free Associations*, no. 75 (2019): 68.

⁴⁵² Hanna Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal: A Kleinian Approach to Clinical Practice* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), 198–204.

exploring the self, it also tries to subdue it by normalized happiness scripts and depoliticized therapeutic narratives.⁴⁵³

Here, the Adornoian diagnosis of the culture industry – as having “penetrated [the depths of our soul]” while “[installing] commodity form as the crux of possible artistic representation” and our enjoyment of artworks – remains relevant.⁴⁵⁴ Aesthetic objects of digitalized mass media are part of the capitalist colonization of private experience, readily inviting us to give up whatever is non-identical to its normalizing scripts.

Binge-watching does not heal – not only because they are private release valves incapable of addressing structural problems, but also because normalized scripts are apt only for characters in fantasized universes. Scripts look harmonious and promising from the outside, and from the side of those who marketize such scripts, propping up the image may require lots of curation and concealment.⁴⁵⁵ Those who are hooked are likely to be more stressed than they show.

Of course, we should not overstate the credulity of the masses. Perhaps many who binge identifications, *see through* these scripts and will not form enduring attachments to images. In important senses, binged identifications can be even more shallow than that of cynics and ‘phony’ members of groups presented in the previous chapter. This shallowness probably explains why one scrolls seamlessly one day from binging real-life influencers to superheroes with shields and drug lords with cancer, and from that to the queen of the Forbidden Palace and the goofy pirate searching for some ultimate treasure.

Consumption of media objects slides (and swipes) frictionlessly from one to another at great speed, as they are designed to be. Sliding breeds “scopophilia” – where “sight” displaces “insight.”⁴⁵⁶ Information and identifications are to be accumulated, refracted, shared, and then discarded, rather than being contained in the mind to form meaningful unconscious connections.

⁴⁵³ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

⁴⁵⁴ Fred Rush, “The Culture Industry,” in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 93. See e.g., Adorno, *The Culture Industry*., chs. 2-3.

⁴⁵⁵ For an example in influencer culture, see Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, “Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram’s Authenticity Bind,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019).

⁴⁵⁶ Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*., ch. 8.

Contra Segal's ideal of aesthetic experience, sped-up consumption of pseudo-intimate contents hardly helps us work through grief and traumas, as such practices don't afford time and space for us to experience the full force of the internalized destruction requisite for healing and reparation. If the occasional high-quality video exposes us to the grief and void attendant to neoliberal empty shells of selves, the shock we experience is likely to be soon inundated by dating-app nudges:

“Not sending Likes is like swimming in a pool with no water: An overall dry experience.”

or the countdown that reads:

“Next video will play in 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... seconds”

In this sense, the most apparent effect of bingeing the *passive, normalized* dramatizations of internal tensions is to identify with the flashing screen. Identifications are less conduits to stable structures than to flash and flashiness – hence the need to binge again and again. Psychic tensions are displaced into outward flashing, accelerated consuming, but are seldom contained within.

4.5. From Manic Functions to Manic Defences and Pathological Organizations

We have seen that manic activity is the site where systemic function (i.e. accelerated accumulation logics under neoliberalism) converges with the needs of the psyches for striving, bingeing and crowding out, but the exact convergence between the psychic and social can be *multiply realized* and varies across individuals. This is important to note if we are not to fall into the trap of over-generalization in the complex phenomenon of manic culture.

4.5.1. Conscious or 'Nudged' Mania

On the most surface level, subjects participate in manic activities to 'defend' against neoliberal stresses out of one's voluntary choosing. This aligns with the neoliberal ideology of 'market freedoms' and 'consumer choice.' However, if we do not overgeneralize this concept of choice and overlook those who are forced to comply with cultural requirements, it offers an accurate

portrayal of some of our activities. There *is* a degree of voluntariness when we feel stressed and *decide* to go for a drink, turn on Netflix, or take the red-eye flight to Tokyo for a shopping spree.

Of course, voluntarism alone hardly explains all our attachments to manic culture – rational preferences for manic activities do not explain the extent to which we become unconsciously *attached* – or ‘addicted’⁴⁵⁷ as many say – to manic activities.⁴⁵⁸ Beyond conscious choice, participation can be induced as a function of *habit* and *cultural environment*. This was what we referred to in the introduction in the general discussion of wounding attachments. Here, wounds that are produced are most conveniently and repeatedly redressed by culturally sanctioned manic activities, driving the addiction to system-congruent, patchwork solutions to wounds. In particular, for manic consumer culture, advances in behavioural and neurological sciences have shown how our brains’ addictive mechanism can be altered.⁴⁵⁹ This has led to efforts to redesign consumer ‘choice environments’ to nudge our insatiable appetites toward actions that create value for others.⁴⁶⁰ That people binge-watch Netflix, pull an all-nighter just to defeat game bosses, or sink hours into watching cat videos is no guarantee that there is some psychodynamically ‘deep’ investment in the symptom. The engineered seductiveness of media consumption could well induce our attachments to manic activities.

It is a function of manic culture’s genius that it can produce effects *without* requiring strong identification or deep wounding attachments. Participation through strategic choice or cultural habituation are ways where accelerated social practices can garner support and people’s energies.

⁴⁵⁷ See, e.g. Jamie Waters, "Constant Craving: How Digital Media Turned Us All into Dopamine Addicts," *The Guardian*, 22 August 2021.

⁴⁵⁸ In psychoanalysis, “unconscious” attachments and processes proper are ones which had been *caused* by sub-rational mental processes. Insofar as they are selected not *as* rational responses to the situation, they are often hardly modifiable by conscious will and other propositional attitudes. For an account of unconscious mental processes as distinct from conscious ones, see Sebastian Gardner, *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch. 4.

⁴⁵⁹ See, Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (New York: Dutton, 2021); Max Fisher, *The Chaos Machine: The inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, First edition. ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022), ch. 1.

⁴⁶⁰ See, e.g. Ryan Calo, "Digital Market Manipulation," *Geo. Wash. L. Rev.* 82 (2013); Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*.

4.5.2. Mania as a Pathological Organization

But, of course, as we already hinted in this chapter's introduction, manic culture does not stop at this but can evolve into deep 'wounding attachments.' To account for how people can be fixated on manic cultural practices and manic activities, we have to see how (1) mania, while offering means to numb and displace painful experiences, actually deepens and reproduces the grip of the traumatizing social order on the psyche; and (2) how the deepening of unresolved traumas can induce greater dependence on the use of manic defences.

No, mania does not solve social problems

It is evident that consumptive means that occupy our time and numb our pain hardly help change the objective social determinants of our plight. However, the various manic activities of self-improvement and self-optimization under 'do-it-yourself' achievement culture fare not much better. What is presented as a means to end one's plight (through work, education, workouts, and self-help) functions mostly as "promises of happiness" that can move manic agents as promises of better selves and better futures, regardless of whether they deliver on their promises.

In reality, under situations of increased structural precarity and inequality, the promise of better futures almost always ends up producing manic agents who are "cruelly optimistic" – optimistic insofar as they are active, cruel insofar as what they aspire to hardly materializes.⁴⁶¹ As the title of the recent *Financial Times* article goes, "even a PhD isn't enough to erase the effects of class"⁴⁶² – and one wonders what comes out of the struggling working-class subjects who take on debt to support their studies, and defensively harden themselves under the self-therapeutic ethos.⁴⁶³ The problem with neoliberal culture is how, through the lens of hyper-individualism, socio-structural problems are falsely rebranded as problems of "personal life-politics," which falsely assumes that the individual (alone) is capable and responsible for their

⁴⁶¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Ruti, *Penis Envy*.

⁴⁶² Soumaya Keynes, "Even a PhD Isn't Enough to Erase the Effects of Class," *Financial Times*, 19 July 2024.

⁴⁶³ Silva, *Coming up Short*. For an infuriating account of how digitalized marketing is used by for-profit colleges to target low-income adults in America, see Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*, First edition. ed. (New York: Crown, 2016), ch. 2

successes in life.⁴⁶⁴ Individualized, agents manically chase empty promises of personal salvation, locked in repeating cycles of compounded frustration and self-blame.

No, mania does not solve psychological problems

To be sure, some manic practices do not and are not intended to address objective social ills. It would, arguably, be wrong to accuse binge-watching, gaming, shopping sprees, or doing self-help exercises of not helping us resolve social problems – because they are not supposed to. What they respond to, instead, are psychological problems. If the world has become a stressfully survivalist place, at least manic activities may save the ‘will.’ Nietzsche argued that it is not suffering itself, but the “*senselessness* of suffering” that is unbearable, and that cultural practices can enchant suffering by giving it meaning.⁴⁶⁵ If all else fails, neoliberal manic culture, at least it so appears, leaves room for meaning-making in ways that are not ascetic and self-negating, but somewhat ‘active’ and ‘voluntary.’⁴⁶⁶

Except it doesn’t work this way. Mania not only masks social and psychological troubles, but also exacerbates them. The self-sabotaging aspect of manic agency is clear when the idea of manic omnipotence — an image of the active subject — shields us from troubled-object relations but also worsens the underlying issues themselves.

Recall that the need for manic defences emerges from troubles with guilt in object relations. Manic triumph, control, and denial are means to prop up the omnipotent self that hides the subject’s inability to recognize dependency on objects, acknowledge guilt for relational harms, and tolerate ambivalence in relations that are essential for the development of mature object-relations. Consider, also, how well the constituents of manic-omnipotent phantasies – triumph,

⁴⁶⁴ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, ch. 1

⁴⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. III.

⁴⁶⁶ There is quite some resemblance between Nietzsche’s positive ideals of the sovereign, creative individual and the consumerist, self-made neoliberal subject. On this, see Jiwei Ci’s account of neoliberal subjectivation as an apparent process of “automimesis” under “postmodern nihilism” in *Moral China in the Age of Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 199–205. For an interpretation that distinguishes the “active” sovereign individual in Nietzsche and the “hyperactive” neoliberal subject, see Han, *The Burnout Society*.

control, and denial converge with social expectations of optimal performance under the normative subject position of the striving entrepreneur and the self-investor.

Struggling for security and survival under a precarizing economy involves *controlling* external circumstances and aspects of the self that may hinder one's success. The heavy cultural emphasis on responsible life planning and self-control to remain competitive, employable, and marketable, pressurizes the ego to rein in its impulses and find means to crowd out unproductive grief and guilt feelings. Such control already involves repressive tendencies towards the receptive and relational parts of the self.

Moreover, the hypercompetitive order of neoliberal government and institutions compels people to seek *triumph* over others and oneself. As Lynne Layton argues, neoliberal institutions, practices, and distinctions mandate and 'concretize' the triumphal projection of dependency onto competitors and social abjects.⁴⁶⁷ Case vignettes and interviews of neoliberal subjects testify that, even if the activities of the individuals in question are not overtly aggressive and triumphant, people's compulsion to strive and self-optimize in different aspects of life is frequently associated with covert wishes to be (seen) *better* than those deemed less worthy, in accordance with the ideals internalized from the social environment. Besides, compelled by neoliberal institutions, individuals often adopt the social distinctions between subject and abject to align themselves with demanding ideals of self-responsibility. In this way, their (manic) pursuits serve as no mere survival strategies, but at the same time fantasised victories over social abjects carrying their repudiated parts.⁴⁶⁸ This, again, heightens the guilt and anxieties we experience towards objects and makes it harder for reparative work (both psychic and social) to take off. In any case, the effect of self-control and compelled triumphalism effects a *denial* of one's relation to and responsibility towards abject others and disowned parts of the self.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, 226–27.

⁴⁶⁸ See e.g. *Ibid.*, ch. 14.

⁴⁶⁹ For self-abjection and the formation of the "entitled self" of work and consumption, see Hoggett, "Shame and Performativity." For denial of responsibility, see Altman, "Manic Society."; Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, ch. 12; Benjamin, "Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma."

The culture of neoliberalism *encourages* the use of manic defences and the internalization of a manic pathological organization to alleviate accumulating stresses and relational troubles. Psychodynamically speaking, manic defences deepen relational troubles by sanctioning activities that displace and reproduce guilt. As clinical accounts show, omnipotent triumph, control and contempt over objects produces fears of potential retaliation from the repudiated objects (inside and outside),⁴⁷⁰ reproducing the need for omnipotent control. Repeated, the hope for non-controlling relations to objects grows more distant, locking the person in a wounding attachment to the pathological organization.⁴⁷¹

Psychosocially speaking, *social demands* for *self-control and triumph* have a great strengthening effect on people's use of manic defences to deflect psychic tensions that the social order imposes on individuals. Manic culture also strongly sanctions the internalization of a manic pathological organization, as repeated performances of self-control and triumph can produce corresponding fantasies heightening anxieties and guilt towards the object, which is only resolvable by further manic performances.

Such social internalization can, again, be multiply realized. In deeper instances, especially for the strivers we described, the ego threatened by guilt participates in manic social practices to dramatize triumphal and controlling fantasies with external objects. Here socially-sanctioned manic performances fulfil individual's needs to dramatize inner manic fantasies, reproducing mania both as social practice and pathological organization. In more subtle instances, even if the mind can escape the pitfalls of abjective triumph and control, being seduced and compelled to engage in manic activities can still block meaningful attempts at repairing the damaged self by crowding out and binging alone.

In any case, meaningful psychological work that can take us beyond frantic activity and omnipotent denials demands the self to confront its guilt and anxieties, seeking less triumphal and more relational ways of alleviating them. This requires much expenditure of time and

⁴⁷⁰ Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, 90; Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 351.

⁴⁷¹ For clinical examples of disturbed object-relations in action, see Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, ch. 10

psychic energies. Yet, in a culture where positivity and accelerated activity dominate cultural spaces and social expectations, such time and energy are either unavailable, traded away or voluntarily given up. Striving blindly for survival, crowding out pain and binging shallow identifications, neoliberal subjects are left with little mental space to contain their own wounds – let alone forming alliances to collectively challenge the cannibalizing order.

Without individual and collective spaces to contain and metabolize social traumas, people's internal worlds are kept in a state of *undead* suspension – as Winnicott describes with his manic patients.⁴⁷² The continuous use of the culturally-sanctioned manic defensive organization as a retreat from real problems only adds to the difficulty of resolving the deadlocks and produces an inner world that is so 'barren' that change feels 'catastrophic.'⁴⁷³

Perhaps it is right to argue that, behind the optimistic, (hyper)active, self-made appearance of the neoliberal entrepreneur, lies the socialized imperative to *prop up omnipotence* through manic activities and defences. Manic activity is seldom just an innocuous search for meaning and agency in a suffocating world, but a *socially coordinated attempt to suffocate people's relational and dependency needs by crowding out at best, and projecting them onto objects and 'killing' them through triumph, control, and denial of responsibility at worst.*⁴⁷⁴ Instead of space to contain and metabolize wounds, what we get, at best, are activities that produce a precarious sense of self-deceptive liveliness that keeps our pains, our fears, and our hidden destructiveness at a distance. Yet, as Winnicott puts it:

“the individual [in manic defence] is unable fully to believe in the liveliness that denies deadness, since he does not believe in his own capacity for object love; for making good is only real when the destruction is acknowledged.”⁴⁷⁵

For Winnicott, love, care, and concern are not mere moral expectations but necessary elements of healthy self-relating. Only if we have the capacity to love and care for dependent and non-

⁴⁷² Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 131–32.

⁴⁷³ Wilfred R. Bion, *Learning from Experience*, ed. Chris Mawson, The Complete Works of W. R. Bion, Vol. 4 (London: Routledge, 2014 [1962]); *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Chris Mawson, The Complete Works of W. R. Bion, Vol. 5 (London: Routledge, 2014 [1963]), ch. 13

⁴⁷⁴ See, Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, 12–14.

⁴⁷⁵ Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 131–32.

perfect objects are we capable of love and accept ourselves as less-than-omnipotent beings. Only if we are capable of forgiving other's 'failures' can we forgive ourselves for not being 'in control' all the time.⁴⁷⁶ Reparation and reconciliation with others are inseparable from the accommodation of the self as prone to momentary failure and despair. Yet, in the world of frantic speeds, the psychic space to contain and repair inner damages is practically absent. Small wonder is how cut-throat survivalism of society is echoed by mutilated and self-mutilating subjects who repeatedly chant the same triumphal song.

4.6. Deadlocks: When Cultural Mania Kills Emancipatory Knowledge

Manic culture commands great powers over us because it renders manic activities a normative expectation. Forced to perform these activities, we can be lured into making psychological uses of them – whether symptomatic or conscious, active or (medio-)passive. But, of course, mania is not the only flawed container. Manic culture overshoots (producing clinical mania) and underperforms (producing burnouts, melancholia and panic). The casualties of neoliberal accelerationism and survivalism are plenty, and are managed by ways beyond striving, bingeing, and crowding out. When manic cheerfulness and bingeing prove too facile, people can also sedate themselves or witch-hunt for scapegoats in the abjects. Individualized pathologization and paranoid politics are psychosocial pathological organizations we will discuss in the coming chapters.

But before we proceed, I would like to conclude this chapter by considering the deadlock presented by manic culture in terms of its inhibitions – even attacks – on emotional, social and emancipatory knowledge. Such inhibition also results from the other two pathological organizations I discuss.

'Knowledge' seldom occurs in psychosocial theorizations. It is commonplace to assume that psychoanalysis is predominantly interested in the dynamics and transformation of 'irrational'

⁴⁷⁶ Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 84–85.

drives, affects, and emotions and not so much truth and knowledge.⁴⁷⁷ However, especially for Wilfred Bion, the therapy of our desires, the development of thinking and the capacity of rationality are one. We become capable of working through our relational and internal troubles only to the degree that we can *know* and *think about* what we are going through.

Bion shares rationalist assumptions that knowledge involves a conscious sorting out of facts about ourselves and the world, and figuring out ways of instrumentally dealing with them. But going beyond the rationalist, he also emphasizes the capacity to ‘receive’ and experience affectively-charged messages from our unconscious and from others, ‘contain’ them, and digest them (because the problems that confront the mind concern not only brute ‘objective’ reality, but the pressing needs of the psyche and the soma that can only be experienced internally). The latter, for Bion, demands a freely-associative receptivity to emerging contents of the mind and creative processes of fantasizing in addition to instrumental reasoning.⁴⁷⁸ In this sense, Bionian knowledge involves a type of psychological experience that is holistic, requiring us to be both affectively attuned to and cognitively aware of internal and external realities.

Of course, such an ideal of holistic knowledge is often broken apart and inhibited, as the mind cannot tolerate the sting of *receiving painful affects associated with emerging thoughts – especially thoughts that remind us of our finitude, dependency and guilt.*⁴⁷⁹ This is where psycho-defences come in.⁴⁸⁰ In extreme cases, thoughts are so overwhelming that the person becomes incapable of containing any emotional experience in the mind. Overwhelmed by the anxiety, he attacks his capacity to process thoughts, and loses interest in the mind and the world completely, considering them hostile. The result of this is psychotic breaks, which avoid the

⁴⁷⁷ There is a sense in which Freud harbours strong Enlightenment commitments to reason and knowledge, despite his emphasis on unconscious currents. On this see Whitebook’s reading of Freud as a “representative of the dark Enlightenment.” Whitebook, *Freud*.

⁴⁷⁸ Bion, “A Theory of Thinking (1961).” For an illustrative account of how such holistic experience functions in the clinical and everyday setting, see Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), esp. chs. 1-2.

⁴⁷⁹ See e.g. Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, ch. 8.

⁴⁸⁰ Wilfred Bion coins the function of “K” (knowledge) and “-K” (attacks on knowing) in addition to love and hate in *Learning from Experience*, chs. 13-21. In this reading, symptoms and defences are not expressions of love and hate, but can be deployed against (affectively, cognitively, and empathetically) knowing oneself and others.. For illustrative clinical accounts of K in children, see Edna O’Shaughnessy, “A Commemorative Essay on WR Bion’s Theory of Thinking,” *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* 7, no. 2 (1981).

painful consciousness of reality by aggressive projections and withdrawal from relating to the self and others.⁴⁸¹ For people who are less distressed, inhibitions to the capacity to think are less total, but aspects of one's experience can still be cut off, such that when these experiences are brought to consciousness, they are either perversely shoved aside, denied/reduced in significance or are experienced as an outbreak of anxiety.⁴⁸²

We can consider manic culture an instance of the latter. Instead of insights into resolving the psycho-social deadlocks, mania provides us with things, ideals, and wounding identifications with them that allow us to *evade* painful thoughts. Given the nature of our predicaments, reconstituting a relational self that is more in touch with one's traumas, and a collective capable of recognizing our common vulnerabilities may be the first step in the direction of meaningful, emancipatory change. But under the manic mode, reconstitution and reconciliation can actively be feared, mocked, and shamed as weakness and loss of control.⁴⁸³

When meaningful alternatives are crowded out for the potential psychological pains that considering them may stir up, we are left with manic evasion or further degradation of the mind. We saw how manic defence compounds trauma, and this compounding process can also be expressed in terms of knowledge and thinking. Mania is one way we escape from facing our anxieties, grief, and trauma, but as we avoid them, the more unknowable and horrible the internalized psychotic void becomes. This, at least for now, does not mean the complete degradation of thought in psychosis.

Neoliberal manic culture is not stupid, it provides us with sophisticated scientific knowledge and highly efficient technical means for the control of our environment, our social others, and our lives. However, from a Bionian perspective, is manic knowledge not a case of the breaking

⁴⁸¹ Bion, "Attacks on Linking." Bion disagrees with Freud that reality can be denied. Instead what is denied is the "consciousness of reality."

⁴⁸² For a general description of how anxious attacks on the mind relate to symptomatic formation, see Lear, *Freud*, esp. ch. 1, 4, 5. See also Segal's characterization of pathogenic repression as containing a psychotic core. Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal*, 78–80.

⁴⁸³ See Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*, ch. 14.

apart of emotional knowledge – a case where technical, objective understanding displaces proper emotional understanding?

How is the person, and the social system that breeds such a person, overtaking everyone on the street while looking on the app to find the closest train door to exit just to get to work three minutes earlier, *less* sick than Freud's Rat Man, who was worried on the train about how to 'return' money to a Lieutenant to whom he owes no money?⁴⁸⁴ Aren't both victims too preoccupied with a "defensive struggle" with the symptom,⁴⁸⁵ that takes so much into *managing* the symptom, while taking as given the psychological and psychosocial deadlocks that necessitate the performance of the symptom?

The apt Cantonese phrase "rushing for reincarnation"("趕著投胎") emerges naturally in a conversation with my brother as a reflection of the hecticness on the streets. It is used as a death curse for those who bump into people in a rush. But as we dug further, the evocation of "reincarnation" – as an event *after* death that marks the true end of one's meaningful existence – makes it ambiguous as to whether the person cursed is dead, and to what the whole point of the rush is. Perhaps the ambiguity is truthful. The streets are filled with undead manic agents chasing death in the guise of mastery, activity, and vitality.

Manic culture is but one of the three neoliberal psychosocial symptoms we will investigate. But to anticipate the upcoming discussions, all three symptoms reproduce and compound the psychosocial deadlocks by blocking knowing, thinking, and experiencing. Without knowledge rooted in the emotions, we are left with what Bion calls a deep "catastrophe that remains at one and the same moment actively vital and yet incapable of resolution into quiescence."⁴⁸⁶ The dream of emancipation from this injurious order seems further than ever, but to the degree that it is possible, something along the lines of confronting this shared inner catastrophe may be necessary.

⁴⁸⁴ Freud, SE 10, 165-172.

⁴⁸⁵ Freud, SE 10, 221f.

⁴⁸⁶ Bion, "Attacks on Linking," 94.

Chapter 5. Depression and the Medicalization of Discontents

Every day on my way home after my lecture on “our manic age,” I walk past a grey electric box. On it, writes: “Rushing through your life every day, aren’t you tired.” Another two lines come in the form of a question-and-answer: “Will depression be cured?” “I’d also like to know.”



Figure 1 Electric Box graffiti reading “Rushing through your life every day, aren’t you tired” in the centre; in white, the question asks “Will my depression be cured,” followed by an answer in black with an arrow “I would also like to know”

Elsewhere, during a night of urban flaneur, a graffiti on the wall writes: “say it when you can no longer bear”:



Figure 2 Graffiti on the left reading “speak up when you can no longer bear”

Urban commutes and walks offer interesting fact-checks for manic culture. In 2019, a snapshot from an interview with a Hong Kong middle-aged worker, with the subtitle “my demand is to go to work, and nothing else” (我的訴求就是上班，沒有其他), became a recent viral internet meme, mocking the docility of Hong Kong workers.⁴⁸⁷ In 2021, an ad from an HR consultancy firm featuring the slogan in black-and-white fonts “Are you looking forward to today’s work?” (今日の仕事は、楽しみですか。) was taken down from the busiest station walkway in Tokyo after a series of Twitter complaints about its blatant insensitivity to the plight of Japanese workers.⁴⁸⁸ In 2015, the mysterious appearance of David Graeber’s quotes on meaningless work from *Bullshit Jobs* on London Tube trains sparked another series of retweets.⁴⁸⁹

The series of anecdotes testifies to the faltering of manic culture’s positive ideals, with many beginning to question privately or online the toxic positivity pervading workplaces. A recent article on the *Financial Times* argued that “workaholic strivers” now primarily reside at the top of society, enjoying their well-paid work, while an estimated 70% of non-elite are either miserable or “just showing up, wishing they didn’t have to work at all.”⁴⁹⁰ If we turn our focus to the lower-income classes, then the situation proves even more dire. Faced with decades of diminishing hopes under material precarity, members of the rural working class are struggling with material destitution, nihilism, and isolation.⁴⁹¹ In the US, the infamous “deaths of despair” – deaths from suicide, substance overdose, and alcohol-related liver disease – have shown a marked rise since the 2000s in poorer classes who are left behind by neoliberal onslaughts since the 1970s.⁴⁹² The collapse of the many into varying degrees of anxiety, disillusionment, disaffection, and depression is arguably prefigured in the logic of manic culture. As I have

⁴⁸⁷ <https://evchk.fandom.com/zh/wiki/%E6%88%91%E5%98%85%E8%A8%B4%E6%B1%82%E5%B0%B1%E4%BF%82%E6%83%B3%E8%BF%94%E5%B7%A5>

⁴⁸⁸ <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/expert/articles/649b9f8945ecfc90f2bfc880c0593faf85d674c4#>

⁴⁸⁹ See Davies, *Sedated*, 81–83.

⁴⁹⁰ Kuper, “Europeans Have More Time, Americans More Money. Which Is Better?”

⁴⁹¹ See e.g. Silva, *Coming up Short*; ““This Thing Is a Joke”.”; Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

⁴⁹² Case and Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*. For more recent updates on the increased proportion of deaths of despair in amongst black and Hispanic populations in US, see Joseph Friedman and Helena Hansen, “Trends in Deaths of Despair by Race and Ethnicity from 1999 to 2022,” *JAMA psychiatry* 81, no. 7 (2024). For related trends in the UK, Christine Camacho et al., “Risk Factors for Deaths of Despair in England: An Ecological Study of Local Authority Mortality Data,” *Social Science & Medicine* 342 (2024).

argued, manic hyperactivity and bingeing hardly help us untangle our traumas and sedimented anxieties of neoliberal living, while the individualist striving side of manic activity even compounds social relational troubles by displacing empathy and relational contexts essential for healing. More fundamentally, perhaps, is how individualist solutions proposed by manic culture are incapable of undoing the structural causes of precarization, meaning that the illusory promises of consumption are soon invalidated by the structural precarity engulfing greater stretches of the population. Living on in the 2020s, we see signs that people are less and less able to be positively activated to pursue the better, although a pervasive sense of insecurity – a desperate fear that we may lose what one has if one does not work harder – is providing the new fuel for pressing on.⁴⁹³

5.1. The Official Story of Rising Distress

Of course, the contagion of increased dissatisfaction and distress does not go unnoticed in the establishment. In 2017, the WHO declared depression “the single largest contributor to global disability.”⁴⁹⁴ The statistical trend for depression and other mental health diagnoses shows a concerning, near-unanimous rise: Since the 1980s the number of people diagnosed with a mental disorder has skyrocketed.⁴⁹⁵ Coming along with this is the rise in prescriptions of psychotropics for the treatment of mental disorders across advanced capitalist societies.⁴⁹⁶ Mental health estimates seem even more concerning, with reports proposing that the lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in some advanced economies has risen from a rarity to affecting

⁴⁹³ Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*; Streeck, *Taking Back Control?*, 119–21.

⁴⁹⁴ World Health Organization, "Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates," (2017).

⁴⁹⁵ Joanna Moncrieff, *A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Drugs: The Truth About How They Work and How to Come Off Them*, Revised second edition. ed. (Monmouth: PCCS Books, 2020).

⁴⁹⁶ See, e.g. Hans-Christoph Steinhausen, "Recent International Trends in Psychotropic Medication Prescriptions for Children and Adolescents," *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 24, no. 6 (2015). (prescription trends in children and adolescents); H Verdoux, M Tournier, and B Begaud, "Antipsychotic Prescribing Trends: A Review of Pharmaco-Epidemiological Studies," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 121, no. 1 (2010). (prescription trends of antipsychotics); Pauline Lockhart and Bruce Guthrie, "Trends in Primary Care Antidepressant Prescribing 1995-2007: A Longitudinal Population Database Analysis," *British Journal of General Practice* 61, no. 590 (2011). (Scotland GP prescription trends of antidepressants, reported threefold increase in 12 years). See also summaries of relevant statistics in Moncrieff, *Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Drugs*; Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 118–22.

more than half of the population, meaning that more than half of the existing population is estimated to have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder at some point in their lives.⁴⁹⁷

The standard interpretation for the rising trend in mental-health diagnosis and psychotropic prescriptions – one that is often also uncritically embraced by critics of neoliberalism – is that a mental health epidemic is fast developing. Mental health professionals now alert administrators and governments to how ‘untreated’ mental disorders create heavy economic ‘burdens of care’ for society, while advocating for funding to improve mental health care, raise public awareness, and support pharmaceutical and psychological innovations that are supposed to solve this crisis.⁴⁹⁸

Yet, while advocates are right about the rise of distress, their representation of the psychosocial landscape of neoliberalism as *rising burdens of mental disorders* is questionable. The prevailing view of mental health as a social ‘burden’ demanding psychiatric and psychological interventions often makes the following assumptions:⁴⁹⁹

1. Psychiatric diagnosis trends represent a *real* shift in individual aetiologies and psycho-types.
2. Drugs and psycho-techniques are broadly speaking useful in reactivating mentally distressed subjects by targeting specific disorders in the brain.
3. The primary task of governments and administrators is to reenergize and reintegrate distressed populations by following sound findings in psychiatric and psychological sciences.

However, as I shall show in this chapter, all three claims are questionable. In particular:

1. The rise in the number of people diagnosed with mental disorders has been, in part, the result of continued loosening thresholds for psychiatric diagnosis, and of the psycho-culture’s success in popularizing its medicalized and individualizing interpretations of mental distress.
2. Despite elevated claims, psychotropic drugs have limited success in energizing; even when they have effects, they do not resolve disorders that primarily result from brain disorders, but rather by numbing and sedating.
3. Bearing the name of scientific treatment, neoliberal discourse of mental health diverts criticisms of its political functions, while responsabilizing individuals

⁴⁹⁷ M. A. Oakley Browne et al., "Lifetime Prevalence and Projected Lifetime Risk of DSM-IV Disorders in Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey," *Aust N Z J Psychiatry* 40, no. 10 (2006); Kessler et al., "Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication."

⁴⁹⁸ Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 25–28.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

for socially induced distress and licensing state authorities to discipline those who fail to adapt.

Thus, although the neoliberal social order has created great distress, the symptoms of which are diagnosable as ‘mental disorders’ under existing diagnostic frames, we cannot simply treat features such as the statistical rise of diagnosable disorders in the population as unproblematic evidence for rising distress. Worse, as I show in this chapter, by seeing rising social distress under the medicalizing and responsabilizing frames of ‘epidemics’ and ‘burdens,’ we risk unwittingly accepting the modes of problematization and management that are proliferating the wounding attachments we harbour towards the neoliberal order.

The following chapter is divided into five sections: 5.2 deals with the problem of medicalization and individualization by engaging with the biomedical turn of psychiatry in the 1980s and its resultant practices of expanding diagnosis. 5.3 deals with the rising use of psychotropics. 5.4 considers the concurrent rise of psych-discourses as inciting people to accept personal responsibility for social ills in building resilience and optimism. 5.5 continues responsabilization and describes how psychiatry and positive psychology can function repressively and compulsively towards the ‘underclasses’ and the homeless.

5.2. Medicalization and the Problematic of Neoliberal Mental Health

To better understand the management of mental distress under neoliberalism, it helps to look into how neoliberal psychiatry (and psycho-culture in general) problematizes mental distress.⁵⁰⁰ As points of comparison, this Dissertation takes a psychosocial mode of questioning and regards people’s mental distress as psychic effects of neoliberal social structures. This psychosocial account also draws insights from the psychoanalytic mode of problematization, which puts less emphasis on social factors but traces distress to determinants in the individual’s instincts, one’s environment and life history. But neoliberal psychiatry – or psychiatry that has

⁵⁰⁰‘Forms of problematization’ is borrowed from Foucault. See Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 384–90.

coemerged with neoliberalization – is neither concerned with social, instinctual or life-historical factors, but offers a biomedical mode of problematizing distress.

5.2.1. DSM-III and the Psychiatric Aspiration to Biomedicine

To grasp the dominant mode of psychiatric problematization, it is useful to consider the paradigm shift in psychiatry that occurred in the 1980s. Prior to the 1980s, American psychiatry mostly adopted psychoanalytic approaches to psychiatric patients. Psychiatric disorders and symptoms in general are interpreted as meaningful *reactions* to one's environment and life history, supported by the force of instincts. Where drugs were used, they were seen as aids to the patient's discovery of meaning in psychotherapy.⁵⁰¹

However, much was to change by the 1960s-70s, for, with the discovery of new psychotropics and the growing prominence of biomedical models, the psychoanalytic underpinnings of then psychiatry seemingly grew excessive. More importantly, funding pressures, perceived unreliability of psychiatric diagnosis (e.g. the famous Rosenhan experiment involving pseudo-patients), and powerful social critiques of the prejudices and normalising effects of psychiatric diagnosis and treatment have pushed psychiatry to a crisis point. If psychiatry is not to be seen as yet another agent of social control, it has to prove itself to be a proper medical science.

The answer of the psychiatric establishment to critics is congealed in a new edition of the diagnostic bible in 1980 – the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) that marked a paradigm shift in psychiatry towards a “research-based medical model” rooted in biomedicine.⁵⁰² To achieve this, DSM-III made significant changes in diagnostic practice.

Under the paradigm of DSM-III, all psychiatric syndromes are categorically divided and defined by checklists of symptoms specific to that diagnosis. This supposedly provides simple-to-apply, visible criteria that can be consistently applied by different clinicians, aiming to

⁵⁰¹ See, Jonathan Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), ch. 2; M. Wilson, "DSM-III and the Transformation of American Psychiatry: A History," *Am J Psychiatry* 150, no. 3 (1993).

⁵⁰² Wilson, "DSM-III and the Transformation of American Psychiatry: A History," 400.

secure the interrater reliability of diagnosis. There has also been a refocusing of the psychiatric gaze to what can be extracted in standardizable, structured interviews.

As a result of this shift, psychiatric syndromes are now *decontextualised*, diminishing the need for diagnosis to be made in reference to aetiologies, especially those rooted in psychology and personal history. An example of this is how references to “reactions” and “neurotic” conflicts were practically removed in post-DSM-III psychiatric diagnosis. Symptoms are no longer considered “symbolic entities” codifying the person’s psychological reactions to the environment.⁵⁰³ Any meaningful “concept of *depth* of mind” is lost in structured interviews, while “personality and the ongoing development of character, unconscious conflict, transference, family dynamics, and social factors” in the development of psychopathologies are deemphasised in psychiatric practice.⁵⁰⁴

The decontextualization of symptomatology helped transport psychopathological syndromes into a biomedical model, which also aligns psychiatry with the status of an empirical science, discharging critiques of its social and political functions. Although such diagnostic reform first aimed at reliability of diagnosis, the hope for and of the profession is that by first better categorizing and specifying syndromes, the DSM can inspire research that looks into the *aetiology* for psychiatric syndromes, so that findings in genetics, pathophysiology and neuropsychology will later validate the diagnostic categories.⁵⁰⁵ What is most significant for our purposes is that the ‘hope’ for psychiatry at the time of DSM-III is built on a fundamental shift in how mental distress is problematized: *from reactions to psychosocial adversities to essentially ‘disease’ entities rooted in neuro-chemical, neurophysiological disorders of the brain*. This shift established the standard for consensus among psychiatrists and other experts regarding diagnostic entities and the nature of their patients’ distress. At the same time, it provided the rationale for widespread use of psychotropics and for bridging psychiatry research

⁵⁰³ Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 78–79.

⁵⁰⁴ Wilson, “DSM-III and the Transformation of American Psychiatry: A History,” 408.

⁵⁰⁵ Darrel A Regier et al., “The Conceptual Development of DSM-V,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 166, no. 6 (2009).

with biological research. More insidiously, as I shall demonstrate, is how this helps psychiatric and other psychological practices perform social functions for the neoliberal order under the cover of the physical sciences.

5.2.2. Expanding Reach and Impact of Psychiatric Diagnosis

Seen as a response to the crisis of psychiatry, the paradigm shift typified by DSM-III was a success. By realigning themselves to a biomedical model, psychiatry after DSM-III deflected easy criticisms of their dubiousness and complicity in social control. With the problems of reliability resolved, psychiatry also regained the confidence of the general public, funders, and regulatory authorities.

Yet, judged by the purported scientific aims of the discipline, the achievements of this shift are minimal. Although various diagnostic categories (such as depressive disorders, Autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder) and their supposed physiological aetiologies (such as the various ‘chemical imbalance’ theories) have colonized popular consciousness of mental distress, there has been little unproblematic evidence indicating physical aetiologies for most psychiatric disorders.⁵⁰⁶ Indeed, the absence of empirical support for DSM categories has been acknowledged by important members of the psychiatric establishment in recent decades. The leader of the DSM-III task force, Robert Spitzer, acknowledged in 2012 that research has yet to identify biomarkers for most named psychiatric disorders.⁵⁰⁷ Allen Frances, leader of the DSM-IV task force, agrees, citing how diagnosis remains stuck “at its current descriptive level.”⁵⁰⁸ Steven Hyman, ex-director of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), named the danger of DSM categories “reification” – treated “as if they were natural kinds” despite having only sparse “etiological

⁵⁰⁶ Joanna Moncrieff, "Psychiatric Diagnosis as a Political Device," *Social Theory & Health* 8, no. 4 (2010): 373. This does not mean that there are no proposals that received some scientific support.

⁵⁰⁷ James Davies, *Cracked: Why Psychiatry Is Doing More Harm Than Good* (London: Icon, 2013), 20–23.

⁵⁰⁸ Allen Frances, "A Warning Sign on the Road to DSM-V: Beware of Its Unintended Consequences," *Psychiatric Times* 26, no. 8 (2009).

and pathophysiologic information” supporting them.⁵⁰⁹ Indeed, the problems of the DSM are so glaring that the NIMH – the US federal funding body for mental health research – has decided to require research no longer to be carried out under DSM categories in 2013.⁵¹⁰

However, despite all these, the lack of validation of DSM categories did not tarnish its clinical and social impact. Diagnosis has become the centrepiece in communications amongst mental health professionals, in deciding people’s eligibility for treatment and what care they receive (including the use of psychotropics). Outside the psychiatric establishment, diagnosis is an essential part for ascertaining their eligibility for insurance compensation, disability benefits, and accommodations at school and work.⁵¹¹ Acquiring a diagnostic label has become the means by which one becomes *recognizable* in the assemblage of neoliberal institutional practices, so much so that the mentally distressed are often incentivized to seek one.

The move from the more psychoanalytically inclined DSM-II to DSM-III involved the addition of more than 80 diagnostic categories to the manual (famous instances include social anxiety and social phobia). After that, new diagnoses continue to be formulated, while for existing disorders, the threshold for diagnosis generally decreases, making it easier to get a diagnosis.⁵¹² In the course of the century, the DSM evolved from its 132-page first version with 106 diagnosable disorders, into a whopping 1142-page DSM-5-TR with the number of diagnosable disorders nearly tripled. The expansion of the diagnostic net, together with the increasing centrality of diagnosis in our social system, has produced a concerning inflation of the number of people being diagnosed and medicated.⁵¹³

As chair of the DSM-IV task force admitted, the 15 years following the publication of DSM-IV alone witnessed ‘three false epidemics’ – an explosion in diagnosis rates of some disorders

⁵⁰⁹ S. E. Hyman, "The Diagnosis of Mental Disorders: The Problem of Reification," *Annu Rev Clin Psychol* 6 (2010).

⁵¹⁰ L. Winerman, "NIMH Funding to Shift Away from DSM Categories," *Monitor on Psychology*, 1 July 2013.

⁵¹¹ Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 73.

⁵¹² See Guy A. Boysen, "Revision of the DSM and Conceptual Expansion of Mental Illness: An Exploratory Analysis of Diagnostic Criteria," *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 32, no. 4 (2011); Guy A. Boysen and Ashley Ebersole, "Expansion of the Concept of Mental Disorder in the DSM-5," *Journal of Mind and Behavior* 35, no. 4 (2014); Robert Krause, "Depression, Antidepressants and Changes in Epidemiology," *Journal of Radical Psychology* 4 (2005).

⁵¹³ Davies, *Cracked*; Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*, ch. 2.

that is not accountable by valid clinical or scientific judgements, but arbitrary shifts in how diagnoses are formulated.⁵¹⁴ This includes inflated diagnosis rates of ADHD and bipolar disorder,⁵¹⁵ with evidence in child psychiatry showing normal variations in child cognitive development being misdiagnosed as disorders requiring treatment.⁵¹⁶ In this sense, the statistics underlying scare-mongering claims of the pandemics of ‘depression,’ ‘anxiety,’ and ‘bipolar disorders’ *cannot be understood without remembering the diagnostic explosions the expansion of DSM categories typifies.*

5.2.3. Psychiatric Reform and Medicalization

The goal of this brief excursion into recent psychiatric history is not to argue that existing diagnostic practices lack scientific foundations – there are, as seen, good reasons to think that this is the case, but this is not the place to conclusively settle this. The goal, rather, is to show that psychiatry (and other psychological professions), despite its aspiration to become ‘scientifically objective,’ performs important psychopolitical functions in the neoliberal era.

Within and without the psychiatric establishment, concerns and critiques begin to arise as to how scientifically valid and politically legitimate this is – raising questions about how reforms in psychiatry lead to the *aggressive over-medicalization of mental distress*.⁵¹⁷ Notably, Allen Frances warned the task force of the DSM-5 not to continue diagnostic inflation which may lead to “the usual problems of everyday life [becoming] medicalized into mental disorders.”⁵¹⁸ Institutions such as the WHO and the British Psychological Society are raising similar concerns

⁵¹⁴ Allen Frances, *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt against out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life* (New York, NY: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins publishers, 2013).

⁵¹⁵ Indeed, in some countries, ADHD diagnosis rates tripled while paediatric bipolar diagnosis increased fortyfold. Davies, *Cracked*, 48; Leader, *Strictly Bipolar*.

⁵¹⁶ See, most notably, Morrow et al.'s study that found that patterns of paediatric ADHD diagnosis in British Columbia drops drastically after the cut-off date of eligibility to school. Richard L Morrow et al., "Influence of Relative Age on Diagnosis and Treatment of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Children," *Cmaj* 184, no. 7 (2012).

⁵¹⁷ See, e.g. Peter Conrad, *The Medicalization of Society: On the Transformation of Human Conditions into Treatable Disorders*, vol. 14 (Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore, 2007); "The Shifting Engines of Medicalization," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 46, no. 1 (2005); Timo Beeker et al., "Psychiatrization of Society: A Conceptual Framework and Call for Transdisciplinary Research," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (2021); Davies, *Cracked*; Sedated; Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*; Moncrieff, "Psychiatric Diagnosis as a Political Device."

⁵¹⁸ Allen Frances, "The First Draft of DSM-V," *BMJ* 340 (2010).

about medicalization.⁵¹⁹ More directly targeting the *social* effects of overmedicalization, a WHO report noted that:

“Critical social determinants that impact on people’s mental health, such as violence, discrimination, poverty, exclusion, isolation, job insecurity or unemployment, lack of access to housing, social safety nets, and health services, are often overlooked or excluded from mental health concepts and practice. This leads to an over-diagnosis of human distress and over-reliance on psychotropic drugs to the detriment of psychosocial interventions.”⁵²⁰

In a 2017 report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur, it was even argued that “mental health policies should address ‘power imbalance’ (in society) rather than ‘chemical imbalance’ (in the brain).”⁵²¹

To grasp the concern about (over-)medicalization, recall psychiatry's biomedical shift. According to the biomedical model, psychiatry is a medical field that believes mental distress should be problematized and classified as specific brain disorders.⁵²² Under medicalized psychiatry, as Nikolas Rose observed, the distressed, conceptualized as patients, “are all [seen to be] ailing from the same kind of thing” that “a medically trained psychiatrist can diagnose, treat and manage.”⁵²³ It is a domain where, supposedly, no considerations other than those originating from evidence-based clinical knowledge matter. Here, diagnostic manuals dictate the thresholds where medicalized psychiatry can reign, but such thresholds have been lowered despite the lack of sound *scientific reasons* to do so.

The sustained failure for diagnostic practice to be validated (even under the scientific standards internal to this practice) raises questions about the social functions that psychiatrization – i.e. the extension of psychiatric practices to more people and evermore areas

⁵¹⁹ Lucy Johnstone, *A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis*, Revised second edition. ed. (Monmouth: PCCS Books, 2022).

⁵²⁰ World Health Organization, "Guidance on Community Mental Health Services: Promoting Person-Centred and Rights-Based Approaches," (2021).

⁵²¹ phisc Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Rights Expert Urges Shift Away from Drugs in Addressing Depression," news release, 05 April, 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/04/un-rights-expert-urges-shift-away-drugs-addressing-depression>.

⁵²² See Moncrieff, "Psychiatric Diagnosis as a Political Device," 371–72.

⁵²³ Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 71.

*of life – plays.*⁵²⁴ This is particularly true because most of the “critical social determinants” mentioned in the WHO report are regularly ignored by the biomedical paradigm, but are expected to increase stress among the public who are experiencing precarization.

As it will be clearer in upcoming sections, the social-critical concern for over-medicalization is that *by relegating understandable responses to social stressors to the realm of psychiatric knowledge, the socio-contextual origins of distress are obfuscated and turned into technical matters of prescription management, lifestyle re-education, and even psychiatric detention.* Furthermore, by localizing distress into ‘brains,’ *the responsibility for addressing pathological social conditions becomes delegated to the individual (who must navigate on their own their path to ‘recovery’ and ‘resilience’)* in a manner similar to how neoliberal institutions in general outsource responsibility and financial risks to individual life-strategies.

5.2.4. Return of the social in diagnostic manuals

Perhaps it is ironic that despite much work on biologizing psychiatry, social factors reek through the cracks. What is repressed in the biomedical turn glaringly returns in symptomatologies. To begin with, most common diagnoses in the DSM involve the criterion that the disorder “causes significant distress, or impairment in social, school, and workplace functioning.”⁵²⁵

⁵²⁴ There are two important clarifications to make here. First, there is no good conceptual reason why finding the (neuro)physiological underpinnings of a disease entity should exclude interventions other than medical ones, except the fact that it seems to be an implicit feature of the existing mode of psychiatric problematization. After all, even diseases with identified aetiologies can *also* be studied and addressed on socio-economic levels. (The management of a disease – say malaria – can as much begin with doctors as with devising mosquito control policies or even a study into political-economic obstacles for adopting malarial prevention measures.) The questions I pose in this section, therefore, though supported by psychiatry’s failure to self-validate, do not necessarily depend on it. Second, it should be noted that I am neither claiming (i) that there can be no valid psychiatric and diagnostic practice, nor (ii) that there are no mental health phenomena where psychiatric medical interventions (including the use of psychotropics and sometimes forced incarceration) are appropriate. The criticisms of neoliberal psychiatry her is not directed towards (medicalized) psychiatry *per se*, but only its current socio-historical form, in particular its implication under contemporary neoliberal order. Concerning the latter, psychiatric practice may well be no less a victim as a complicit actor.

⁵²⁵ As part of the definition of a “mental disorder,” the current version of the DSM states that “Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities.” (p. 14) References to ‘dysfunction’ pervade diagnosis of DSM-5-TR, including but not limited to developmental disorders, ADHD, psychotic disorders, bipolar disorders, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and gender dysphoria.

This quite contradicts the biomedical pretence that psychiatry puts up. *Functioning depends on the actual social circumstances of the agent.* Other things being equal, the same student who is subjected to high demands to perform is more likely to be more anxious and function worse than one who is not. The same adult who has a steady stream of income from gainful employment is likely to experience less distress than one who is only precariously employed. In both cases, distress and dysfunction do not necessarily indicate brain pathology. Yet, under existing diagnostic criteria, the former in both hypothetical cases would be more likely diagnosed with a medical disorder (that is primarily conceptualized as a brain disorder). The DSM-5-TR diagnostic feature for social anxiety disorder includes the following characterization:

“an individual who is afraid to speak in public would not receive a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder if this activity is not routinely encountered on the job or in classroom work [...]. However, *if the individual avoids, or is passed over for, the job or education he or she really wants because of social anxiety symptoms, Criterion G is met.*”⁵²⁶

If psychiatric diagnoses are at least hypothetically *brain* diseases, it is curious how a person with the same psychological makeup can be diagnosed sick in one situation and not the other because of a difference in the environment. Relatedly, the diagnostic features for generalized anxiety disorders hold similar puzzles:

“The greater the range of life circumstances about which a person worries (e.g., finances, children’s safety, job performance), the more likely his or her symptoms are to meet criteria for generalized anxiety disorder.”⁵²⁷

The point is not whether the average person diagnosed with anxiety disorders is no different from an ordinary person without a diagnosis. (This is likely not the case.) But if diagnosis is biomedical, then the patient’s life circumstances should not matter. Yet if the DSM categories

American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5-TR*. See also Davies, *Sedated*, 270–73. What Davies names as “Global Assessment of Functioning scale” (GAF) has been replaced by the “International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health” (ICF) as of *DSM-5-TR*, but his argument stays true in spirit.

⁵²⁶ APA, *DSM-5-TR*, 232.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

are applied, the same person placed in underemployed working-class conditions will be more likely to get an anxiety disorder diagnosis than if they have a stable job.⁵²⁸

This is the problem of decontextualization: When psychiatry looks only at the collection of immediate symptoms to support diagnoses, ignoring the complex interactions between the presented “pathology” and social circumstances which occasion it, there is a structural risk that people’s reasonable responses to social and environmental deprivations are wrongly medicalized. Yet, once diagnosed under the framework, the person becomes a psychiatric ‘case’ in need of medical treatment. In these mis-medicalized cases, *traces of how social circumstances can be traumatizing and injuring are blotted out, replaced by the discourse of brain chemistry, medications, and sometimes unsolicited, patronizing ‘care.’* This is one way medicalization reinforces the neoliberal order, silencing dissent by reframing socially-inflicted injuries as disorders of individual brains.⁵²⁹

If we compare different versions of the DSM, then its alignment with neoliberal reforms is even more striking. The use of workplace terminologies increased threefold between DSM-III and DSM-5. Likewise, comparison between DSM-I and DSM-5 yields a staggering thirty-fold increase.⁵³⁰

We already see that the tendency to worry ‘too much’ and about ‘too many’ things is branded as a symptom of “generalized anxiety.” This overlooks how social precarization produces more things for people to worry about. Likewise, as neoliberal education and workplaces culture demands people’s readiness to be communicative in unfamiliar situations, *shyness* is

⁵²⁸ In partial support of this claim, epidemiological studies has found diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder more likely in lower-income populations in Canada. Rita A. Watterson et al., "Descriptive Epidemiology of Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Canada," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 62, no. 1 (2017); Ayelet Meron Ruscio et al., "Cross-Sectional Comparison of the Epidemiology of DSM-5 Generalized Anxiety Disorder across the Globe," *JAMA Psychiatry* 74, no. 5 (2017).

⁵²⁹ Medicalization primarily inheres in the mode of problematization embodied in existing psychiatric practices, regardless of the intentions of individual psychiatrists. Though psychiatric experts play an important role in such system, it would be misguided to blame medicalization on individual psychiatrists.

⁵³⁰ Bruce M. Z. Cohen, *Psychiatric Hegemony: A Marxist Theory of Mental Illness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), ch. 4.

increasingly interpreted as a sign of “social anxiety.”⁵³¹ Paralleling the neoliberal expectation for everyone to be self-responsible entrepreneurs, the diagnosis of autism has expanded from mainly including “children who will never learn to speak” to including “fully functioning adults with friends, partners and successful careers” but who are deficient in some areas of social functioning.⁵³² Similarly, people whose attention is incapable of catching up with the attention requirements of the manic world can now be branded with ADHD, with diagnosis criteria historically expanded to include adults.

Under market pressures to perform, it seems understandable to find oneself feeling beaten down, inadequate, and demotivated. Yet, low activity, defeat, and demotivation can now be psychiatricized under the depressive disorders – a diagnosis that Alain Ehrenberg terms a “pathology of inadequacy” in the face of socially unrealistic demands for activity and motivation.⁵³³ Most recently in the list, perhaps, is the inclusion of ‘prolonged’ grief as a mental disorder in DSM-5-TR⁵³⁴ and the removal of the exemption criterion for recent bereavement in “major depressive disorder” in DSM-5,⁵³⁵ which could be read as neoliberal psychiatry’s impatience with people taking their time to grieve and finding their way about losses. There is no time for us to mourn deaths of loved ones, let alone neoliberalism.

We are made to believe that our societies are facing pandemics of depression, anxiety, ADHD, and autism; and societies are losing precious productivity and money because of these pandemics. But as rising demands of functioning shape diagnostic practices, seemingly ‘objective’ diagnosis can be seen as the means through which the “too-muchness” of mental disturbances falls under the de-socializing reign of psychiatric and psychological professionals. This is how diagnosis blurs into judgements about “how people ought to think, feel, and behave”⁵³⁶ – judgements that may not be intended by professionals, but bear traces to the

⁵³¹ Ibid.; S. Scott, “The Medicalisation of Shyness: From Social Misfits to Social Fitness,” *Sociol Health Illn* 28, no. 2 (2006).

⁵³² Johnstone, *A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis*, 33.

⁵³³ Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self*; Davies, *Happiness Industry.*, ch. 5

⁵³⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5-TR*, F43.8.

⁵³⁵ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association 2013).

⁵³⁶ Johnstone, *A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis*, 35.

normative expectations for the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*. This is how *the brutal exclusion of contexts, feigned scientificity, and colonizing over-medicalization in neoliberal psychiatry have the effect of desocializing the social origins of mental distress, and actively reinforcing the normative model of the normative neoliberal subject.*

If we suspend the pathologizing and desocializing gaze of psychiatry, then a lot of medicalized symptoms do make sense. Perhaps the ‘excessively’ anxious precariat has a more realistic understanding of our neoliberal world’s precarizing forces than hedge-fund managers enjoying their socially sanctioned manic highs over the red and green on screens. The ‘depressed’ and ‘socially-anxious’ seem more truthful to how unrealistically demanding the ideal image of the neoliberal entrepreneur is. The ‘attention-deficient’ may be more receptive to the world of platform capitalism which is trying to colonize our attention and overexcite us. The grief-stricken perhaps has a more truthful relation to how our culture fails to contain our losses.

Do ‘normal’ individuals not “negatively hallucinate” about grave injustices and pending catastrophes of the social world, as Bollas argues?⁵³⁷ Do we really have a pandemic of depression, ADHD or anxiety? Or is it better to see distress as effects of objective and internalized social stressors, and say that in our insane society, our attachment to normality and ‘reality’ is itself sick?⁵³⁸

5.3. The Promises of Psychotropics

Social justice is a “mirage,” argued Hayek.⁵³⁹ “There is no such thing as a society” proclaimed Thatcher.⁵⁴⁰ The two slogans are not simply ideology (in the sense of false consciousness), but now reflect social reality. In the domain of scientificized psychology, professionals are in no

⁵³⁷ Christopher Bollas, "Civilization and the Discontented," in *Psychoanalysis and Covidian Life: Common Distress, Individual Experience*, ed. Ana de Staal and Howard B Levine (London: Karnac Books, 2021).

⁵³⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), A36. See also, Fabian Freyenhagen, Anastasios Gaitanidis, and Polona Curk, "The End of the Individual," *Journal of Adorno Studies* 1 (2025).

⁵³⁹ Hayek, *Law Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. 2.

⁵⁴⁰ Thatcher, "Interview for Woman's Own."

position to criticize social contexts, nor does it seem that patients are eager to open the Pandora's box of social criticism.⁵⁴¹ Everyone is potentially a 'patient' and psychiatry's first line of treatment is usually psychotropics. For this reason, it is little wonder that prescription of psychotropics has seen a steady increase during the neoliberal decades.⁵⁴²

5.3.1. Energizing through Suggestion

Psychotropics, we are told, work. Corresponding to the biomedical turn of psychiatry and in no small part driven by marketing and community education campaigns, we are sold 'chemical imbalance' theories of mental disorders.⁵⁴³ Through animations of coloured neurotransmitters travelling through synapses, the most common understanding of psychotropics is that they cure our distress by targeting those imbalances in the brain.

But reality is more sobering. From the 1990s, studies and reviews questioned the assumptions for mental disorders as reducible to simplistic assumptions of neurotransmitter imbalances.⁵⁴⁴ Contemporary neuroscientific research on mental disorders now tends to focus more on neurocircuitries and their complex interactions with molecular and environmental factors (despite the continued popular influence of the unsupported, outmoded picture in popular consciousness).⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴¹ For features of psychotherapeutic encounters under neoliberal settings see, Gaitanidis, Freyenhagen, and Curk, "New Forms of Self and Psychic Suffering Today and Their Implications for Psychoanalysis."; Butler, "Falling through the Cracks: Precarity, Precocity, and Other Neoliberal Pressures."

⁵⁴² For summaries of psychotropic prescription trends, see Joanna Moncrieff, "Opium and the People: The Prescription Psychopharmaceutical Epidemic in Historical Context," in *The Sedated Society* ed. James Davies (New York: Macmillan, 2016).

⁵⁴³ "Psychiatric Drug Promotion and the Politics of Neo-Liberalism," *Br J Psychiatry* 188 (2006).

⁵⁴⁴ E.g. Joanna Moncrieff et al., "The Serotonin Theory of Depression: A Systematic Umbrella Review of the Evidence," *Molecular psychiatry* 28, no. 8 (2023); Joanna Moncrieff, "A Critique of the Dopamine Hypothesis of Schizophrenia and Psychosis," *Harvard review of psychiatry* 17, no. 3 (2009).

⁵⁴⁵ See e.g. Hyman, "The Diagnosis of Mental Disorders."; Thomas R Insel, "The NIMH Research Domain Criteria (Rdoc) Project: Precision Medicine for Psychiatry," *American journal of psychiatry* 171, no. 4 (2014). Despite the turn towards neurological and 'biopsychosocial' models of distress, there remains concerns as to how brain-centred explanations are dominant. The most relevant distinction, as Rose argues, is between brain-centred explanations (which treats distress and behavioural symptoms as in the last instance *caused* by brains) and explanations involving brains. Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 111–13. For critics of the 'biopsychosocial' model, see John Read and Pete Sanders, *A Straight Talking Introduction to the Causes of Mental Health Problems* (Monmouth: PCCS Books, 2022), 31–35, 45–46.

Concerning the functions of psychotropics, psychiatrist Joanna Moncrieff proposed that they work more as psychoactive drugs that disrupt brain chemistries to achieve effects, than as specific cures for supposed ‘brain disorders.’⁵⁴⁶ More scandalous perhaps are the plethora of studies that question the effectiveness and therapeutic benefits of psychotropics, especially for their all-too-common long-term prescription and use.⁵⁴⁷ For instance, systematic reviews on clinical trials on antidepressants demonstrated that for low and mid-severity depression, the difference between experimental and placebo treatment is too small to be considered clinically significant, while placebo effects amount to a significant proportion of the drug response.⁵⁴⁸

Although scandalous perhaps in the eyes of those who think drugs should act upon a specific neurochemical mechanism, placebo effects are very *real*.⁵⁴⁹ Indeed, psychotherapy works mainly through ‘placebo effects.’ (Psychoanalytically, placebo effects are just conceptualized as the transference. In this regard, it is interesting how studies have found psychotherapy producing comparable outcomes as psychotropics.⁵⁵⁰) For psychiatrist Jonathan Metzl, psychotropics are always “imbued with expectation, desire, gender, race, sexuality, power, time, reputation, countertransference, [and] metaphor.”⁵⁵¹ The suggestive power of the doctor who prescribes, the cultural expectations surrounding medications, and the models the patient projects (through transference) onto both all feed into the effect we attribute to drugs.⁵⁵² It is just that the biomedical turn of psychiatry, in Metzl’s terms, “from Freud to Prozac [...] precludes the awareness of Freud as Prozac.”⁵⁵³

⁵⁴⁶ Moncrieff, *Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Drugs*, ch. 2.

⁵⁴⁷ For summaries of critiques of existing practices of psychotropic prescriptions (such as long term or early-intervention uses), see Davies, *Sedated*, ch. 2; Moncrieff, *Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Drugs*. Moncrieff offers detailed summaries of research different drug types such as anti-depressants, antipsychotics, ‘mood stabilizers,’ and stimulants.

⁵⁴⁸ E.g. I. Kirsch et al., “Initial Severity and Antidepressant Benefits: A Meta-Analysis of Data Submitted to the Food and Drug Administration,” *PLoS Med* 5, no. 2 (2008). See a summary of different findings on anti-depression effectiveness in Irving Kirsch, “Placebo Effect in the Treatment of Depression and Anxiety,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019).

⁵⁴⁹ See Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, 125–26.

⁵⁵⁰ A. Khan et al., “A Systematic Review of Comparative Efficacy of Treatments and Controls for Depression,” *PLoS One* 7, no. 7 (2012); Kirsch, “Placebo Effect in the Treatment of Depression and Anxiety.”

⁵⁵¹ Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch*, 5.

⁵⁵² See *ibid.*, 197–98.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*

In the few decades after WWII, the commonest psychotropics, tranquillizers, promises as “mother’s little helpers”: Imageries of unmarried women and angry feminists are portrayed in drug ads as threats to men who are to be pacified and brought back to prescribed gender roles by the consumption of coloured pills.⁵⁵⁴ Psychiatric drugs back then were mainly marketed for their sedative and pacifying functions, with little indication that these substances could *cure* mental disorders.⁵⁵⁵

However, by the 1990s, the discourse surrounding drugs had changed. Fueled to a great extent by the pharmaceutical industries in the 1980s and 1990s, hype gathered in the medical community about how the new-generation psychotropics can effectively *cure* mental disorders by selectively targeting the specific neurochemical disorders of the brain underlying mental pathologies.⁵⁵⁶ Public culture followed suit in the combined efforts of drug ads, public awareness campaigns, and consumer advocacy movements. Under this new paradigm, people are increasingly induced to interpret mental distress as originating from brain disorders that drugs can effectively treat. The new drugs, thus, are no longer merely seen as chemical means to sedate. Instead, they are imbued with the hopes to cure or manage the pathology so that people can resume normal function,⁵⁵⁷ allowing the subject to *‘regain control’ of the self in its project for ‘autonomy’ and self-realization.*⁵⁵⁸

It is perhaps not surprising that the redefinition of the cultural meaning of drugs temporally coincided with the advent of neoliberalism. The hope exhibited by the new drugs is what is needed right when precarizing pressures of the neoliberal order start to accumulate. Importantly, psychotropics *promise the user the possibility of a ‘return to work’ by silencing worries and conflicts endogenous to the neoliberal manic subject.* As Ehrenberg argues, the new

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 210.

⁵⁵⁶ Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self*, 179–80; David Healy, *The Antidepressant Era* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵⁷ As psychiatrist David Healy puts in an interview, “Pills [=psychotropics] come with a label that ‘this works,’ and that tends to give people an impression, ‘I just take a pill and it will work.’” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vvQ59Rs1wM&>.

⁵⁵⁸ Rose, *Politics of Life Itself*, 209–15.

antidepressants have made confronting psychic conflicts and traumas a matter of choice.⁵⁵⁹ Freed from the psychic troubles that bog us down, psychotropics promise a return to culturally sanctioned mania. In the form of capsules we consume, the newest psychoactive substance transforms individuals into “*chemically Taylorized beings* whose disconnect from affective fluctuations renders them manically hyperproductive.”⁵⁶⁰

Of course, as with the ideals of manic self-exploitation, we may ask *for whom the promises of psychotropics work and how*. This, to be sure, is often treated as a question of people's physiological constitution: physiology surely determines response to psychotropics. But, if psychotropics also work by suggestion and transference as Metzl proposes, then the drug's effects are hardly only determined by physiology, but also by the social/psychic currency it commands.

Perhaps, the power of social suggestion may well affect those *not taking the drugs* as much as those taking them. To a certain extent, psychotropics can be read as a perverse form of ‘containing’ in manic culture.

We saw how manic culture ‘contains’ our troubles with the market of products promising us pleasure and quick fixes to our problems. In the sphere of mental health, the “consumerist philosophy of suffering”⁵⁶¹ also pervades, where people seek consumerist solutions to senseless sufferings of the age as markets have emerged for industries promising to provide us with omnipotent ways of relieving stress, improving sleep, and optimizing performance. Amongst the many objects of consumption of fantasized objects that bring us calmness and flow, what is more potent than that witch’s brew that promises to lift us from the deepest existential horror even when our mind breaks down – without us even having to try?

Interestingly, with the replacement of psychoanalysis by biomedicine, a new structure of psychiatric authority has also emerged. Remarking how medications replace the personality of

⁵⁵⁹ Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self*.

⁵⁶⁰ Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch*, 174.

⁵⁶¹ Davies, *Sedated*, 3.

the male psychiatrist in psychotropic ads, Metzl argues that the drug capsule has now become the new “phallic symbol.”⁵⁶² As psychopharmaceuticals have dominated psycho-consumerist culture of the age, such symbol has become the fantasized object imbued with the powers of the potency most needed for the manic hyper-performing subjects of our age. The fantasy of something holding us together even in the worst of times can give us some sense of security and set our minds free to pursue more “productive” endeavours - even when, in reality, our composure is often only held together by a thread. Arguably, the feigned omnipotence of the psychological sciences and their ‘potent’ medical promises also assures social authorities that there is something which can handle the havoc neoliberalization unleashed on the masses.

5.3.2. From Energizing to Sedating

Similar to consumer products, psychotropics are not as potent and magical when used. The energizing, activating effects of anti-depressants can be short-lived. In the long-term, they function as mind-numbing substances rather than activators,⁵⁶³ and patients, as Metzl and Ehrenberg showed, ultimately have to reckon with the collapse of the euphoric promises of the energizing capsules and the risks that the disorders may become ‘chronic’⁵⁶⁴ – meaning that those who go to the psychiatrist for a miracle cure is likely going to be disillusioned and disappointed soon enough.

Here, the Lacanian account of consumer commodities is instructive: the object is imbued with desired magical powers to the degree that it is viewed from the right angle and from a proper distance (i.e. through fantasy) – once one steers too close, fantasy collapses, leading to an existential crisis of enjoyment.⁵⁶⁵ The security accorded by the capsule’s suggestive power is

⁵⁶² Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch*, 67.

⁵⁶³ See Moncrieff, *Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Drugs*, ch. 5. Moncrieff outlines the effects of antidepressants as mostly sedative, with SSRIs having milder psychoactive effects, but with patients reporting feelings of “distanced from life” or being “apathetic and demotivated.”

⁵⁶⁴ Metzl, *Prozac on the Couch*, 184–87; Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self*, 188–206.

⁵⁶⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Desire and Its Interpretation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019).

arguably strongest when one does *not* need to take it. This way, there is no possibility of a desire frustrated, and the ‘phallus’ not delivering.

However, even when the drugs do not deliver the fantasized benefits of reenergizing the subject’s entrepreneurial endeavours, most of them still numb and *sedate*. This, for social control, can be sufficient.⁵⁶⁶ Not everyone needs to be manic entrepreneurial strivers; they just have to be content enough with the various means to consume, compliant enough not to resist, and functional enough not to become ‘welfare dependent.’ The model for many under neoliberal capitalism, as Davies argues, may well be “functional dissatisfaction.”⁵⁶⁷

5.4. Individualized Brains, Responsible Neurochemical Selves

Let me return to the bigger picture of psychiatrization and medicalization. To a certain extent, the whole talk surrounding mental health – ranging from the neurochemical hypotheses, the effectiveness of drugs, to the benefits of treatment and the risks and economic costs of ‘undiagnosed’ psychiatric disorders – is in place not only to identify and funnel the psychologically distressed into the psychiatric system’s individualizing paradigm, but also to contribute to a new mode of social problematization and subjectivation. In other words, psychiatric power has the potential to effect a reconfiguration of everyone’s relations to self, regardless of whether one is occupying the broadening definition of the ‘sick’ role. As Nikolas Rose suggests, under this new psychiatric regime, we are increasingly induced to become “neurochemical selves.”⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁶ In this regard the widening diagnostic thresholds for diagnosis such as bipolar disorder, which in practice warrants prescription of antipsychotics and mood stabilizers (drugs with stronger sedative effects than antidepressants), coupled with increased use of antipsychotics eerily matches this pattern. For expansion of bipolar disorder diagnosis and prescription trends, see Moncrieff, *Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Drugs*, ch. 6. David Healy, "The Latest Mania: Selling Bipolar Disorder," *PLoS medicine* 3, no. 4 (2006).

⁵⁶⁷ Davies, *Sedated*, 233–35.

⁵⁶⁸ Nikolas Rose, "Neurochemical Selves," *Society (New Brunswick)* 41, no. 1 (2003).

Rose argues that neurochemical subjects increasingly “come to understand [their] minds and selves in terms of our brains and bodies.”⁵⁶⁹ People are incited to think of themselves in somatic, brain-based terms, such as to:

“code one’s hopes and fears in terms of this biomedical body, and to try to reform, cure or improve oneself by acting on that body. At one end of the spectrum this involved reshaping the visible body, through diet, exercise, and tattooing. At the other end, it involves understanding troubles and desires in terms of the interior “organic” functioning of the body, and seeking to reshape that — usually by pharmacological interventions. While discontents might previously have been mapped onto a psychological space [...] they are now mapped upon the body itself, or one particular organ of the body — the brain.”⁵⁷⁰

Rose’s account of the neurochemical selves emphasizes how the pharmaceutical-driven mindset in psychiatry has given rise to the idea that everything formerly thought of as psychological – especially psychopathologies in particular – must “pass through the brain and its neurochemistry.”⁵⁷¹ The pharmaceutical industry, along with the psychiatric profession, has created a cultural discourse for people to re-narrate their (troubled) emotional lives as a story of dopamine, serotonin, brain activities, and the like.

At times, this mode of self-narration is forced upon the patient as a matter of their treatment. Therapies and treatments are targeted at inciting their participants/patients to *recognize* the truth of their illness as a brain disorder/disease (this being ‘insight’ which is an essential part of contemporary psychiatric cure⁵⁷²) that they cannot overcome by themselves and must work with experts if they are to stand a chance of recovery. Once recovered under these terms, ‘survivors’ become marketized role-model patients whose footsteps others are supposed to follow, perpetuating the neurochemical understanding of mental disorders.⁵⁷³

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁷² Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*, ch. 4.

⁵⁷³ Peele illustrates both points well in the case of addicts and addiction therapy groups. As he writes “[T]reatment programs make no bones about the need to educate addicts and alcoholics about the nature of their disease, The treatment is learning the disease viewpoint, combined with group sessions in which people describe their problems and are applauded when they admit these are signs of their disease. Successful completion of treatment means accepting that they are addicts or alcoholics and vowing never to drink or take a drug again.” As he argues further, addicts who have recovered (under the prevailing disease model of addiction) then becomes *proud* “recovering

In other contexts, the acceptance of the biomedical discourse is an effect of public awareness campaigns that try to ‘educate’ the general public about the ‘risks’ for undiagnosed mental disorders and hence the need to seek expert help when in doubt. This is the target of mental health awareness and ‘first-aid’ programs funded by governments and private enterprises alike.⁵⁷⁴ In the paediatric scene, the perceived risk of the ‘undiagnosed’ can be so strong as to lead teachers and parents to question their own ability to deal with their children’s problems and seek expert help for the troubling (but normal) discrepancies in their children’s behaviour.⁵⁷⁵ Regardless of whether the subject in question is diagnosed with a disorder, the process of getting ‘educated,’ seeking ‘help,’ and receiving support conditions the acceptance of the whole *psychiatric mode of problematization* – one that codes mental disorders as fundamentally neurochemical, and amenable to treatment with psychotropics – in the parties concerned.

Currently, perhaps, there is no greater evidence of the efficacy of the neurochemical mode of problematization in shaping people’s self-understanding than in people’s propensity to self-diagnose and share their struggles with emotional and mental adversities under neurochemical/psychiatricized terms. Coming with the recent trend of TikTok and YouTube videos featuring people’s experience with diagnoses and medications, it was observed that teenagers are going to psychiatrists to report their self-diagnosed mental disorders.⁵⁷⁶ In sharp contrast with how the song “Officer Krupke” in *West Side Story* involves the self-attribution of behavioural troubles to troubled family relations and bad social environments, social media

alcoholic addict” who can “save and convert others.” Stanton Peele, *Diseasing of America: How We Allowed Recovery Zealots and the Treatment Industry to Convince Us We Are out of Control*, 1st Lexington Books Pbk. ed. (New York: Lexington Books, 1995), 91, 112–13.

⁵⁷⁴ See Davies, *Sedated*, ch. 3.

⁵⁷⁵ Another important factor contributing to the rise in diagnosis in the paediatric psychiatric disorders is noted by Timimi, which traces how the moral pressure on carers (most notably mothers) about their child’s behaviours generate the pressure to medicalize their children’s behaviour with the a diagnosis of ADHD. Sami Timimi, “Why Diagnosis of ADHD Has Increased So Rapidly in the West: A Cultural Perspective,” in *Rethinking ADHD: From Brain to Culture* (London: Red Globe Press, 2009), 148–49. Similarly, some describe bipolar diagnoses in children to be a “variation on Munchausen’s syndrome, where some significant other wants the individual to be ill and these significant others derive some gain from these proxy illnesses.” David Healy and Joanna Le Noury, “Pediatric Bipolar Disorder: An Object of Study in the Creation of an Illness,” *International Journal of Risk & Safety in Medicine* 19, no. 4 (2007): 219.

⁵⁷⁶ Johnstone, *A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis*, 40–43.

posts of the newer generations of our days testify to the success of neurochemical subjectivation.

One of the most significant effects of the predominance of the neurochemical understanding of the self is the individualization, disenchantment, and desocialization of our psychological lives. As we interpret our emotional fluctuations from an organic lens, they become primarily properties of our individual brains. Besides, the highly somatic and neurochemical understanding of our emotional lives would also block understanding of our emotional fluctuations (especially when they become psychiatric symptoms) as meaningful entities deserving of interpretation. When the irrational currents of the mind are interpreted as symptoms of an ailment not so different from a cold⁵⁷⁷ or a calculator which has suffered water damage, there is nothing to read from the symptoms other than the fact that “it needs fixing.” Under the current psycho-culture, much of our distress and psychological intrusions to our conscious mind are interpreted under the latter category – completely disenchanting. Instead of helping us look into what has potentially gone wrong in our lives and in our social environment, the neurochemical model invites us to treat psychosomatic symptoms and ‘irrational’ behaviour as meaningless manifestations of the brain gone haywire, of faulty functioning of brains that should be ‘nudged’ back to rationality.⁵⁷⁸

As Rose points out, what was treated as psychological is “now mapped on to the body itself” – as the broadly psychoanalytic/psychodynamic approach to psychological struggles is now attacked as “psychobabble.” Aside from the sedative effects of psychotropics, many of the new psycho-techniques on the consumer market (under the labels of cognitive-behavioural therapy, positive psychology, mindfulness, ‘New age’ therapies, “self-nudging”) that are invented under

⁵⁷⁷ Notably, the rise in depression diagnosis and anti-depressant prescriptions in Japan came with the rebranding of distress as the “cold of the heart” (心の風邪). Hiroshi Ihara, “A Cold of the Soul: A Japanese Case of Disease Mongering in Psychiatry,” *International journal of risk & safety in medicine* 24, no. 2 (2012).

⁵⁷⁸ For an interesting critical account on how the behavioural economics of ‘nudges’ weaves together brain and social-network sciences to prop up the rationality of *homo oeconomicus* upon its collapse after the financial crisis, see Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism : Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*, 163–76.

this new paradigm now offer novel ways of distancing ourselves from our struggles in the name of boosting our happiness, rational self-control and psychological resilience.

Through the formation of the neurochemical mode of subjectivation, their area of effect reaches far beyond those caught under the diagnostic net and branded as pathological. As the neurochemical model of subjectivity has become *generalized*, its effects not only affect those being diagnosed with a mental disorder, but also *anyone in general*.

5.4.1. Responsibilizing Neurochemical Citizens

One of the immediate effects of attributing psychological and behavioural abnormalities to diseases of the brain is a partial de-responsibilization of those occupying the 'sick' role. If sickness is thought to have emerged from disorders of the brain, then no one, supposedly, should be responsible for bringing it about. Yet, the story is hardly this simple. As some medical anthropologists argue (in the context of non-psychiatric disorders), the de-moralization and destigmatization of the sick role in the West has been associated with the discovery of magic-bullet drugs (most notably anti-biotics) that can reliably cure diseases in a short time frame. However, this ideal of a drug for every disorder does not work for increasing segments of the population who are afflicted with *chronic and untreatable disorders* (cancer, diabetes mellitus, heart disease, etc.) by the mid-20th Century. Responsibility here reemerges in the form of the *imperative to manage one's lifestyle habits and behaviour to manage risks*: risk of the disorder worsening (for those who are already afflicted) and risk of contracting such disorder (for those who do not but have a potential to develop such disorders).⁵⁷⁹

We see similar trends in psychology and psychiatry. Had the neurochemical means for controlling them proved effective in addressing and treating people's mental distress, there would perhaps not have been neurochemical subjects in the full sense. The effectiveness of the

⁵⁷⁹ Charles Rosenberg, "Banishing Risk: Continuity and Change in the Moral Management of Disease," in *Morality and Health*, ed. Allan M. Brandt and Paul Rozin (New York: Routledge, 1997); Allan M. Brandt, "Behavior, Disease, and Health in the Twentieth-Century United States: The Moral Valence of Individual Risk," *ibid*.

means of sedation and reenergization would, to be sure, hardly make drugging and sedating people for psychosocial problems any more justifiable, but it would make an important difference in the kind of ethical responsibility people are incited to accept under the regime of neurochemical subjectivation.

There are different ways in which the inadequacy of psychiatric means returns to haunt the subject with its responsibilities. In the psychiatric setting, people may feel ‘exculpated’ for a short while once they got an official diagnosis, but as their progress of recovery are less than ideal, they may be gradually treated as if they have “complete responsibility for their feelings and behaviour” and that their prolonged occupation of the ‘sick’ role is a result of “‘unmotivation,’ ‘attention seeking’ or ‘don’t really want to get better.’”⁵⁸⁰

Continuous with his discussion of neurochemical selves, Rose discusses how biological citizens and neurochemical selves are activated when personal responsibility for health emerges within psychiatry’s neurochemical discourses.⁵⁸¹ Studying Prozac websites of the 2000s, Rose argues that ‘public education’ campaigns from the pharmaceutical industry do not seek only to induce compliance with medication regimes and supplant psychiatrists’ authority; they also “encourage the person suffering from depression to form an ‘active’ alliance with the medic in the realization of a program of care.” In addition to selling the neurochemical reduction of mental distress, such campaigns also emphasize the *active responsibility of neurochemicalized patients*. They suggest that the process of recovery “[enlists] a whole range of techniques of the self: practicing self-discovery, liking yourself, being kind to yourself, reducing stress, engaging in physical exercise, eating well, writing lists and keeping diaries, building self-esteem, joining a support group, and reading the Prozac.com newsletter.”⁵⁸²

The idea of a neurochemical self as a responsible subject is even more prominent in popular psychology, recent trends in neuropsychology, and behavioural economics. In Alain Ehrenberg’s study of cognitive neuroscience, mental afflictions (most notably that of autism,

⁵⁸⁰ Johnstone, *A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis*, 61.

⁵⁸¹ Rose, *Politics of Life Itself*, 140–44.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 142–43.

but also including schizophrenia) are recast under a vocabulary of afflictions and “hidden potentials.”⁵⁸³ In this model, individuals with a psychiatric diagnosis are not so much ‘sick,’ but a person ridden with special ailments and “hidden potentials” that can be overcome if they can “[transform] the constraints of disability into a lifestyle chosen by [themselves] and recognized by others, [be themselves] not only despite the disability, but thanks to it.”⁵⁸⁴ This model of overcoming the disorder one is born into and trying to make the best out of it is, argues Ehrenberg, one that everyone can identify with (irrespective of the presence of a psychiatric diagnosis). They are in line with the culture of neoliberal entrepreneurial individualism under which all are supposed to individually overcome (social) obstacles in life and realize their own potential. Stories of “exemplary brains” of autistics and schizophrenics demonstrate to everyone “the diversity of ways in which anybody can turn bad into good by simply having self-confidence. They are models of being: they create viable, credible pathways to a utopic society organized around the individual.”⁵⁸⁵

Supplementing the neurochemical myth of the psyche, best-selling positive psychology manuals argue that agents can become happier with the right technique. Sam Binkley gives the example of a bestselling self-help book, which simplistically compartmentalizes the psyche into three parts – the genetically predetermined (50%), the environmentally determined (10%), and the controllable parts (40%).⁵⁸⁶ Under the banner of ‘science,’ the author argues that we can make the best out of the last 40% if we perform various psychotechniques (such as keeping gratitude journals and engaging in regular acts of altruism). This brand of positive psychology effectively reduces unhappiness to the result of, as Binkley puts it, “the reluctance to act on one’s own, to assume full responsibility for oneself and one’s life, or to settle into unreflective routines” – in short, ‘inactivity’ and ‘passivity’ for which the subject is responsible.⁵⁸⁷ By

⁵⁸³ Ehrenberg, *Mechanics of Passions*.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 46–47.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁸⁶ Binkley, “Happiness, Positive Psychology and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality.”

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 389.

attributing causes of unhappiness to personal inactivity and habits of thought which could (and should) be actively practised, harbouring positive moods again becomes one's responsibility.

The most recent, but no less insignificant, example of responsabilized neurochemical subjects takes the form of "self-nudging." The concept of "self-nudging" is a recent extension of the discourse of 'nudging' in behavioural economics. The latter, in turn, makes a conceptual distinction in neuro-psychology between two types of mental processes in the human brain termed "system I" (unconscious, intuitive, emotional, and flow-like brain processes) and "system II" (cognitive, slower rational, deliberative and reflective processing) functioning.⁵⁸⁸ Proponents of nudging defend the view that to help agents better and more rationally achieve their own (consciously defined) ends and produce greater welfare, government and public agencies should carefully design the "choice architecture" of their subjects (i.e. 'nudge' their subjects) to minimize the effects of intuitive/emotional (system I) biases and align their decision-making process to ideal models of *homo oeconomicus*.⁵⁸⁹ Building upon Sunstein and Thaler, proponents of self-nudging are now proposing to promote the techniques of nudging to individuals, so that they can better "self-regulate" and "address what they perceive as failures of self-control."⁵⁹⁰ The hero of self-regulation is Odysseus, who, in the paper, is positively referred to as the self-nudger *par excellence*: the "psychologically sophisticated agent" aware

⁵⁸⁸ See, e.g. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). One may see resonances between Kahneman's distinction (system-I and system-II) and the psychoanalytic one (the unconscious and the conscious) – although there are significant differences in orientation. Both sets of distinction are similar in that they both define a system of unconscious, automatic orientations against another system amenable to *conscious* deliberations and reflections. However, the similarities end here. While the psychoanalytic unconscious is seen as repositories of meaningful memory traces and unintegrated psychic motivations, whose practical integration *can bring the subject into* higher state of reflective self-understanding and self-consciousness (with practical implications to both systems), Kahneman's system I has no meaning outside an instrumentally defined context. The dominant theme in Kahneman's discussion of the two systems is rational decision-making in *goal-directed, instrumental* action. Decisions, whether made from intuitions in system I or deliberations in system II, are judged by how well they satisfy consciously defined ends. The discourse of nudging, indeed, further disparages the working of the automatic system I as a dangerous source of bias and naïve optimism awaiting correction by the right nudges.

⁵⁸⁹ Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*; Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Nudge?: The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism*, Storrs Lectures on Jurisprudence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁵⁹⁰ Samuli Reijula and Ralph Hertwig, "Self-Nudging and the Citizen Choice Architect," *Behavioural Public Policy* 6, no. 1 (2022): 5.

of his “vulnerability to enchantment” and (thus) able to effectively utilize “behavioural tools” to cope with his vulnerability and “pursue both his short-term and long-term goals.”⁵⁹¹

Although responsibility is not the dominant tenor in self-nudge literature, the deployment of the same concept in diet control, fruit and digital consumption habits demonstrates how well this psychotechnique maps onto fitness culture – an area saturated with imperatives for responsabilized, self-optimizing lifestyles.⁵⁹² In a paper discussing the self-nudging potentials of smartphone apps, it is argued that “external apps provide an optimal structure for *self-responsible* interventions on digital media consumption”.⁵⁹³

Overall, it is not accidental how a pioneering paper on self-nudges casts the modern subject in the position of the modern-day Odysseus, who is being steered away from achieving their “long-term goals” and pursuing “higher incomes” by the highly seductive economy of “high-caloric, low-cost processed foods and sweetened sodas” and a “manipulative information environment”.⁵⁹⁴ The “self-nudge” literature’s understanding of contemporary subjects bears uncanny resonance with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for which the *Odyssey* also holds the key to deciphering the prehistory of the enlightenment, bourgeois goal-directed subject.⁵⁹⁵ Yet, under the pragmatist, non-committal tone of the authors, the self-nudge literature brushes off the horrors of the goal-directed subject outlined in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which offered a deep reflection on the psychic costs and the mutilation of experience involved in the casting of human life in instrumental terms. Under the seemingly innocuous pretence of improving people’s “self-control” and “self-regulation” in overt, technologically smart ways, nudging has the potential to become a new paradigm for inventing neoliberal psycho-

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² D. J. Gruning, F. Riedel, and P. Lorenz-Spreen, "Directing Smartphone Use through the Self-Nudge App One Sec," *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 120, no. 8 (2023); Leonard Michels et al., "Salience, Transparency, and Self-Nudging: A Digital Nudge to Promote Healthier Food Product Choices," *European Journal of Information Systems* (2023); Gruning, Riedel, and Lorenz-Spreen, "Directing Smartphone Use through the Self-Nudge App One Sec."; M. van Rookhuijzen et al., "When Nudges Become Nudgers: Exploring the Use of Self-Nudging to Promote Fruit Intake," *Appl Psychol Health Well Being* (2023).

⁵⁹³ Gruning, Riedel, and Lorenz-Spreen, "Directing Smartphone Use through the Self-Nudge App One Sec," 2, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹⁴ Reijula and Hertwig, "Self-Nudging," 2–3.

⁵⁹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We will revisit this uncanny resemblance in Chapter 7.

techniques. It is perhaps chilling that ‘nudge’ economics and its proponents have worked their way into the US and British governments right after the 2008 GFC.⁵⁹⁶

To a significant extent, the various models of responsabilized, active neurochemical selves outlined above converge with the model of the neoliberalized subject. Again, Rose offers an incisive summary of how the new psychological/psychiatric technologies have moved beyond energizing, sedating, or individualizing in the sense outlined thus far. The new psychological technologies are producing a new model of cultural subjectivity with distinctive responsibilities to self:

The new psychiatric and pharmaceutical technologies for the government of the soul oblige the individual to engage in constant risk management, to monitor and evaluate mood, emotion, and cognition according to a finer and more continuous process of self-scrutiny. The person, educated by disease awareness campaigns, understanding him- or herself at least in part in neurochemical terms, in conscientious alliance with health care professionals, and by means of niche-marketed pharmaceuticals, is to take control of these modulations in the name of maximizing his or her potential, recovering his or her self, shaping the self in fashioning a life. The forms being taken by contemporary neurochemical selfhood, the blurring of the boundaries between treatment, recovery, manipulation, and enhancement, are intimately entwined with the obligations of these new forms of life.”⁵⁹⁷

Although Rose does not mention neoliberalism, we can hardly read the ideals of “maximizing one’s potential,” “fashioning a life,” and “enhancement” without seeing its potential resonance with the model of human capital.

As part of the project of neoliberalism’s self-optimizing craze, active neurochemical subjectivation compounds the already mounting pressures on the manic subject. In earlier chapters, we have already seen how subjects under neoliberalism are expected to perform with optimism, resilience, and positivity. The consciousness of pain and grief, if they were still recognizable, is crowded out by manic hyperactivity. Responsibilized neurochemical subjectivation adds a layer to the story – for along with the new psychotechniques, even those

⁵⁹⁶ Mark Easton, “How Politicians Learned the Power of the Gentle Nudge,” *BBC News*, 22 July 2015.

⁵⁹⁷ Rose, *Politics of Life Itself*, 223, emphasis added.

who fall off the manic train into depression, anxiety and other diagnosed disorders are greeted with highly responsibilized long-term responsibility and imperatives of self-management. In this new regime of subjectivation, there is no complete escape even in psychological illness – for even in diagnoses like depression, there are expectations and demands for the agent to work on and reenergize themselves.

Under the gaze of medical and psychological experts, activity, optimism, and rational life planning are qualities expected of the psychologically distressed in their technically managed ‘recovery.’ In the name of helping the person live well, psychological expertise now offers highly *individualized* virtues demanded from all workers as a source of social capital and productivity.

In the final section, I shall argue that the compulsiveness of individualized ‘virtues’ of active neurochemical subjects is most apparent as – not unlike neoliberal culture in general – ‘soft’ neurochemical culture morphs into ‘hard,’ coercive psychological compulsion.

5.5. ‘Hard’ Psychiatric Culture: Psychiatry and Incarceration

It would be a misrepresentation of the power of the new psychological sciences if we were to discuss only neurochemical subjectivation and sedation. Like neoliberal culture in general, psychiatric power is not always ‘soft,’ but can be extremely repressive. Indeed, as Moncrieff argues, psychiatric diagnosis can be used to facilitate “the control of people who exhibit violent and antisocial behaviours, whom the criminal justice system does not want to entertain.”⁵⁹⁸

In North America, per capita rates of psychiatric ‘involuntary commitments’ have seen a significant and steady rise in the last three decades. Such involuntary commitments have also been shown in a number of places to follow concerning class and racialized patterns, disproportionately targeting the welfare recipients, unemployed and non-White populations.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁸ Moncrieff, "Psychiatric Diagnosis as a Political Device," 380.

⁵⁹⁹ For racial patterns, see M. S. Swartz, "The Urgency of Racial Justice and Reducing Law Enforcement Involvement in Involuntary Civil Commitment," *Psychiatr Serv* 71, no. 12 (2020); P. Barnett et al., "Ethnic Variations in

Despite significant reforms in psychiatry and the advent of the more “positive” revolutions in psychology, there remains an important function of psychiatry and psychology as a tool of repression and coercion.

There is, of course, a significant shift in discourse and the mode of problematization. Instead of reference to historical models of social and disciplinary normality or the eugenic preoccupation with social ‘hygiene,’ contemporary psychiatric disciplinarization resorts to a medicalized conception of illness to justify its doings: Contemporary psychiatry now refers to the management of “risks” (to patients themselves and to their social others), potential “compliance” with medicalized treatment outside the psychiatric facility, and “insight” into their own illness when justifying psychiatric incarcerations. Under this discourse, forced detention in psychiatric facilities is the inconvenient but ‘necessary’ solution to be used only when their patients are ‘at *risk*’ (when judged suicidal or a threat to others), are unwilling to comply with medical treatments, and/or are misguided about the ‘right’ understanding of the illness.⁶⁰⁰

The goal of psychiatric incarcerations, on paper, is neither to punish nor to sedate, but to allow their patients to receive the ‘appropriate’ treatments so that they can ‘reintegrate’ in society and live ‘meaningful’ social lives.⁶⁰¹ However, in practice, concepts littered in diagnostic and treatment manuals such as “insight [into one’s illness],” and “patient compliance,” (or the softer term “adherence”) can be mobilized in psychiatric contexts to ensure agreement with clinicians and can be used as a weapon against patients (even those voluntarily presented to the institution) who refuse medications. In the US, court decisions for psychiatric detentions not only often defer to the authority of psychiatrists but also regularly take “predictions of a patient’s potential

Compulsory Detention under the Mental Health Act: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of International Data," *Lancet Psychiatry* 6, no. 4 (2019).

⁶⁰⁰ See Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*, chs. 3–4.

⁶⁰¹ We see a version of regarding some psychiatric patients as less-than-capable agents in social life and in need of involuntary commitments, guardianship, and substituted decision-making in the opinion of prominent psychiatrists challenging a UN Commission Article recommending abolishing coercive practices in psychiatry. See Melvyn Colin Freeman et al., "Reversing Hard Won Victories in the Name of Human Rights: A Critique of the General Comment on Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities," *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2, no. 9 (2015).

refusal to take antipsychotic medication in a community setting as the most probative evidence on the question of whether involuntary civil commitment should be ordered.”⁶⁰²

Psychiatry is a testimony to how coercion has not been outmoded by soft, seductive power.⁶⁰³ Supported by mental health legislation, psychiatric institutions have immense power over psychiatric patients, which in some cases involves locking up, sedation, and restraints. Such powers have historically been used politically for purposes of control and social normalization.⁶⁰⁴ Metzl’s study of the evolution of psychiatric diagnosis in the civil rights movement in America is a clear testimony of how diagnoses (in this case, “schizophrenia”) are nudged to justify the suppression of black activists.⁶⁰⁵ Indeed, racial stigma in psychiatry remains operative even after the biomedical turn of psychiatry in the 1980s, as people of colour are still over-represented in ‘high-risk diagnoses’ (e.g. bipolar disorder and schizophrenic disorders) related to higher rates of forced hospitalizations and prescription of psychotropics with sedative effects.⁶⁰⁶

Journalist Robert Wipond gives chilling descriptions of the ease with which police can involuntarily commit individuals to psychiatric institutions. In some cases, psychiatry is instrumentalized as “retaliatory practices against whistleblowers,” as means to handle angry workers, and ‘troublesome’ clients.⁶⁰⁷ Wipond’s examples also show the ease with which sane persons can be trapped in the psychiatric system and have difficulty proving their ‘sanity’ to

⁶⁰² Perlin, 2000, as quoted in Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required.*, ch. 3

⁶⁰³ This contrasts with Han’s misguided claim that “[s]hock therapy is a genuinely disciplinary technique” and “[v]iolent psychiatric interventions of this kind are employed in disciplinary society alone.” Han, *Psychopolitics*, 35.

⁶⁰⁴ See e.g., Foucault, *Abnormal*.

⁶⁰⁵ Metzl argues traces how the clinical definitions and public conceptions of “schizophrenia” morphed during the American Civil Rights movement from a condition afflicting artistic, taciturn White individuals with mild symptom presentations, into a condition characterized by ‘paranoia,’ ‘projection,’ and ‘violence’ primarily associated with adult black males. Metzl, *Protest Psychosis*. In a related paper, Metzl traces how psychotropic ads also tap onto racial anxieties in branding themselves as ‘solutions’ to racial conflicts and violence. Jonathan M Metzl, “Mainstream Anxieties About Race in Antipsychotic Drug Ads,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 14, no. 6 (2012).

⁶⁰⁶ C. King, “Race, Mental Health, and the Research Gap,” *Lancet Psychiatry* 6, no. 5 (2019); Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*; K. J. Coleman et al., “Racial-Ethnic Differences in Psychiatric Diagnoses and Treatment across 11 Health Care Systems in the Mental Health Research Network,” *Psychiatr Serv* 67, no. 7 (2016).

⁶⁰⁷ Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required.*, chs. 19-21.

get out – because of the ingrained, pathologizing and punitive prejudices of the psychiatric system.⁶⁰⁸ This difficulty of escaping the system is only greater when the detained are socio-economically disadvantaged (such as being homeless and unemployed), as they are more likely to exhibit behaviour interpreted as psychiatric symptoms (perhaps due to chronic exposure to sickening levels of environment-induced distress), lack social and monetary resources to appeal, and have clinician prejudices stacked against them.⁶⁰⁹ In this section, therefore, we will see how the punitive functions of psychiatry and psychology function as an arm of neoliberal discipline.

5.5.1. Psychological Compulsion of the Unemployed

One of the clearest examples where the new psychological sciences are repressive is in the state management of welfare recipients. As discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberal politico-economic reforms in advanced capitalist states involved reforms to social welfare. Structurally, welfare reforms are in line with the state's macroeconomic goals of 'balanced budgets' and austerity in recent decades.⁶¹⁰ To meet this goal, discourses surrounding welfare have been recast from honouring *the state's duty of care* for those in need into that of educating individuals from habituated 'welfare-dependency.' As such, policies are designed to discourage welfare use and force the poor into precarious, unskilled segments of the labour market.⁶¹¹ Welfare reforms since the 1990s have sought to *reduce* the duration of welfare recipient's dependency on welfare (lifetime caps), *coerce* welfare-dependent subjects to work for their benefits (Workfare), punitively *audit* the 'needs' of recipients (e.g. 'Work Capability Assessments' and physical or mental disabilities clauses), and psychologically '*retrain*' welfare recipients to make them employable.⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ For a discussion of clinician's racial prejudices in psychiatry, see A. Londono Tobon et al., "Racial Implicit Associations in Psychiatric Diagnosis, Treatment, and Compliance Expectations," *Acad Psychiatry* 45, no. 1 (2021); S. M. Eack et al., "Interviewer-Perceived Honesty as a Mediator of Racial Disparities in the Diagnosis of Schizophrenia," *Psychiatr Serv* 63, no. 9 (2012).

⁶¹⁰ Schäfer and Streeck, "Introduction."

⁶¹¹ See Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, ch. 3.

⁶¹² Julie MacLeavy, "Neoliberalism and Welfare," in *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, ed. Simon Springer, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

One of the most important aspects of neoliberal welfare discourses is how they insidiously portray benefit-recipients in moralized and psychologized terms. Instead of tackling structural and specific causes of misery (which, in fact, structurally create ‘dependency’), structural causes are reframed as resulting from personal behavioural failures and character traits (e.g. ‘laziness,’ ‘passivity,’ and ‘entitlement’) that are often associated with marginalized and racialized groups.⁶¹³ Moralized and individualized, the new welfare discourse justifies the disciplining of marginalised individuals. Here, welfare recipients are portrayed as fundamentally ‘incompetent,’ ‘passive’ individuals to be ‘nudged’ and ‘reactivated’ to become ‘self-responsible’ economically productive subjects through tight surveillance, discipline, and retraining.⁶¹⁴

In the UK, for example, continued receipt of welfare benefits is conditioned upon attendance in mandatory positive psychology training courses, inspired in no small part by the ‘nudge’ and positive psychology advocates.⁶¹⁵ These courses operate under the assumption that benefit recipients are “passive” and therefore should not only accept responsibility for their own misery but also work hard to cultivate the *positive affects* that mainstream neoliberal culture presumes are required for successful reintegration into the job market.⁶¹⁶ In the words of Friedli and Stearn, such positive psychology training amounts to “psycho-compulsion” that exhorts welfare recipients through mandatory activities to accept the various connotations of the dominant welfare discourse.⁶¹⁷ Under the self-legitimated ‘insights’ of psychology and behavioural economics, welfare recipients are into accepting the ‘passivized’ abject-position

⁶¹³ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 98–100; MacLeavy, “Neoliberalism and Welfare.”

⁶¹⁴ Wright, “Conceptualising the Active Welfare Subject.”

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ There is double irony in this presumption. First, like most market trends, positivity requirements at work result in no small part from positive psychology’s self-confirming make-believe that positivity brings productivity benefits. (Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, ch. 3.) Second, it is questionable that without structural reforms that create jobs suitable for welfare recipients, that positivity is going to do recipients any good. (On the irony of ‘work-ready’ mothers unable to find ‘mother-ready’ jobs, see Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 85–88.)

⁶¹⁷ Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn, “Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy: Conditionality, Activation and the Role of Psychology in UK Government Workfare Programmes,” *Medical humanities* 41, no. 1 (2015).

that existing neoliberalized welfare discourses impose on them, despite the gross insufficiency of psychologistic terms in representing their plight.⁶¹⁸

Given the structural origins of precarization, psychological solutions hardly help welfare recipients out of their true plight. In the rare case psycho-compulsion *does* work as intended to nudge welfare subjects into positivity, it would have instilled an unsustainable kind of “cruel optimism” – an attachment to the unrealistic ideal of positive achievement in a socio-economic world that hardly gives room for its realization.⁶¹⁹ With minimal room for realizing the promise of positivity, the responsabilized poor who accept self-responsibility for their plight face additional “fears of being a ‘burden’” and “come to think of, and act on, themselves as though their lives have no value.”⁶²⁰

Of course, the efficacy of psycho-compulsion need not work through the *successful*, ‘soft’ nudging of welfare recipients. A significant group of ‘psycho-compelled’ and ‘coerced’ welfare subjects hardly find the ideology of positive achievement sufficient to capture their lived experiences, which – in Wright’s terms – are not “passive,” but “undermined” by precarity.⁶²¹ In response to psycho-compulsion, then, people have been reported to feel misunderstood and experience disempowerment, anger, or humiliation during interactions with the welfare agents.⁶²²

Indeed, welfare psycho-activation programs to many may even amount to secondary “affective injustice,” where victims of a structural injustice are unjustly exhorted to bear the dehumanizing burden to withhold legitimate emotional responses to victimization and act positively and productively to improve their social outcomes.⁶²³ As Friedli and Stearn argue,

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Ruti, *Penis Envy*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

⁶²⁰ Mills, “Dead People Don’t Claim,” 12.

⁶²¹ Many welfare recipients are neither reluctant to take up work, nor become dependent because of personal choices. Indeed, as Wright has argued that the “active welfare subject, despite effort and self-development, may still meet a brick wall structured by systems and processes beyond their influence.” Wright, “Conceptualising the Active Welfare Subject,” 249.

⁶²² Friedli and Stearn, “Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy,” 44. See also Davies, *Sedated*.

⁶²³ For discussions of “affective injustice” in the context of anger against racial injustices, see Amia Srinivasan, “The Aptness of Anger,” *The journal of political philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018). See also Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. for a

being a welfare recipient has come with burdens of emotional labour, as “working on psychological deficits becomes the full-time, unpaid labour of millions of people, which, together with mandatory job search activities, ensures that these days people who are poor have no money, no time—and no place.”⁶²⁴

Here, oppressiveness of the psychological discourses is apparent: *Wielding the power to discontinue benefits for claimants, psychological experts and agents running privatized Workfare institutions have the power to coerce their subjects into accepting the dehumanizing abjection and psychological compulsions*⁶²⁵, regardless of whether they fairly represent the circumstances of welfare recipients and whether the latter willingly accept their ascriptions. Under the system’s extensive surveillance of their psyches,⁶²⁶ those who have a real need for social support have no choice but to do what the system demands or put up a system-conforming façade at the cost of heavy emotional labour. As China Mills observed, such oppressive Workfare arrangements in the UK have, in recent decades, caused benefit claimants to commit suicide under immense anxiety and desperation.⁶²⁷ Even more enraging, as Mills also observes, is how the casualties of the neoliberalized welfare system are again depoliticized and psychologized by the public, interpreting casualties of the order as results of psychiatric problems and psychological weakness of the poor.⁶²⁸

5.5.2. Psychiatrization of Poverty and Homelessness

Due to welfare reforms that punitively restrict continued access to unemployment assistance, important segments of the poor have been displaced into disability benefit schemes. The eligibility for sustained welfare payments and housing support, under neoliberal reforms, is

discussion of the psychological burden positive psychology creates in marginalized groups. As Friedli and Stearn details, welfare recipients under psycho-compulsion programs are recommended to stay positive and restrain their tendency to question, imagine bad scenarios, or indulge in anger and frustration. Friedli and Stearn, "Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy," 43–44.

⁶²⁴ "Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy," 45.

⁶²⁵ This is not a rallying-call against frontline workers in charge of welfare programs, but institutional norms and structures that forces them to act in such manner.

⁶²⁶ Friedli and Stearn, "Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy," 43.

⁶²⁷ Mills, "'Dead People Don't Claim'." See also the "Deaths by Welfare" timeline curated by Healing Justice London under the direction of Mills: <https://deathsbywelfare.org/>

⁶²⁸ Mills and Pring, "Weaponising Time in the War on Welfare."

often tethered to diagnoses of a medical or psychiatric kind, and, for the latter, requires treatment by psychotropics.⁶²⁹ In America, for example, an increasing proportion of benefit claimants under “Supplemental Security Income” have claims based on psychiatric conditions.⁶³⁰ Under this scheme, recipients are incited to accept medicalized diagnosis to secure a survival income and avoid the perils of poverty and homelessness. Some have described this as “an era of medicalised poverty,” where poverty compels welfare recipients to accept psychiatrization and sedation as a “new survival strategy.”⁶³¹ A similar case occurs for housing for the homeless. Motivated by the idea that the chronically homeless are homeless because of their mental illness, some US states have narrowed the eligibility of government-subsidised supportive housing to homeless people with a diagnosable mental disorder.⁶³²

As we have already seen, accepting a diagnosis means affirming the ideology that the poor’s distress is an individual medical problem. It involves one’s responsibility in ‘getting well’ and complying with the disciplinary demands of the psychiatric apparatus.⁶³³ It involves a *depoliticizing* affirmation by the poor of an economic system wrought with injustices and a normalizing moral-psychological economy that disburses benefits on the condition that one accepts psychiatric abjection. Yet, as with other social classes, one’s distress and conditions are not reducible to psychological and biomedical factors (and, in some cases, hardly at all). Even in cases where the benefit claimants genuinely present symptoms meeting the threshold of diagnosis, the medicalised model ignores how symptoms may emerge from stresses arising

⁶²⁹ Deborah Padgett, Benjamin F. Henwood, and Sam J. Tsemberis, *Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 2; Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker, “Pathologizing Poverty.”

⁶³⁰ “Pathologizing Poverty.” Similar trends are found in the UK, see Sebastião Viola and Joanna Moncrieff, “Claims for Sickness and Disability Benefits Owing to Mental Disorders in the UK: Trends from 1995 to 2014,” *BJPsych Open* 2, no. 1 (2016).

⁶³¹ Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker, “Pathologizing Poverty.”

⁶³² Padgett, Henwood, and Tsemberis, *Housing First*, ch. 1; Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*, ch. 7

⁶³³ Psychiatrization may already be the softer fork of the disciplinary forces the homeless faces – the other being penal incarceration, although, as Wacquant argues, “a dynamic interrelationship between these three modalities of state treatment of deplorable states of affairs, with medicalization often serving as a conduit to criminalization at the bottom of the class structure as it introduces a logic of individual treatment.” Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, xxi.

from chronic socio-economic deprivations that medicalized treatment can in no way address except by sedating.⁶³⁴

As medicalization reaches the bottom of the social ladder, its normalization and compulsions become repressive. Acceptance of a diagnosis often means accepting treatments with psychotropics with mind-numbing properties and significant side effects. When used to treat symptoms of stress which have clear socio-economic causes⁶³⁵, their use is even more questionable. Yet, despite every reservation, expectations of compliance with medication regimes have been a condition for demonstrating one's disability needs.⁶³⁶ Compelled by social conditions they cannot control, some were even made to drug and sedate themselves and their children to stay afloat in an inundating economy of structural poverty, regardless of whether drugs help them or not.⁶³⁷

The situation is more grim for the homeless: under the expertized, psychiatrized programs for homelessness, the provision of government-sponsored housing depends on successful 'treatment' of presumed mental disorders. Thus, in supervised and group housing, the homeless can be expected to prove the effectiveness of their 'treatments' by compliance in medication and tight disciplinary regimes (curfews, bed checks, sobriety, etc.).⁶³⁸ This often leads to poor

⁶³⁴ "Poverty may well be so acutely or chronically distressing that it leads to 'symptoms' that might fit psychiatric diagnostic categories; however, this does not mean that these 'symptoms' are 'symptoms' of such disorders rather than 'normal' reactions to longstanding conditions of poverty or inequality" Mills, "Psychiatrization of Poverty," 216.

⁶³⁵ For a recent account of US homelessness as primarily a socio-economic problem, see Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern, *Homelessness Is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain U.S. Patterns* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022).

⁶³⁶ Mills, "Psychiatrization of Poverty."; Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker, "Pathologizing Poverty."

⁶³⁷ For coverage of how a single-parent is incited to medicate her children for ADHD to receive SSI benefits for living, see, Patricia Wen, "A Legacy of Unintended Side Effects," *Boston Globe*, December 12 2010. Not everyone is likely to find medicalization and psychiatrization straightforwardly repressive. Indeed, amongst the abject categories of the poor, the psychiatric patient who has responsibly fought its way to therapeutic progress can be the least stigmatizing, and a cause for pride under dominant terms. That said, the question of whether psychiatrization should be the dominant discourse that people's struggles under poverty should be casted remains questionable. For multilayered ethnographical accounts of how psychiatrized welfare recipients navigate the system, see Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker, "Pathologizing Poverty.". See also Silva's account of individualized, therapeutic self-transformation narratives has become common tropes amongst working-class young adults in Silva, *Coming up Short*, ch. 5.

⁶³⁸ Padgett, Henwood, and Tsemberis, *Housing First.*, ch. 1

outcomes: service users are subjected to stressful living environments devoid of privacy, freedom and a sense of control, often resulting in diminished ‘treatment’ outcomes and their inability to secure housing.⁶³⁹ Many homeless people (deemed ‘treatment-resistant’ and ‘housing-unready’) thus become dependent on temporary shelters, or avoid the system altogether to stay away from surveillance, disciplinarization, and forced medications.⁶⁴⁰

Recently, in blatant disregard of the complex causes of homelessness and ineffectiveness of the punitive psychiatrization of the homeless, initiatives have even been made in some states to expand the scope of involuntary commitments. That is, making it easier for police, city workers, and concerned citizens to send homeless individuals to courts that can enforce psychiatric stays.⁶⁴¹ This is all done in the name of allowing the homeless (branded ‘mentally ill’) to receive ‘humanitarian’ care. However, given the failure of the psychiatric system to ‘treat’ homelessness and the abusiveness of the psychiatric system in treating its patients under detention, it would not be a stretch to question if this is a case of *abuse* and *oppression* by a society that cannot bear the sight of the losers it manufactures.

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed the various functions medicalized, scientificized models of psychiatry and psychology play in the neoliberal order. Under psychiatry and psychology’s biomedical pretence, individual consequences of structural injustices are problematized as ‘mental-health’ issues, conceptualized as matters of individual reform and compliance with expert advice that are the responsibilities of individuals themselves. Besides, the widening availability of psychotropic means of activation and sedation also serves to obfuscate the social origins of

⁶³⁹ Sam Tsemberis and Sara Asmussen, "From Streets to Homes: The Pathways to Housing Consumer Preference Supported Housing Model," in *Homelessness Prevention in Treatment of Substance Abuse and Mental Illness* (Routledge, 1999), 116–17.

⁶⁴⁰ “Homelessness [...] precipitates crises, police interactions, hospitalization, and forced treatment—which drives such people back into homelessness to get away. Basically, many people are homeless in part because they’re actively fleeing forced psychiatric treatment, not because they’ve been unable to get treatment.” Wipond, *Your Consent Is Not Required*, ch. 6

⁶⁴¹ Katie O’Connor, "Nyc’s Involuntary Treatment Policy May Backfire, Experts Warn," *Psychiatric News* 2023.

distress. With regards to punitive uses of psychiatry towards the downtrodden, we see a clear example of abjection, where rejected, ‘dependent’ parts of neoliberal, self-responsible selves are projected onto the poor, justifying the demeaning and disciplinary treatments of welfare recipients.

It may not be easy to see how medicalized psychiatry and individualizing psycho-culture connects to wounding attachments. But to the degree that neoliberal psychoculture dominates most (if not all) institutional spaces where distress generated by the neoliberal order are handled, managed, and ‘cared’ for, the distressed are likely align themselves to norms of the responsibilizing psycho-culture, variously taking up diagnostic labels, using psychotropics, and adopting various practices of self-care and self-nudging – if only strategically to lighten one’s school and work burdens.⁶⁴²

On a deeper level, to the degree that psychiatric and psycho-techniques are not complete hoaxes, the gratifications and mollifying effects can well be the only available psychological thread the distressed hangs on to, and as such can generate forms of attachment to it. Given the potential suggestive and containing effects of psychotropics I discussed in 5.3, it is a curious hypothesis to relate the reported prevalence of long-term anti-depressant use in recent decades⁶⁴³ to people’s potential dependence on (and attachment to the suggestive powers of) psychotropics to avoid disturbing moods and distress. If, as Ehrenberg proposes, anti-depressants really became the promised choice for some to stall deeper working-through of their psychic conflicts, then antidepressants *can* become an object of wounding attachment in similar ways as manic activity does. In both cases, by promising to keep aside accumulating anxieties and grief without ever resolving them, one becomes dependent on that which maintains the precarious balance keeping one alive. In both cases, by promising to keep aside accumulating troubles without ever resolving them, the distressed becomes dependent on that which maintains their

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⁶⁴³ In a 2017 US report, one-fourth of antidepressant users in the US aged 12 and above have been on medications for more than ten years. See, Laura A Pratt, Debra J Brody, and Qiuping Gu, "Antidepressant Use among Persons Aged 12 and Over: United States, 2011-2014. NCHS Data Brief. Number 283," *National Center for Health Statistics* (2017).

precarious psychological balance. If anything, both are likely to *reproduce* the stresses and traumas in the process of silencing their disruptive expressions.

Aside from psychotropics, attachments are also possibly at work in how diagnostic categories shape identifications and group solidarities. Without diminishing the liberatory and empowering effects of mental health activism, the active resignification of the ‘sick’ role and of trauma narratives (such as under discourses of ‘neurodiversity’ and ‘survivorhood’) can also reinforce the neoliberal ethos of therapeutic self-responsibility.⁶⁴⁴ In its worst instances, as some argue, trauma discourses can be exploited for professional-class virtue-signalling, effectively portraying class privilege as individual achievements while obscuring the economic devastation caused by neoliberal policies.⁶⁴⁵ All these could play into reproducing the neoliberal order that wounds and traumatizes us in the first place.

Perhaps the most significant part medicalized psychiatry and psychoculture plays in the overall scheme of wounding attachments to neoliberal pathological organizations lies not merely in people’s identification with the categories, scripts, and practices *within* it, any more than its precise function along with other aspects of neoliberal socialization. As an institutionalized part of neoliberal culture dedicated to the handling of psychological distress, psycho-culture suggests to all that no matter how bad one may feel, there is likely something or someone that can contain our troubles and return us to striving, competing, and binge-consuming. The promises of quick-fixes for emotional troubles – from psychotropics to self-help routines – both extend and supplement our everyday manic strivings.

Furthermore, psychiatry’s punitive categorization frameworks also produces easy justifications for punitive treatments of the downtrodden poor, that served as the abjected underside of positive neoliberal socialization. Social *abjection* of ‘underclasses’ singles out the most downtrodden for impoverishment and humiliation, while perpetuating the collective blindness

⁶⁴⁴ For a related note on how the political use of trauma discourse have helped spread “triumphant self-reliant individualism” underlying capitalist psychoculture, see Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 57–63.

⁶⁴⁵ Liu, “The Problem with Trauma Culture.” *Contra* Liu, trauma culture is not the sole prerogative of the professional-managerial class, but her arguments surrounding its tendency towards individualization, class-obfuscation, depoliticization remains incisive.

towards the structural features of the neoliberal economy that is driving further *precarization* – trends that are creeping up the class ladder. Such blindness helps reproduce the precarizing forces and, as such, will paradoxically only heighten the desire to abject. All these are ways how medicalized and individualized mental distress can reproduce wounding attachments to the order.

In the next chapter, we will look into populist politics, where the expanding reaches of neoliberal precarization, coupled with the habituated drive to *abject*, produce a paranoid politics of resentment that inclines the precaritized to identify with sub-segments of the economic elite while continuing their abjection of the downtrodden.

Chapter 6. Paranoid Politics

The moment I heard the news that Donald Trump was reelected US president, I was also scrolling through Instagram. In ten minutes, the algorithm presented me with three ‘shorts’ that included some symbol references to the Nazi salute and the song "Erika." I scrolled through first two times, and on the third time, I was bewildered – what was in my social media profile that Mr. Surveillance Capitalism would think a critical theory researcher with Marxist, feminist leanings would enjoy this, and why at this time? Am I becoming right-wing if I smirked at the balloon flapping its arms? What of people who aren’t left-wing – what would their feed look like?

Very gradually, the associations gathered as I recall how many times I saw similar memes, and others portraying borderline ridiculous but offensive content on platforms. They are shared and liked, and their comment sections were sometimes firestorms with hostile name-calling and cynical trolls. I refused to join in, but I occasionally share memes on Asian stereotypes for the fun of ironic self-mockery.

I also recall during the 2019 protests how protestors in Hong Kong appealed to Trump and the GOP. The positive representation of Trump reverberated long after, as times I hear people expressing that the Democrats are sell-outs and ‘we’ should be grateful for Donald Trump, who ‘saved Hong Kong.’ During many conversations with friends, colleagues, and students, I found myself surrounded by symbols and narratives that so much resembled the American Right’s: An ex-student complained about ‘woke culture,’ another complained about gender-neutral bathrooms, a high-school friend sharing a short showing the example of a bad environmentalist argument. More surprisingly, perhaps, was my father asking me about ‘wokism,’ and fellow teachers sharing their troubles with school kids who were making racist, homophobic and Nazi jokes. (Little did I know that the same Nazi reference would soon be reenacted by Elon Musk.)

What, of course, we may ask, do personal anecdotes in East Asia tell us about politics elsewhere? In a sense, not much. Most of the people I know of and I encounter in Chinese-speaking circles

online hardly know anything about American and European politics; indeed, most probably could not care less. Yet, in another sense, experience here can be illustrative. If Hong Kong and the West share little in common at the level of history, traditions, and identifications, if their respective discursive communities show little overlap, and if the most salient commonality between these communities is their place in the world as advanced neoliberalized economies and, perhaps, prevalent digital social media use, then a case can be made that the appeal of right-wing ideologies can be accounted for without strong emphasis on socio-historical circumstances particular to one locality.

In this chapter, I seek to give an account of the final, perhaps most damaging symptom of neoliberalism: paranoid politics. Postulating the model of a large-group paranoid-schizoid phantasy, I seek to account for contemporary right-wing reactionary mobilizations as an example of paranoid politics. (6.1) Without denying the importance of local factors, I focus on broader factors in analyzing paranoid politics:

- I show that paranoid/subjective splits have long permeated neoliberal discourse, and neoliberal societies encourage individuals to internalize them. (6.2).
- Next, utilizing research from sociologists, historians, and critical theorists, I illustrate how the surge of anxiety and increasing distrust following the Great Recession era provided the fertile ground for right-wing neoliberal ideologues. They exploited existing divisions and redirected feelings of lost entitlement towards progressive liberals (characterized as progressive ‘elites’), along with scapegoated vulnerable minorities. (6.3)
- Adding to the well-accepted accounts from sections 2 and 3, I argue in 6.4 that the global, viral spread of contemporary paranoid political currents must be understood in relation to the design of digital spaces of interaction. In it, paranoid object-relations are not only strategically produced, but are rooted in algorithmic ecologies of decentralized digital networks.
- Capping the discussion, I conclude in section 6.5 that paranoid phantasies, once in place, are self-confirming and self-proliferating. Paranoid attacks create a world where the world of objects is seen as hostile and threatening. This perception reproduces the perceived need for hostile defences, thus preventing a

realistic perception of the world and our subsequent reconciliation with others. Paranoid politics, therefore, belongs to psychosocial symptoms that produce wounding attachments to itself.

6.1. Paranoid Politics as a psychosocial possibility

6.1.1. Paranoid Politics, clarifications and examples

In talking about ‘paranoid politics,’ I am discussing what is more commonly referred to as “populist” movements – or, more recently “right-wing,” “neo-fascist,” “anti-democratic,” “post-factual” movements.⁶⁴⁶ The use of ‘paranoia’ over other terms in this context seeks to avoid the ambiguously pejorative connotations ‘populism’ carries,⁶⁴⁷ and its tendency to localize political deadlocks onto particular groups of actors (such as the truth-deniers or the right-wingers). More positively, it emphasizes in no uncertain terms the problematic *affective and phantasmatic currents that underlie* the contemporary political landscape, especially in their functions as “psychosocial defences” like manic culture and individualized psychopathologies we discussed in previous chapters.

Paranoid politics, in a nutshell, is a politics of frontiers characterized by sharp antagonistic hostility of an in-group towards an out-group. These frontiers often carry a mythic, ‘phantasmatic’ character, especially apparent in their readiness to map group belongings and identities along crude moralized distinctions and simplistic problem-narratives:⁶⁴⁸

1. Moralized splits: in-group members are perceived as good, morally upright and heroic, while out-groups are viewed as evil, conspiratorial intruders. Going with the

⁶⁴⁶ For examples in the literature, see e.g. Streeck, "The Return of the Repressed."; Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation," *Critical inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2006); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018); Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

⁶⁴⁷ For instance, Mouffe and Laclau considers ‘populism’ a necessary element of political mobilizations, and thus is morally neutral. (See *On Populist Reason*.) Apart from Mouffe and Laclau, populism is often used in various derogatory ways. For globalist ‘elite’ neoliberals, populism moralisingly degrades any political agenda that threatens social ‘order’ and challenges the reality of neoliberal status quo. (See e.g., Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 22.) Against the neoliberal interpretation, Žižek refers to populists as those who challenge the political status quo without challenging the ‘Real’ of capital, while Brown uses it to refer to reactionary mobilizations that continues the neoliberal project in an authoritarian and anti-democratic manner. (Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation."; Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*.)

⁶⁴⁸ For accounts similar to the following, see Eva Illouz, *The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023), 19–20; V. D. Volkan, *Large-Group Psychology: Racism, Societal Divisions, Narcissistic Leaders, and Who We Are Now* (Bicester: Phoenix Publishing, 2020), 59.

intruders, out-group members also include those who unfairly steal advantages from the rightful (in-group) owners, or morally questionable sell-outs who help the intruders.

2. Persecution and Defensive Solutions: Under such a black-and-white frame, personal and social problems experienced by the in-group are traced to the persecuting influences of the out-group. From this, the in-group becomes victims, and social problems are interpreted as wrongs perpetrated by the out-group. Solutions to perceived injustices, then, often involve ideas of the (re)assertion of in-group glory and mastery (greatness/control), the establishment of fantasized boundaries that promise wished-for impermeability and invulnerability (e.g. walling, deportations, closing borders), the purification of corrupting influences from within (e.g. dismantling governmental bureaucracies, further reducing welfare, etc.).
3. Affective Salience and Antagonistic Survivalism: Paranoid narratives can be variously articulated and to different levels of detail (ranging from drawn-out conspiracy narratives to more inchoate attitudes and perceptions that express hatred and indignation against others), but common to them is how they command strong emotional fixations on antagonistic distinctions. People relate to the out-group with zero-sum mentalities involving the wish to triumph over or even annihilate the out-group for the sake of the in-group's survival.

For purposes that will become clear in subsequent sections, it is important to distinguish between '*full-fledged*' group paranoia (or paranoid politics proper), and group attitudes and splits that occur in an abjective and not yet paranoid manner. The former involves sufficient degrees of conditions 1, 2, and 3, and, as Vamik D Volkan puts it, often involves a hostile and narcissistic sense of "entitlement" to (purportedly) lost goods taken away by others.⁶⁴⁹ In contrast, for proto-paranoid conditions, moralized splits, distrust, and hatred are present, but

⁶⁴⁹ *Large-Group Psychology: Racism, Societal Divisions, Narcissistic Leaders, and Who We Are Now*, 37.

they are latent as abjections, but do not get consciously articulated into a sense of group-based wrong and, still less, the felt need to defend themselves against the outgroup.

6.1.2. Paranoid-Schizoid Defences

Many accounts have been given to explain paranoid political dynamics. Following my earlier work on the topic,⁶⁵⁰ the account that I shall pursue in this chapter is based on the Kleinian theory of paranoid-schizoid defences.

Although following Freud on the aggressive instincts, Kleinians did not reduce paranoid dynamics to the operation of aggressive or narcissistic drives. Instead, Kleinians see paranoia as an infantile but powerful means of anxiety-management actualized in *phantasy-laden interactions with the world of (internal and external) objects*. Placing paranoia within the dynamics of phantasy-laden object relations in the world means that this model allows for a discussion of paranoia as conditioned by interactions between drives and the relational environment.

Observing them at work in infants and older patients who are disturbed, Klein describes paranoid-schizoid defences as conditioned by strong, amorphous anxieties and frustrations that (are felt to) threaten to annihilate the ego. The logic of the paranoid-schizoid position goes as follows⁶⁵¹: (Figure 3)

1. First, in a desperate attempt to protect the ego from disintegration, the infantile ego *denies* the existence of bad feelings and *concretizes* them as bad ‘bits’ in phantasy. The first denial of bad experience thus produces a *split* between an intact ego and the bad ‘bits’ of experience that threatens the former into dissolution.
2. Second, the threatened ego handles these bad bits by projecting them onto external objects. These bits then become associated with imagoes that co-occur during bad experiences. A primitive mode of phantasmatic causality is then generated as the bad imago charged of ‘producing’ bad feelings – thus becoming an ‘evil persecutor.’

⁶⁵⁰ Felix S. H. Yeung, "Psychoanalyzing Democracies: Antagonisms, Paranoia, and the Productivity of Depression," *Constellations* 31, no. 1 (2024).

⁶⁵¹ See, "Notes on some Schizoid Mechanisms" and "On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt" in Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, chs. 1–2. For useful summaries, see Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, ch.3.

3. The third moment occurs as a 'good' correlate to the first two steps – with *gratifying experiences* associated and projected onto good, gratifying imagoes similarly temporally associated and causally baptized.

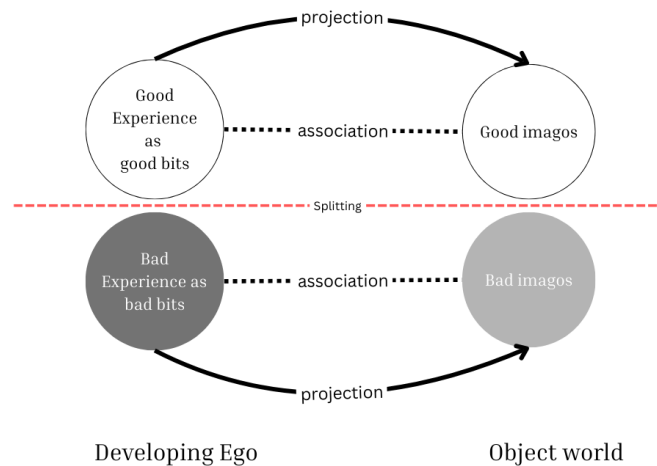


Figure 3 Splitting and Projection in the Paranoid-schizoid Position

Three moments, all taking place at the level of primitive, phantasmatic mental functioning, underlie the paranoid-schizoid defence:

- a world and ego split into good and bad,
- a feared (scapegoated) persecutor who holds the bad 'bits' ready to be defended against, and
- a gratifying 'good' object ready to be idealized.

Though simple, paranoid-schizoid phantasies are powerful in binding anxieties of disintegration. This is because paranoid-schizoid phantasies provide a stable framework that deflects fragmentation anxieties by rechanneling them into projective attacks and control of the *scapegoated persecutor-object*, while producing a sense of security by forming *idealizing, gratifying alliances with an idealized object*.

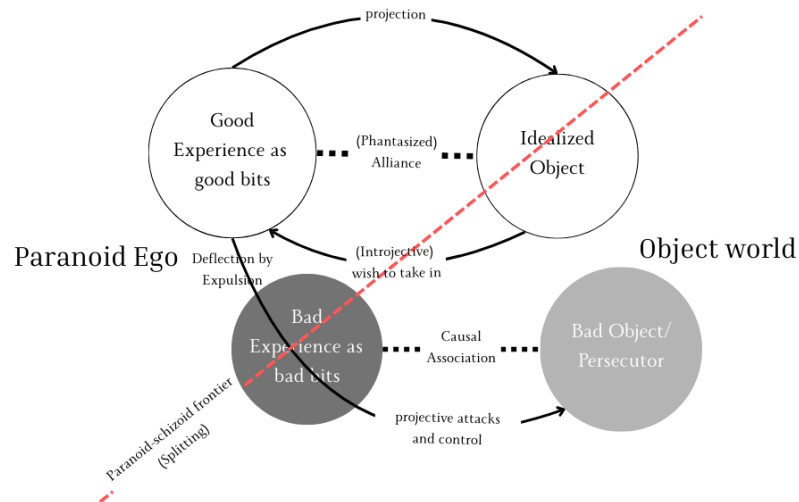


Figure 4 Paranoid-schizoid Defence

Although paranoid-schizoid defences do not remove anxieties, they can serve as the mature ego's last resort in fending off the dread of ego-disintegration.

6.1.3. Group-specific Paranoid Defences and Paranoid Politics

Insofar as paranoid-schizoid structures are limited in binding anxieties (anxieties are just displaced, and not bound for good), and that any adult with developed ego-capacities most likely will find full-fledged paranoid phantasies implausible, paranoid pathological formations are often only observed in pure form in the developmentally-challenged or the clinically regressed.⁶⁵² However, this does not prevent adults from retaining some paranoid-schizoid defences to handle problems momentarily. As Klein herself argues, paranoid-schizoid defences may recur in adults under extreme levels of anxiety.⁶⁵³

The situation is altogether different when paranoid defences are sanctioned by groups. Bion discovered with small therapy groups that groups can spontaneously develop regressive 'basic assumptions' such as collective dependency and paranoid 'fight-flight' attitudes to deflect

⁶⁵² Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, ch. 6.

⁶⁵³ Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 233.

perceived anxieties of ego disintegration.⁶⁵⁴ Subsequent studies of organizations showed that existing role distinctions in organizations can be imbued with paranoid-phantasy meanings, with hostile blaming, suspicion, and scapegoating against some parties on the one hand, and the idealization of some others on the other.⁶⁵⁵

Most relevant to our coming discussion is how unstructured large groups readily evoke panic and group-defensive homogenization and intolerance. Participants surrounded by unfamiliar others can be overwhelmed by a barrage of mass projections that challenge ego boundaries while incapable of receiving meaningful feedback for the fit of their own projections.⁶⁵⁶ To bind anxieties, the large group thus evolves a homogeneous culture based on rigid ideologies and massive empty slogans, intolerant of those who deviate and demonstrate individual thinking.⁶⁵⁷

Indeed, group-psychoanalysis offers other insights for understanding paranoid politics as it shows that: (i) groups can harbour psychologically regressive tendencies in group ‘traditions’ and ‘cultures’ unless well-designed with clearly specified aims and mechanisms to correct for paranoid-schizoid phantasmatic dynamics; (ii) individuals who enter unstructured group interactions without proper moderation can become distressed. This predisposes the individual to either leave or ally with the group’s regressive culture; (iii) once enthralled by group dynamics, group-belonging overrides ordinary ego-controls, making it easier for the individual to perform and possibly enjoy paranoid acting outs and violence as a member of the group.

⁶⁵⁴ Wilfred R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups, and Other Papers*, ed. Chris Mawson, The Complete Works of W. R. Bion, Vol. 4 (London: Routledge, 2004 [1961]).

⁶⁵⁵ Elliott Jaques, "On the Dynamics of Social Structure: A Contribution to the Psycho-Analytical Study of Social Phenomena," *Human Relations* 6, no. 1 (1953). See also Menzies, "A Case-Study in the Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety."

⁶⁵⁶ Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group." Consider also Kernberg’s remark on large unstructured groups: "The lack of stable individualized relationships in the large group prevents effective mutual control and promotes unsuccessful reliance upon the mechanisms of projective identification, omnipotent control, denial of aggression and gratifying passivity to protect the participants against the common anxiety which may rise very high very quickly, and at times can reach the level of panic." Otto F. Kernberg, "Sanctioned Social Violence: A Psychoanalytic View - Part I," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 84, no. 3 (2003): 686.

⁶⁵⁷ Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group," 126f.

As I will show in subsequent sections, contemporary paranoid group ideologies imaginarily politicize hurt, frustrations, and anxieties into a sense of felt injustice based on splitting, producing an exclusionary alliance of ‘victims’ whose sole suffering should be vindicated, while scapegoating a phantasmatically unified group of perpetrators (out-group).

6.2. The Neoliberal Seeds of Paranoia

6.2.1. The Paranoid Frames of Neoliberalization

How did paranoia become widespread with the advent of neoliberalism? One possible origin lies in the implicit paranoid logics of neoliberal thinking. It is telling how the 1947 founding Statement of Aims of the Mont-Pelerin Society – the think tank housing the most famous of neoliberals from Hayek and Friedman to Thiel – begins:

“The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the Earth’s surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy.”

Civilization is threatened by “constant menace.” Skipping one line, we find the phantasized culprits:

“Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own.”⁶⁵⁸

Eerily similar to contemporary reactionary, free-speech libertarian responses against ‘civilization decline,’ the early neoliberalism’s purported solution is to reinstate the “rule of law,” and values of “private property and the competitive market.”⁶⁵⁹ The paranoid script is clear: fantasizing *persecution*, (*self-*)*victimization*, and the *reassertion of group ideal*.

This repeated association of democratic, social-justice, and state forces with totalitarian threats are littered across the works of Hayek.⁶⁶⁰ Wendy Brown’s study of neoliberal thought reveals

⁶⁵⁸ Mont Pelerin Society, “Statement of Aims,” (1947), <https://montpelerin.org/statement-of-aims/>.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁶⁶⁰ See e.g. Hayek, *Law Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. 2, 68; 133–34; *The Constitution of Liberty*, chs. 18–19.

how neoliberalization entailed active “*attacks*” on the social and democratic collectivity in the name of defending libertarian “freedom-as-license,” traditions, religions, and national identities.⁶⁶¹ Quinn Slobodian genealogically show how the paleolibertarian and anarchocapitalist neoliberal visions have emerged in recent decades has produced right-wing paranoid survivalist discourses of ‘race’ or ‘culture’ wars and civilization collapse to promote ‘solutions’ of elite exit and anti-democratic struggles.⁶⁶² Neoliberals, as Slobodian surveys, did not shy away from naming the other as a threat, their survival as being threatened, and the solution as self-righteous, purportedly ‘self-protective’ aggression to ‘beat’ this other ‘into submission.’⁶⁶³

Outside of neoliberal discourses, paranoid hints of neoliberalism are apparent in the unfolding of real neoliberalism since the 1980s. In the first wave of neoliberalization of the 1980s, Thatcher’s talk of “enemy within” when responding to the 1984-85 miners' strike and Reagan’s decision to outlaw the 1981 PATCO strikes and call the strike a “peril to national safety” are signs of the paranoid frame in use.⁶⁶⁴

The mobilization of paranoid fears is equally notable in the America-led response to the 9/11 attacks during the triumphal decades of neoliberalism. Echoing the MPS in singling out enemies of ‘freedom’ and ‘civilized’ values, then US president George HW Bush called for a ‘war on terror’ against terror that begins with (and later expands far beyond) al Qaeda, a “*they*”

⁶⁶¹ Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*.

⁶⁶² Quinn Slobodian, "Anti-'68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right," *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2019); *Hayek's Bastards; Crack-up Capitalism*.

⁶⁶³ "Anti-'68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right."

⁶⁶⁴ Margaret Thatcher, "Speech to 1922 Committee ("the Enemy within")," news release, 19 July, 1984, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document%2F105563>; Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan's Remarks on the Air Traffic Controllers Strike 8/3/1981 [Youtube Recording]," (1981); UTA Libraries, "The 1981 Patco Strike," 2021. Indeed, as Lynne Segal comments on Thatcherism, she argues that no one is “so determinedly manipulating fear and paranoia as Thatcher did: fear of inflation[...]; fear of foreigners; fear of militant trade unionism; and fear of weakness.” Lynne Segal, "Thatcher’s Legacy: Thinking Psychosocially, across the Decades," *Psychodynamic Practice* 20, no. 1 (2014): 10.

that “hate[s] our freedoms -- our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote.”⁶⁶⁵

The grief, deaths, and narcissistic injuries to the advanced capitalist psyche linked to the collapse of the Twin Towers were woven into a new paranoid narrative: the ‘Axis of Evil’ naming an unknowable, ever-expanding threat to the ‘free world’ comprised of the ‘civilized,’ ‘god-chosen’ people of the West. The fantasized solution is that imperialistic ‘spread’ of values of American marketized freedom abroad with drones and tanks, and the moral license to an augmentation of intelligence/surveillance capacities outsourced to private military and digital powers.

Ideologically, this is a pioneering attempt at producing a paranoid frame that charts morally innocent, civilized ‘Americans’ against unknowable, evil, threatening terrorists.⁶⁶⁶ As Clarke and Hoggett argue, for the American psyche after 9-11, any action other than retaliation based on a “paranoid-schizoid” morality of retaliation is foreclosed. Revenge the West must, not because revenge is justified, but because *manic, omnipotent triumph* is the way the West can recover its self-idealizing innocence and pride in the face of shattered narcissism.⁶⁶⁷

As we shall discuss later, violence perpetrated to shore up fantasies of denial is paradoxical. Paranoid attempts to triumph over enemies often *reproduce* anxieties, while the same acts perpetrated to deny complicity compound our felt guilt towards the other. These affects return in the form of paranoid fears of destruction that proliferate both *within and without*, distorting our perception of the phantasized other while necessitating stronger defensive acting outs.

This is apparent during the ‘war on terror.’ Even judged by its self-avowed aim of eliminating ‘terrorist threats,’ the wars waged in Afghanistan and Iraq were counterproductive.⁶⁶⁸ The

⁶⁶⁵ George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," news release, 20 September, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

⁶⁶⁶ One tragic upshot of this paranoid frame is how it gave the US government license (‘freedom’) to strike, bomb cities in the name of self-defence, pre-emption, and ‘democratic’ liberation of peoples.

⁶⁶⁷ Simon Clarke and Paul Hoggett, "The Empire of Fear: The American Political Psyche and the Culture of Paranoia," *Psychodynamic Practice* 10, no. 1 (2004). See also Segal, "From Hiroshima to 11th September 2001 and After."

⁶⁶⁸ Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, ch. 4.

presumed innocence of the West in mainstream counter-terrorist discourse obfuscated the West's role in reproducing the 'terrorist' problem they want to 'solve,' so militaristic destruction of the threatening other degrades into the unthought, and ultimately untenable solution to the invented crisis. As critical terrorism scholars argued, aside from provoking extremist radicalization abroad, attacks also converted 'terrorism' into a phantasm of ineliminable, "unknowable" other, whose threat is perceived to creep into increasing areas of social life.⁶⁶⁹ The rhetorical tropes of purging terrorists 'threats' to 'defend' Western civilization are still present to this day.

6.2.2. Abjective Seeds to Paranoid Politics

We should not assume that paranoid frames are sufficient in fomenting large-scale identification with neoliberal norms, let alone steering everyone into paranoid politics. Charismatic leadership alone converts only the readily convertible.⁶⁷⁰ More is needed if we are to account for how frames were instrumental in shaping neoliberal subjectivities and sowed the seeds for a *paranoid* politics that emerged only in recent decades.

Even where the paranoid stance of counter-terrorism is not widespread in the early 2000s, the flood of paranoid ideologies shapes how issues of public concern are problematized. In the US and the UK, the discourse around 'terror' and 'culture wars' has been invoked in ways that

⁶⁶⁹ Relatedly, critical terrorism scholars have argued that the lingering sense of looming terrorist 'threat' is produced in discourses of 'radicalization' which depoliticizes causes of terrorism and relegates those causes to fantasy-narratives of religious and psychosocial "radicalization." See, Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'terrorism'* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Richard Jackson, "The Epistemological Crisis of Counterterrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 1 (2015); Sanjay Sharma and Jasbinder Nijjar, "The Racialized Surveillant Assemblage: Islam and the Fear of Terrorism," *Popular Communication* 16, no. 1 (2018).

⁶⁷⁰ For example, in America in the 2000s, scepticism about the legitimacy and justifiability of the 'war on Terror' gained traction. Indeed, even on the grounds of the Bush administration, paranoid emotions are set at some distance from 'home' – as he, according to Gerstle, was "insistent from the war's outset that Americans were to continue living as they always had." As Sheldon Wolin powerfully puts it "The citizenry is kept at a distance, disengaged spectators watching events in the formats determined by an increasingly "embedded" media whose function is to render warfare "virtual," sanitized, yet fascinating. To satisfy viewers with an urge for vicarious retaliation, for blood and gore, a parallel universe of action movies, computer war games, and television, saturated with images of violence and triumphalism, are but a click away." Sheldon S Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 107; Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 205.

transform issues into matters of culture and obfuscate *systematic material harms* that government actions cause. Although the ‘war on terror’ framing of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq never garnered widespread support, the ‘terror’ and racist ‘good’/‘evil’ framing of the 9/11 attacks stuck.⁶⁷¹ The Islamophobic frame was evoked variously on immigration and refugee policies in subsequent years. Indeed, in far-right circles which subsequently gained influence in digital spaces, the counter-terrorist narrative has not only been associated with generalized islamophobia against ‘enemies without’, but, again, attracted white-supremacist and patriarchal articulations of ‘enemies within.’ In these circles, the threat of terrorism originates from the decline of the West (and parochial ideals of White masculinity) brought about by effeminate men, over-dependent youths, and misguided multiculturalists.⁶⁷² These tropes are genealogically related to ‘culture war’ and anti-woke narratives two decades later.

Perhaps more importantly, the most damaging effect of neoliberal paranoia is relayed through institutions that served economic and socializing functions of discipline, precarization, and abjection. Neoliberalization is effected through seismic structural shifts that accompany the paranoid rhetoric of neoliberal politicians and thinkers. Their disdain for ‘social justice,’ ‘dependency,’ and worker solidarity was institutionalized through welfare, labour and financial reforms.

Neoliberal institutionalization replaced collective solidarity with competitive entrepreneurialism.⁶⁷³ It created private and public organizations that remade subjects as human capital, forcing them to demonstrate ‘virtues’ of competitiveness and independence.⁶⁷⁴ Materially, the neoliberal economy separated upper-class ‘mobile elites’ from the growing waste pile of the precaritized. Symbolically, the formation of neoliberal subjects involves the

⁶⁷¹ Islamophobia grew as unfavourable media portrayals of Arabs and discrimination, and hate crimes directed at “Muslim-looking people” increased. As Sharma and Nijjar argues, paranoid fears of terrorism are systematically projected onto Muslims as unknowable, threatening others, whose activities should be surveilled, whose entry have to be denied or held to great suspicion, and whose foreign plots should be ‘preemptively’ attacked. For related discussions, see Sharma and Nijjar, “The Racialized Surveillant Assemblage: Islam and the Fear of Terrorism.”

⁶⁷² Annie Kelly, “The Alt-Right: Reactionary Rehabilitation for White Masculinity,” *Soundings* 66, no. 66 (2017).

⁶⁷³ Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, ch. 6.

⁶⁷⁴ See Chapter 4.

internalization of socially-sanctioned splits between the deserving and the undeserving.⁶⁷⁵ Parts of the self, organized around independence, competitiveness, and control get idealized, while dependency needs, slack, and vulnerability are denied. The latter denial is often accomplished by projection onto social *abjects* along racial, classist, and gendered lines.⁶⁷⁶ The latter's lives are considered implicitly less valuable and 'deserving' of mistreatment by the precarizing order. In this sense, class, gender, and racial distinctions are already imbued with latent phantasmatic meanings even before their paranoid inflaming. In this sense it takes little to channel the resentments of victims of precarity into a right-wing paranoid frame that doubles down on the repression of racialized and gendered abjects.

The dissemination of the paranoid frames within and beyond economic spheres publicized 'zero-sum' logics where structural harms and hurts are considered unavoidable and defensively displaceable by victimizing others. Here, abjective elements of neoliberal culture can be read as a 'disavowal of harm'⁶⁷⁷ that obfuscates how the 0.1% neoliberal oligarchs cannibalize the 99%, approves the oligarch's extractive operations, and even licenses government repression of scapegoated others.

Last but not least, a combination of neoliberal ethos and the fanning of the 'terrorist threat' narrative formed the pretext for American 'private-public' partnerships in intelligence and cybersecurity.⁶⁷⁸ This, in no small part, contributed to the rise of privately-owned, minimally regulated digital platforms that, as we will see, possess inordinate powers over publics and contributed to the devastation of public discourse.

⁶⁷⁵ See 3.3.4.

⁶⁷⁶ See also Layton's concept of 'defensive autonomy' in Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*.

⁶⁷⁷ As Jessica Benjamin puts it, the neoliberal social system is predicated upon a political structure that harbours an "inability to fully face and work through the history of slavery and genocide" and the "inability to admit that economic exploitation [...] involves harming." Benjamin, "Wolf's Dictionary," 472.

⁶⁷⁸ Anu Bradford, *Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 131f; Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 112–16.

6.3. Paranoia, as the “Return of the Repressed”

Paranoid elements and abjecting splits in the psychosocial scene were present throughout the history of neoliberalism, but much of it remains latent and active on the fringes. Whether a paranoid discourse circulates widely depends on more factors than the mere existence of paranoid discourses alone.

One key feature in distinguishing abjective undercurrents and true paranoia depends on whether such elements are inflamed in a large group to produce what Vamik D Volkan calls “entitlement ideologies.”⁶⁷⁹ Adapting the concept from Volkan, we may characterize ‘paranoid entitlement ideologies’ as:

“a group’s feeling of entitlement to ‘*regain*’ something (e.g. glory, land, solidarity) fantasized to have been unduly lost due to wrongs committed by an enemy. The group under such ideology demonizes an outgroup and develops group-sanctioned *hostility* to the point of committing acts of violence.”⁶⁸⁰

As with individual paranoid organizations, paranoid-schizoid entitlement ideologies are often activated by overwhelming anxieties. Uncontained Stresses

We examined how neoliberal social arrangements gave rise to piling anxieties and grief.⁶⁸¹ Under the neoliberalized economy, increasing segments of the population increasingly feel the looming stresses ingrained in the precarizing economy. As privatization, deregulation and financialization unfolded, precarities surrounding employment, debt, and welfare gradually crept up the social ladder, and this accelerated when things busted in 2007-08.⁶⁸² The Great Recession hammered into working-class and middle-class people alike the message that neoliberal competition is no joke – systemic risks and ‘irresponsible’ life choices are fatal.

As the economy increasingly evolved into a survivalist ‘free-for-all’ where winners take all, and the rest fight against one another for scraps, people’s perception of the world also began to shift. Hopeful symbolic frames (e.g. ‘the American Dream’) supporting the positive aspirations

⁶⁷⁹ Volkan, *Large-Group Psychology: Racism, Societal Divisions, Narcissistic Leaders, and Who We Are Now*, 37f.

⁶⁸⁰ The current formulation follows Volkan, but have deemphasized entitlements as derived from *ancestrally* inherited “chosen traumas” or “chosen glories.” Ibid., 37.

⁶⁸¹ See O.

⁶⁸² Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*.

to achieve and consume in the neoliberal order⁶⁸³ begin to collapse, as looming threats of the neoliberal ego “losing what one has obtained” and “having less and less” become ever more perceptible.⁶⁸⁴ The individual’s manic, accelerated striving continues, but the pretence of lightness and positivity becomes strained. Internalized manic symptomatic formations loosen up as people become increasingly infected by a ‘fear of falling’ rooted in a survivalist reality. People feel evermore desperate, and competition is waged with great hostility and fewer moral restraints. As stresses and anxieties become uncontained, a legitimization crisis seems structurally overdetermined.⁶⁸⁵ Society, in this sense, is *ripe* for the explosion of paranoid energies in the political.

6.3.1. The Return of the Repressed

Prevailing commentaries tend to treat paranoid politics as a matter-of-course ‘return of the repressed’:⁶⁸⁶ battered by years of exploitation and expropriation, lied about the rewards of entrepreneurialism and globalization, and relegated to a mere spectator, people have accumulated genuine grievances. It is natural that in worsening times that people would fight back against the hypocritical faces of the upper-class elites. This explanation will make full sense, *had political movements targeted neoliberal oligarchs and the expropriative economic structure*. However, what comes out of the ‘repressed’ is, arguably, no less pathological than the system it purports to attack. Popular (right-wing) reactions to neoliberalism become culturalized in a way that scapegoats even more vulnerable minorities, while, in many cases, granting popular support to politicians who are shamelessly cannibalistic. In the US, especially, the so-called ‘return of the repressed’ became the new sheep’s skin, a proxy war between globalist neoliberals (neoliberals with a bad conscience) and populist neoliberals (feudalist,

⁶⁸³ See Streeck’s 2014 prognosis of how social integration in the aftermath of capitalist crisis depends on a combination of “coping, hoping, doping, and shopping” together with a “fear of social descent.” Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End*, 41–46.

⁶⁸⁴ Hartmut Rosa uses the analogy of the ‘slipping slope’ to describe how accelerated socio-cultural changes replaced positive aspiration with the fear of falling behind as a key driving force of personal and collective strive under late capitalism, see Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 9–10; *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, ch. 4.

⁶⁸⁵ Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism*, 194–95.

⁶⁸⁶ Streeck, “The Return of the Repressed.”; “Trump and the Trumpists.” See also Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.

anarchic paleo-neoliberals) – neither of which is concerned with targeting the inordinate power of oligarchs and capital.⁶⁸⁷

Perhaps such a caveat is well captured by Streeck’s choice of term, the “return of the repressed” – as it is Freud’s formulation for painful affects *phantasmatically displaced and returning in pathological organizations*.⁶⁸⁸ What comes as a response to felt threats to the mind gets displaced and disfigured into repetitive, maladaptive responses that often price psychological relief at the expense of dealing with their *real causes*.

In the case of paranoid politics, we need to distinguish fear or self-defence as a response to real threats and that which results from phantasmatic constructions that paranoically displace the real problem. Failing to recognize the inconsistencies of phantasies often means we cannot break free from their grip. The task of distinguishing reality and phantasy can already be hard in individual cases, as paranoid-schizoid tendencies in patients can mesh with rationalizations in the personality. At the group level, it is even more challenging. Accounts of social causation are couched in modes of problematization shaped by collective phantasies, and that one group’s phantasies about others – especially paranoid ones – have tangible and often *self-fulfilling effects on intergroup dynamics and, thus, on social realities*.⁶⁸⁹ Even accounts that try hard to ‘fact-check’ phantasies can be basing their analysis on a social reality that is already structured by phantasy dynamics played out in the social space.

In light of the above challenges, the account I give here will not claim ‘objectivity’, let alone indubitability. Instead of checking people’s responses against a set ‘*rational*’ reference point, I compare people’s paranoid fantasies with possible, less-paranoid alternatives against a backdrop that takes reasonable account of the relevant facts in political history and socio-economic structure.

⁶⁸⁷ Slobodian, *Hayek’s Bastards*.

⁶⁸⁸ See Freud, SE 14: 141-158

⁶⁸⁹ See 6.5.

As US sociologists such as Arlie Hochschild and Jennifer Silva argue, one important understorey in the rise of right-wing paranoid politics can be found in the stories of the rural, white working class.⁶⁹⁰ If the aftermath of 2007-8 rang the alarm bells of professional classes, the spread of risk and insecurity has long been felt by rural, working classes. As deindustrialization, deunionization, and cuts to the social safety net took hold, both young and older working-class individuals increasingly took on precarious jobs, accumulated more debt, and/or depended on little benefit payments to barely support themselves. Belief in the promises of upward mobility quickly evaporated, while practical arenas sharing hurt and seeking social solidarity disappeared.⁶⁹¹ Additionally, the easing of regulations on development and the defunding of local governments led to a decline in infrastructure and the appearance of dumps and scrapyards in their prized living environments.⁶⁹² As local situations became desperate, ‘deaths of despair’ from drug overdose, alcoholism, and suicides also grew prominent.⁶⁹³ The injury experienced by the working class is only exacerbated by the abject current in neoliberal subjectivation – most apparent in the disdain within neoliberal ‘progressives’ toward working-class values, perceiving them as backward, conservative, and intolerant.⁶⁹⁴ Living in decades of decline, hardship, and misrepresentation, interviews of working-class subjects, quite understandably, predominantly identify strong feelings of isolation, distrust, betrayal, and being ‘left behind’ by urban elites.⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹⁰ Silva, *We're Still Here*; Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*; *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* (The New Press, 2024). There is no claim here that rural working classes were the *only* supporters of populist neoliberalism. Silva's and Hochschild's studies are conducted in America, but it is arguable that much of the anti-liberal-establishment sentiments follow patterns towards localist/nationalist exclusion. For a qualitative study of Brexit support in UK in relation to local factors, see Olivas Osuna, Kiefel, and Gartzou Katsouyanni, "Place Matters: Analyzing the Roots of Political Distrust and Brexit Narratives at a Local Level." See also Streeck, *Taking Back Control?*, ch. 7.

⁶⁹¹ Jennifer Silva describes how, with the collapse of local solidarity, her young-adults subjects have turned to hardening individualism and/or online conspiracy theories to explain their misery. Silva, "'This Thing Is a Joke'."; *We're Still Here*.

⁶⁹² Michael McQuarrie, "The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger," *The British journal of sociology* 68 (2017): 135; Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 21f.

⁶⁹³ Case and Deaton, *Deaths of Despair*.

⁶⁹⁴ Streeck, "Trump and the Trumpists."; Hochschild, *Stolen Pride*. ch. 13

⁶⁹⁵ *Strangers in Their Own Land*; Silva, *We're Still Here*; "'This Thing Is a Joke'."; Olivas Osuna, Kiefel, and Gartzou Katsouyanni, "Place Matters: Analyzing the Roots of Political Distrust and Brexit Narratives at a Local Level."

A strong predisposing factor for recent right-wing paranoid mobilizations then is to be found in the actually degraded, disorganized class of the ‘left-behind’ and the betrayed, as an *understandable* “backlash against the degradation of a disorganized class” by neoliberal elites.⁶⁹⁶ At this conceptual level, paranoid mobilizations are rooted in a long-awaited backlash against the neoliberal Washington consensus that extracted material and symbolic gains from a downtrodden lower class.

But the ‘rationality’ of it stops here and the paranoid symptomatology begins. Articulated by Trump and the Trumpists, the structural, economic ravages of neoliberalism are culturalized into a battle of cultural identities and ‘entitlement ideologies’ rooted in restoring the *essentialized ‘former glory’ of a traditional, white, masculine identity*. Framed as a reaction to globalist, progressive neoliberalism prevalent in the 1990s-early 2000s, right-wing reactionary paranoia involves a twofold process of frontier reengineering: first, the activation of racist, xenophobic and anti-relational abjections and covert paranoid undercurrents of cosmopolitan neoliberalism (e.g. hatred of dependency projected onto racialized ‘underclasses’ and welfare dependents); second, the elevation of the white precaritized working-class against a cultural neoliberal ‘elite’ supposedly embracing racial, gender, and cosmopolitan values of equality (conveniently framed under ‘social justice,’ ‘Cultural Marxism,’ and ‘woke’).

Capitalizing on the idea that the ‘white,’ ‘masculine,’ and ‘common-sense’ have been unduly suppressed, the right converted the dissatisfactions of the working-class precariats and declining white middle-class into racist, xenophobic, anti-progressive *ressentiment* by producing a glorified racist past.⁶⁹⁷ Fanning White ‘entitlement’ to glory and honour, an unlikely cultural alliance is forged between racist, nationalist, shameless, and libertarian oligarchs and white victims of unchecked neoliberalization. In place of class struggle, a ‘culture war’ is waged against a fantasised alliance between ‘underserving’ ‘line-cutting’ benefactors

⁶⁹⁶ Streeck, "Trump and the Trumpists."

⁶⁹⁷ Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*. ch. 5. For a discussion of existing “entitlement ideologies” and the “chosen glory” of the racist past, see Volkan, *Large-Group Psychology: Racism, Societal Divisions, Narcissistic Leaders, and Who We Are Now*, 33–35. For a discussion of middle-class identifications, see Benjamin, "Wolf's Dictionary." For a discussion of working-class identifications, see Silva, *We're Still Here*; Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

of ‘DEI’ initiatives, intruding immigrants and refugees,⁶⁹⁸ and ‘woke’ elites who are, supposedly, working with the former two.⁶⁹⁹

Before delving into the digital mechanisms supporting the Right’s reengineering of this new frontier, it is worth pondering its political ingenuity. On the one hand, the right rightly picked up on people’s real dissatisfactions and feelings of betrayal against neoliberal globalism.⁷⁰⁰ There is a much-needed backlash against the mainstreamed liberal ‘left’ – in particular, the ‘left’ that allies with the professional classes in their moralized disdain for lower classes.⁷⁰¹ Indeed, with its commitment to globalizing markets, dismantling the state, and identitarian politics, the ‘left’ that has turned *a blind eye towards how the capitalist order cannibalized classes and identity groups other than the upper-class liberal elites*.⁷⁰² As the object of right-wing reactions, mainstream liberal-left identitarian politics have sadly found their place in elitist ‘ethical managerialism’ – the ‘human,’ ‘philanthropic’ façade barely covering the havoc capital wreaks over ever-greater segments of the population.

Yet, such ingenuity does not change the fact that this remains fantasized, paranoid solutions especially when compared with how alternative, more emancipatory and less hateful solutions and alliances could have been forged. Framed as a ‘culture war’ between white working class conservative values against middle class cosmopolitan values, right-wing paranoid reactions not only stumped working class alliance with similarly struggling middle-class counterparts with liberal leanings⁷⁰³, they antagonized potential allies by creating scapegoats amongst the

⁶⁹⁸ For accounts of working-class identifications through the concept of ‘undeserving’ ‘line-cutters’ and the desire to shame ‘elites’ who shamed them to Trumpist neo-fascisms in America, see *Strangers in Their Own Land*. ch. 9; *Stolen Pride*. ch. 13.

⁶⁹⁹ On ‘culture wars’ see, Finlayson, “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web,” 177–79.

⁷⁰⁰ The affects right-wing populists tap onto are legitimate reactions to the neoliberalized state that betrayed people’s trust and abandoned individuals to piling effects systemic insecurities and threats. Silva, *We’re Still Here*; Bauman, *Liquid Fear*.

⁷⁰¹ For a psychosocial account, see e.g. Benjamin, “Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma.” For a historical account, see Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 132f.

⁷⁰² See, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%* (London: Verso, 2019), 10–16; Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (U of Minnesota Press, 2021); Streeck, “Trump and the Trumpists.”

⁷⁰³ It should be emphasized here that the problem is Trumpist reactionary mobilizations, and not (white) working class people. Indeed, to the degree that cosmopolitan, ‘progressive’ neoliberalism abjected the working class and elevated the professional-class subject of achievement, perspective shifts should also occur amongst professional classes – as Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich powerfully puts it: “Any renewal of oppositional spirit among the

similarly disenfranchised along gender and racial lines, and blinding themselves from the suffering of even more expropriated amongst working-class people of colour and the globally dispossessed.⁷⁰⁴ Indeed, if progressive neoliberalism reproduces the plight of the declining white male, contemporary right-wing reactionaries are no-less cheering for the reproduction of oppression and a self-idealizing disavowal of one's complicity to proliferate harm.⁷⁰⁵

Furthermore, the problematic reactionary alliance appears no less neoliberal in policy and in subjectivation. However, the political spectacle is produced, it is inconceivable how systemic *economic* deprivation can be addressed by aligning with another subset of predatory oligarchs. Besides, by elevating the white male's 'virtue' of individualism and independence against 'entitled,' 'dependent' others, neoliberalism's competitive, individualist ethos is only amplified.⁷⁰⁶ The framing of 'culture wars' elevated already fierce social competition into cut-throat survivalism that champions the phantasy that Jessica Benjamin calls 'only-one-can-live':⁷⁰⁷ *If social competition for survival has objectively intensified during the neoliberal decades, it has become phantasized as a war where the projected weak must die for the strong to survive under the paranoid rearticulation.* Trumpism is not beyond neoliberalism, it is predatory neoliberalism on cocaine.

If the account above is an accurate characterization of paranoid reactions to neoliberalism, one might legitimately ask what an appropriate reaction to neoliberalism might be like. What if, instead of the disenfranchized attacking the more disenfranchized, people come together to resist neoliberal cannibalization? What if instead of aggressively sustaining a compensatory idealization of oneself as independent and competitive, we socialize our vulnerabilities and

Professional-Managerial Class, or what remains of it, needs to start from an awareness that what has happened to the professional middle class has long since happened to the blue collar working class. [...] The debt-ridden unemployed and underemployed college graduates, the revenue-starved teachers, the overworked and underpaid service professionals, even the occasional whistle-blowing scientist or engineer—all face the same kind of situation that confronted skilled craft-workers in the early 20th century and all American industrial workers in the late 20th century." Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, "Death of a Yuppie Dream," 11.

⁷⁰⁴ McQuarrie, "The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger," S137–46.

⁷⁰⁵ Benjamin, "Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma." See also Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*. ch. 12.

⁷⁰⁶ For a discussion of the neoliberal, hyper-individualist ideologies in online right-wing culture, see Finlayson, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web," 180–82.

⁷⁰⁷ Benjamin, "Wolf's Dictionary."

hurt in a sensate democratic resistance? Perhaps we would not need to engage in cut-throat, ‘free-for-all’ survivalism? The possibility of a position outside of current paranoid antagonisms needs to be contained and thought, for critique not to be subjected to yet another paranoid logic. But critique also needs to call a spade a spade; and this outside to neoliberal survivalism is progressively displaced as paranoia spirals out.

6.4. Paranoid Digital Swarms

It is hard not to be awed by the right-wing leaders and ideologues for their genius in remaking frontiers to surf globalist neoliberalism’s legitimation crisis by splitting the citizenry and manipulating people’s identifications.⁷⁰⁸ But if Trump and the Trumpists were objects for identification, they are also their Tweets, voice, media appearances, memes, and conspiracies. Where the former is the macropolitical face of paranoid politics, the latter, micropolitical basis also seems indispensable and extends far beyond Trumpists themselves. Indeed, aside from charismatic authority, paranoid reactions have fermented through digital networks with an inherent tendency to breed psychotic fears and outrage.

For a time, the internet promised democratic potentials. For advocates of digital democracies, the Internet offers powerful means for people to connect, access information, and participate in political deliberations.⁷⁰⁹ Gone, it seemed, is the age where monopolized media organizes politics top-down, as participants can spontaneously organize themselves and share information outside of a centralized authority.

Yet, attractive as it may seem, ideals of democratic digital spaces never materialized. Indeed, it is in liberated networks that some of the worst hateful and fascistic currents emerge. To see how this comes to be, let us compare digital politics against the fragile ideal of public

⁷⁰⁸ On Trump’s ability to manipulate shame into identification, see *ibid.*; Hochschild, *Stolen Pride*. ch. 13. On populist neoliberals, see Slobodian, *Hayek’s Bastards*, Introduction, ch. 2.

⁷⁰⁹ For an outline and a critique of this view, see Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). esp. ch.1

deliberation. Taking inspiration from Habermas's influential theory of the public sphere, a well-functioning public requires⁷¹⁰:

1. Time and space for free and inclusive public discourse: Spaces where public discussion happens are accessible to all interested parties, with no undue exclusions at the level of institutional designs and ideology. Ample time should also be dedicated to relevant issues.
2. Commitment to publicity: Participants in interaction recognize that issues for collective discussion and decision-making bear not only on individual interests, but also on shared, universal interests and values accountable to all.
3. Sincere commitment to truth and understanding: Participants are oriented towards mutual understanding and collective problem-solving. They interact sincerely without intent to deceive or mislead and can change their views by rationally and empathetically considering one another's contributions to the discussion.
4. Reliable media institutions: Due to the complexity of public issues and the scale of political entities, discussions of political significance rely on media institutions for accurate information and widely accepted interpretations of current events, without undue influence from political and commercial interests. The reliability of media representations – though criticizable – is assumed as starting points to political deliberations.

Adding on Habermas's rationalist reading of deliberative politics, we may add a fifth condition:

5. Psychosocial maturity: Participants are emotionally open to seeking understanding and terms of coexistence. This involves engaging with one another in a broadly responsible and empathetic manner. Wrongs committed

⁷¹⁰ Although the following account is inspired by Habermas's, there is no commitment to Habermas's cognitivist view of argumentation and political discourse, nor his commitment to such ideals as '*bourgeois*.' Habermas overplays his idea of the 'performative attitude' of speakers in his mature works. Starting from his cognitivist, pragmatic theory of language, Habermas almost assumes that good public discourse takes the form of a truthful exchange of rational arguments and that such argumentative practices are (only) threatened by power and material interests originating from functionalist social systems. I consider Habermas's cognitivism a liability that underplays the importance of dramaturgy, emotions, and identifications in politics. Worse still, it assumes that empathetic sensitivity arises naturally from competent language use, thus underestimating the psychosocial obstacles to empathy and perspective-taking. That said, I also do not see how simplistic idealizations of radicalized critiques, identifications, and emotions in politics that some of Habermas's critics embrace can do the job. Cognitivism and rationalism aside, the overall commitment to sincere, well-intentioned, and empathetic exchanges remains essential – even if far from sufficient in existing social realities – for reasonable public engagements to get off the ground. For critiques of Habermas's overplayed cognitivism, see J. M. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995); Noelle McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). See also, Felix S. H. Yeung, "On the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory" (MPhil diss., University of Hong Kong, 2019).ch. 7. For interesting accounts of deliberative politics that does not underestimate empathetic understanding and emotional experience, see, e.g. Noelle McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 215–25. For a critique of Habermas's consignment of the public sphere to the '*bourgeois*' expressions, see Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*.

by oneself and one's social group are acknowledged and actively rectified, while those of others are treated charitably and forgiven when properly redressed.

The above conditions demonstrate how a well-functioning deliberative public relies on a delicate and contingent balance among social, cultural, and individual-psychological factors, supported by specific material conditions – many of which are counterfactual. Public spaces were never free of exclusions based on class, gender, and race. Personal and ideological interests influence participants in public discourse. Psychosocial maturity is rare – and indeed, groups unified by ideologies often regress into intolerance, hate, and even violence.

Besides, throughout the latter half of the 20th Century, commercial and political instrumentalization and 'refeudalization' of public discourses were carried out under 'public relations' and 'public opinion' campaigns.⁷¹¹ The intrusion of private, corporate interests into public-opinion formation only intensified under neoliberal economies with the rise of giant, privately owned media conglomerates.⁷¹² Meanwhile, the globalization of capital, coupled with the rise of accelerated manic culture, means that the world is fast becoming incomprehensible, while people have no mental space to consider issues of public concern beyond the immediate.⁷¹³

The rise of digital platforms in the recent decade has produced significant changes in mediatized communications. On the surface, some of these shifts confirm techno-utopian promises. As internet technologies lowered barriers to information access and production, the media took an 'audience turn.' People became less subjected to editorial choices of private media and can access and author information and opinions more freely. Social media platforms also lowered the bar of entry into public discourse, allowing users to participate in online opinion formation through commenting, reacting ('liking') and sharing, fostering connections between people across different localities.

⁷¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), 175–95.

⁷¹² Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*.

⁷¹³ Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, ch. 11.

Yet, one only needs to scratch the surface to see the dark side. First, the ‘democratization’ of information enabled misinformation to spread and swamp reliable sources. Meaningful connections arise predominantly in ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘fanbases’ where the similar coalesce, leading to social fragmentation and political divisiveness. Far more than breeding solidarity and progressive alliances, the public sphere of the Internet bred widespread distrust, hatred, intolerance, and resentment, and in some cases, even funnelling people towards violent extremist alliances. *Two decades into the digitalization of public spaces, it is amply clear that what we are calling paranoid neoliberal politics emerges, ironically, from digital ecologies that once promised openness, freedom, and democracy.*

What went wrong, and how did this happen?

The long answer requires looking into the media ecologies and interactive ethos on online platforms. But, in a nutshell, we are faced here by *networks shaped by capitalist survivalism*. Contrary to naïve techno-optimism, decentralized, delocalized and deregulated networks do not democratize.⁷¹⁴ Networks intensify disparities of power and influence by the differential effects between better-connected and less-connected individuals.⁷¹⁵ Creating platforms for large groups to engage in unmoderated discussions can result in rigid ideological adherence, reduced individual thinking, and intolerance and violence against non-conforming others – as group psychoanalysts found before the advent of these technologies.⁷¹⁶ These degenerative tendencies of networked communication are entrenched in our neoliberal order. As survivalist competition exists both in reality and fantasy, technocapitalists, political leaders, content producers, and users alike enrich and empower themselves by hacking networked ecologies.

In the rest of this section, I substantiate the claim that the neoliberal digital networks produce widespread paranoia by undoing all conditions to reasonable publics: Social media spaces

⁷¹⁴ While democratization requires particular forms of social network decentration (in particular, decentration from the hierarchical powers of the state), not all decentralization leads to social democratization. For democratization and decentration, see Jiwei Ci, "States, Scripts, and Democratisation," in *Scripts Working Paper* (Berlin: Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS), 2023).

⁷¹⁵ See the works of Jodi Dean, who draws upon Albert-László Barabási's studies on networks, in e.g. Jodi Dean, "The Neofeudalising Tendency of Communicative Capitalism," *tripleC* 22, no. 1 (2024): 198–200.

⁷¹⁶ See 6.1.3. Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group."; Kernberg, "Sanctioned Social Violence."

feature large volumes of accelerated, fragmenting, decontextualized, and overwhelming communications. Media oriented to issues of ‘public’ interest are largely displaced by influencer culture and “infotainment” practices, converting audiences into engaged/enraged ‘fanbases.’ Mature, empathetic engagements are overridden by psychotic universes of ‘floating’ paranoid symbols and part-objects where no issue and no object can be engaged holistically.

6.4.1. Neoliberal Platforms

Any account of digital politics must remark that digital platforms are privately owned and managed, and their genesis and origins have been penetrated thoroughly by neoliberal ideologies. Silicon Valley incarnates free-market ideology; and the development of the Internet has always been instrumental in the US’s intelligence and security operations local and abroad.⁷¹⁷

Privately owned platform capital gathers petabytes of data to screen and target citizens for surveillance, security and intelligence.⁷¹⁸ The same data collected from users and handled by big-tech has also enabled the development of personalized technologies of subtle behavioural manipulation. By mapping our behaviour with what content we are exposed to and the manner in which it is presented, algorithms learn to subtly and strategically curate our ‘feeds’ and notifications to generate intended effects. This ability to subtly herd people is commercialized in ad-targeting and has also been instrumentalized for election manipulations.⁷¹⁹

Beyond direct interference on the basis of commercial and political interests, the *automated dynamics* of platform communication have also had significant effects in producing paranoid dynamics. Social media algorithms, essential in determining what we are exposed to in our online lives, have variously been reported to distribute hateful misinformation, stir up outrage and anxiety in users, promote reactionary ideologies, and encourage inflammatory rhetoric.⁷²⁰

⁷¹⁷ Bradford, *Digital Empires*, ch. 1.

⁷¹⁸ Yasha Levine, *Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018); Paul B de Laat, "The Disciplinary Power of Predictive Algorithms: A Foucauldian Perspective," *Ethics and Information Technology* 21, no. 4 (2019).

⁷¹⁹ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*.

⁷²⁰ See various examples in Fisher, *Chaos Machine*.

Studies found that YouTube's algorithm promotes extreme-right content by establishing one-way "radicalization pipelines."⁷²¹ These pipelines exposed users with right-of-centre views to increasingly radical, hateful, and paranoid ideas, ideas instrumental subsequently in fomenting real-world hate crimes and far-right mobilizations.⁷²² Although later changes in recommendation algorithms and deplatforming have stopped the extreme instances of the pipeline,⁷²³ the effects of recent extreme radicalization can still be felt.

It is unlikely that algorithms are *designed* to inspire political chaos – but they do inspire chaos when algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement while caring nothing about the factual accuracy, normative appropriacy and potential social effects of what it spreads.⁷²⁴ Significantly, automated algorithms 'discovered' that, in our already anxiety-laden world, content that instils outrage, paranoid conspiracies and perceived identity threats *also* 'hooks' viewers and induces user sharing with other users – so recommend them they did.⁷²⁵ Across platforms, algorithmic recommendations politicize and radicalize expanding segments of its user-base.⁷²⁶ Whether one is politically oriented, *algorithmic profiling and clustering* practices can group politically motivated and non-politically motivated users into the same filter-bubble and recommend content that may be charged with similar political messages. This is likely how paranoid ideas spread to non-political communities such as new mothers, gamers, and the

⁷²¹ Ibid.; Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., "Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2020 conference on fairness, accountability, and transparency, 2020); Jonas Kaiser and Adrian Rauchfleisch, "Birds of a Feather Get Recommended Together: Algorithmic Homophily in Youtube's Channel Recommendations in the United States and Germany," *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 4 (2020).

⁷²² Fisher, *Chaos Machine*. ch. 9.

⁷²³ Adrian Rauchfleisch and Jonas Kaiser, "The Impact of Deplatforming the Far Right: An Analysis of YouTube and Bitchute," *Information, Communication & Society* 27, no. 7 (2024); Kevin Munger and Joseph Phillips, "Right-Wing YouTube: A Supply and Demand Perspective," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27, no. 1 (2022).

⁷²⁴ For social media algorithm's "blindness by design," see Shoshana Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy?: The Death Match of Institutional Orders and the Politics of Knowledge in Our Information Civilization," *Organization Theory* 3, no. 3 (2022): 22–25.

⁷²⁵ Fisher, *Chaos Machine*; Paolo Gerbaudo et al., "Angry Posts Mobilize: Emotional Communication and Online Mobilization in the Facebook Pages of Western European Right-Wing Populist Leaders," *Social Media+ Society* 9, no. 1 (2023). This is consistent with what Mark Zuckerberg reports with Facebook's own research: "when left unchecked, people will engage disproportionately with more sensationalist and provocative content." Mark Zuckerberg, "A Blueprint for Content Governance and Enforcement," *Facebook* 2018. Fisher's narrative is insightful and fascinating, but carries the danger of reducing the online radicalization phenomenon to how algorithms game neuro-evolutionarily determined human 'instincts.' What is missing in Fisher's account, but indispensable to radicalization is people's frustrations and anxieties under neoliberal social realities as I emphasize earlier.

⁷²⁶ For a summary, see Whitney Phillips and Ryan M Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (MIT Press, 2021), 143–45.

depressed turning them into anti-vaxxers, misogynists, or patriarchal self-help gurus.⁷²⁷ As long as inflaming paranoia can be monetized without governmental regulations, platforms have little incentive to curb this trend.⁷²⁸

6.4.2. The Paranoid Culture of Political Influencers and Beyond

The rise of the platform media occasions the growing influence of online influencers and a distinctive mode of ‘semi-private’ modes of communication enclosed within platform-created ‘filter bubbles.’ Influencers are mostly self-employed media creators whose income importantly scales with their ability to secure viewership and engagement. This incentivizes creators to adapt to platform’s recommendation algorithms, build up a ‘fanbase’, and cater the rhetorics and styles of their content to the algorithm and their fans (who are a major source of sustained viewership, sponsorships, and merch sales).⁷²⁹

Political influencers are key players in this rising sphere of ‘alternative media’ that are unbounded by regulatory, editorial, and journalistic standards of objectivity, non-partisanship, and inclusiveness. Instead of responding to the wider public, they produce *relatable*, ‘*authentic*,’ and *feedback-responsive* content to fan bases.⁷³⁰ The tested and successful strategies for influencers, as Alan Finlayson argues, are that they should build a “consistent seeming brand image,” conform to their fans’ expectations “to imply authenticity and intimacy,” and cultivate a “parasocial relationship” with them. Specifically, political influencers engage their audiences by promising to uncover the concealed ‘truths’ of social conspiracies and keeping them enraged.⁷³¹

Like PR experts, successful influencers are masters of *identities* and *identifications*. In the manic-consumerist economy, idols present an idealizable and likeable model for their

⁷²⁷ Fisher, *Chaos Machine*.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., Section 10.3.

⁷²⁹ William Callison and Quinn Slobodian, "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol," *Boston Review* 2021.

⁷³⁰ Rebecca Lewis, "Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube," (2018): 15–20.

⁷³¹ Alan Finlayson, "This Is Not a Critique: Reactionary Digital Politics in the Age of Ideological Entrepreneurship," *Media Theory* 7, no. 1 (2023): 36–37.

followers.⁷³² This is similar to political influencers, who purport to be ‘models’ showcasing how to live in ideological ‘truth.’⁷³³ One of the tested strategies of political influencers is to foment the shared paranoid victimhood where influencers and viewers alike fantasizes themselves *persecuted – threatened, shamed, and silenced – and demonstrate how they fight back.*⁷³⁴

This paranoid element is most powerfully mobilized in right-wing, reactionary movements that have gathered a sizable following on digital platforms. Given a minimally-regulated online airspace to propagandize, collaborate, and distribute, the online network of “alt-right,” “alt-lite,” sceptics, conspiracists, and the “intellectual dark web” bred expanding paranoiac alliances with shared inflammatory stylistics and symbols.

The dominant fantasy narrative depicts the *victimhood* of ‘morally upright,’ ‘naturally superior’ white men, as menaced by malevolent ‘woke elites,’ ‘cultural Marxists,’ ‘social justice warriors (SJWs)’ who are embedded in the ‘deep state’ and allied with ‘millennial snowflakes,’ ‘pedophiles,’ ‘entitled Blacks,’ and ‘terrorists.’ (The list goes on.) These persecutors brainwash, police, and guilt-trip people with ‘their’ left-leaning, egalitarian ideologies [=persecution], suppressing White men and stealing their [=victimization] ‘deserved’ entitlements, achievements and glory [=idealized self].⁷³⁵ Political influencers enter the picture as they present themselves as ‘exposing’ - in the form of a quasi-religious revelation – the ‘censored’ truth of persecution. Once this truth is revealed, people are exhorted to take the ‘red pill’ and identify with a ‘suppressed’ collective to undo the ‘damages’ done by the persecutors.⁷³⁶

The online presence of right-wing groups is, no doubt, heterogeneous. Groups differ in how explicitly hateful they are, and how much they believe in conspiracies in the literal sense.⁷³⁷

⁷³² See above 4.3.4.

⁷³³ Lewis, "Alternative Influence."

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ Finlayson, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web.," "YouTube and Political Ideologies: Technology, Populism and Rhetorical Form," *Political Studies* 70, no. 1 (2022).

⁷³⁶ For a discussion of the ‘red-pill’ rhetoric, see, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web," 179–80; Lewis, "Alternative Influence," 25–28.

⁷³⁷ For example, ‘alt-lites’ differ from ‘alt-right’ by being deliberately ironic to obfuscate their true intentions when propagating hateful speech. The famous ‘QAnon’ conspiracy, for example, can be a fun game of decoding cryptic

Yet, the radical heterogeneity of potentially conflicting commitments of the online right, its obscurity, and its openness to modes of identification – from the serious to the ironic – seems essential to its widespread resonance.⁷³⁸ Stringing together a constellation of conservative, racist, anti-gender, and counter-progressive tropes with a radicalized commitment to inequalities and individualist achievement, fan-based influencer cultures played an important role in the shaping of the paranoid victim-identity visible in populist neoliberalism.⁷³⁹

As of today, catch-all paranoid symbols – memeified, remixed, and shared – have entered the mainstream. All the while, right-wing political influencers enriched themselves⁷⁴⁰ and produced reverberating effects on the mainstream political scene. Right-wing paranoid politicians collaborate with influencers, appear on their podcasts, and often flirt with internet memes and symbols in their tweets and speeches.⁷⁴¹ Besides, the tested and proven aesthetics and stylistics of political influencers also became examples for how politicians can ‘starify’ themselves to secure young votes.⁷⁴²

On the side of media, under the threat of being rendered obsolete, mainstream media outlets, are pressurized to streamline and simplify their content, adopt short-form or podcast styles, and include click-baits in the fierce competition in the attention economy.⁷⁴³ Platform aesthetics –

messages, but can also be taken quite literally as exposing a real Satanic scheme of child sex trafficking that Trump is trying to fight.

⁷³⁸ Cf. Butler’s remarks on contemporary anti-gender phantasm: “[T]he incoherence and impossibility of the case against gender represent contradictory phenomena, and even offer its public a way to collect many of its fears and convictions without ever having to make the bundle coherent[...] The contradictory character of the phantasm allows it to contain whatever anxiety or fear that the anti-gender ideology wishes to stoke for its own purposes, without having to make any of it cohere.” Judith Butler, *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Random House, 2025), 16.

⁷³⁹ In some circles, the neoliberal ethic is even channelled through social Darwinism to yield ideas such as ‘sexual market value’ and distinctions of ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ males. For a discussion of how right-wing influencers espouse neoliberal, achievement ideologies as they are themselves objects of consumerist markets, see Clare Birchall, “The Paranoid Style for Sale: Conspiracy Entrepreneurs, Marketplace Bots, and Surveillance Capitalism,” *symploke* 29, no. 1 (2021); Finlayson, “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web,” 180–82.

⁷⁴⁰ Birchall, “The Paranoid Style for Sale: Conspiracy Entrepreneurs, Marketplace Bots, and Surveillance Capitalism.”

⁷⁴¹ Anna Nicolaou, “The Podcast Bros Who Helped Put Trump Back in the White House,” *Financial Times*, 25 January 2025.

⁷⁴² Ana Salazar, “Scrolling Politics in the Politainment Era,” in *Fast Politics: Propaganda in the Age of Tiktok* (Springer, 2023); Marcus Bösch, “Alternative Tiktok Tactics: How the German Right-Wing Populist Party Afd Plays the Platform,” *ibid.*

⁷⁴³ Jürgen Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023).

fragmenting, decontextualizing, and simplifying – becomes the dominant style for information consumption.

Most significantly perhaps, is the indispensable role reactionary political influencers play in the partisan questioning of mainstream media's credibility, the rebranding of editorial gatekeeping as 'censorship,' and the politically-motivated propagation of falsehoods, misleading information, conspiracy theories, and unverified hearsays.⁷⁴⁴ Although political influencers are hardly the only actors, they have spearheaded the pollution of media spaces and paralyzed the fact-relaying function of media. Inside and outside fan bases, people's trust in editorialized, mainstream media declined, while trust in partisan, internet media rose.⁷⁴⁵

Even without trying to idealize the neutrality of traditional media outlets, we can see how the turn of some groups towards strongly partisan and instrumentalizing representation of facts is highly problematic for the 'public.' Using Habermasian concepts, we can say: When even *stating facts* can be instrumentalized for political ends, no truth-claim can be read as sincere or truthful.⁷⁴⁶ *Doubt regarding facts erodes and divides the already-shrinking basis for inter-group understanding. Besides, strong distrust of the sincerity of speakers (especially from sources that do not match one's political views) collapses truth-finding into a moralized search for 'trustworthy' sources.* Both phenomena incentivize the segregation of the public into partisan fanbases: in a world where information overwhelms and sincerity is questionable, group identifications – especially paranoid ones – provide black-and-white 'safe-spaces' of

⁷⁴⁴ Rebecca Lewis, "'This Is What the News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-Celebrity," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (2020).

⁷⁴⁵ For the complexity of information pollution by online and offline actors, see Phillips and Milner, *You Are Here*.

⁷⁴⁶ Zeeuw captures the effects of the instrumentalization of belief in online spaces very well when he writes: "the status of belief [...] is at once displaced by and incorporated into an alternative model of communication that sees words and images as weapons to reorient users' perception and sense of reality. It is not only that critics mistakenly take conspiratorial beliefs to be 'factual' rather than 'symbolic' [...] it is that the function and status of language and belief is radically displaced by this operational understanding of what it means to speak or act in public. It is this model that online trolls and other 'anons' enact and possess an intimate understanding of, based on their engagement with online environments." Daniël De Zeeuw, "Post-Truth Conspiracism and the Pseudo-Public Sphere," *Frontiers in Communication* 9 (2024): 7.

perverse trust, fun, and solidarity.⁷⁴⁷ Feeling exposed and culpable, some enter political fanbases. Fanbases foster mutual trust, enabling groups to ‘hallucinate’ the truths they embrace.

6.4.3. Generating Paranoid Symbols

Algorithms recommend enraging political content for the sake of viewer retention, and influencers are important agents in fostering identification with paranoid ideologies by instrumentalizing the ‘parasocial’ relationships they form with their viewers, but these two facts alone cannot explain completely how paranoia is mainstreamed. To understand how paranoid politics is mainstreamed through digital media affordances, we also need to consider how influential agents are enabled by digital media ecologies.

Media scholar Rebecca Lewis illustrated how YouTube networks between influencers and their audiences, and between different influencers can pose a radicalization pressure on influencers themselves.⁷⁴⁸ Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner showed how, in the US, paranoid, conspiracist frames fermented in the dark corners of the ‘chans’ (online forums) are deployed not only by right-wing media and politicians, but were unintentionally amplified by mainstream media agents who indiscriminately report these fringe ideas for clickbait and debunking.⁷⁴⁹ Yet, these are also insufficient to explain why anti-woke, anti-feminist, and anti-immigrant tropes invade localities far beyond American, in Europe and even in circles in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss approach digital paranoia from the perspective of online aesthetics and communicational dynamics. In particular, I show how (i) platform

⁷⁴⁷ Cf. Kleinians describe how perverse denial gratifies destructive parts of the self and the group, while Lacanians go further and argue that populist enjoyments involve fantasies of how one’s (in-group) enjoyments are stolen and threatened by the (paranoid) Other. (See, Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 49–51; Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), ch. 6.) We see both at work in right-wing populisms, where members enjoy in-group solidarity in enraging their ‘woke’ enemies while suppressing objects.

⁷⁴⁸ Lewis, "Alternative Influence."

⁷⁴⁹ Phillips and Milner, *You Are Here*.

aesthetics fragments user's ego- and alter-perception, incentivizing the circulation of 'floating' symbols, paranoid slogans, and caricaturized part-objects. This fragmentation is (ii) only compounded by hostile, overwhelming communicative dynamics on platforms that structure most of our encounters with 'others' online.

Under the influences of a 'semi-private' political fan culture mediated by engagement-priming algorithms, audiences and producers alike converge upon partisan, sensationalist, and emotional content. Besides, as people's pace of life accelerated, media consumption increasingly occurs through 'side-screening,' casual listening, and brief, high-intensity vertical-format 'shorts' on smartphones. Much of the viral political commentaries have evolved into repetitive chattering or stylized heated 'debates' that are often partisan, lack analytic depth, and yet are sprinkled with catchy 'soundbites,' theatricalized disagreements, and emotional suggestions.⁷⁵⁰ Holding people's attention through simplistic narrative and emotional activation seems to be the key to virality on platforms. This is where paranoid narratives shine. As media scholar Marcus Bosch argues, "populist content coined through emotionalization, simplification, dramatization, scaremongering, provocation, and breaking taboos" is "readily spread, seen, and interacted with" on platforms.⁷⁵¹

The sheer volume of similar-formatted content allows already-engaged fans/viewers to satisfy their need for 'understanding' of the current state of the world,⁷⁵² and refuel their daily boost of paranoid and self-righteous identifications with the influencer. More importantly, the sensationalist narrative styles of influencers, coupled with the ready accessibility for everyone

⁷⁵⁰ For accounts of stylistic tropes in YouTube political content, see Munger and Phillips, "Right-Wing YouTube."; Lewis, "Alternative Influence." From personal experience in early 2025, depending on where one's YouTube 'viewer profile' stands, one might be drawn into series of 15-minute live-stream edits with 'clickbait' thumbnails involving some in-depth 'analysis'/ranting on Musk's false gaming achievements, or hour-long episodes of political influencers dialogues and 'debates' who spin every news story, every new Hollywood film into a moralizing criticism of 'woke culture,' an update on threats of immigrants, leftists and feminists on 'Western civilization' that – despite its 'civilized' pretence – reeks of racism, islamophobia, and misogyny in every pore.

⁷⁵¹ Bösch, "Alternative Tiktok Tactics: How the German Right-Wing Populist Party AfD Plays the Platform," 159–60.

⁷⁵² The effects of repeated exposure to falsehoods on social media may increase perceived credibility of even highly-implausible sources. This is named in experimental psychology as the 'illusory truth effect.' See e.g., Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D Cannon, and David G Rand, "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News," *Journal of experimental psychology: general* 147, no. 12 (2018).

to access, remix, and reedit content into catchy snippets, montages, ‘shorts,’ and memes, allows influencer content to be recontextualized, recommended and disseminated to wider audiences. *Fragmented, recombined, recontextualized in remixes, snippets of paranoid ideologies spread far beyond their native echo-chamber (which may bear roots repugnant to the many) and circulate as spreadable memes, shorts and “mythemes” for mainstream audiences.*⁷⁵³

Spreadable, remixable content, arguably, holds the key to a reverse pipeline that channels extremist symbols to the mainstream internet. Here, ‘wokism,’ ‘SJWs,’ and ‘leftard’/‘postmodern’/‘cultural Marxist’ ideologies – terms that may originate in conservative, supremacist, or conspiracist ecologies – are popularized into amorphous, catch-all phrases cited by mainstream politicians and commoners alike.⁷⁵⁴ This is an exemplary case of Butler’s performativity as citation – repeated ‘citations’ enact the essentialized unity of idealized objects and abject bodies to be identified with or defended against.⁷⁵⁵ Suffering in isolation from anxieties, insecurities, and betrayals that find no expressive outlet under ‘civilized’ neoliberal culture, the eventual outpour of paranoid symbols online allowed many to find (fantasy) explanations for misery, recover longed-for ‘solidarity,’ and seek fantasized revenge for crimes in scapegoated out-groups.

Never mind who the outgroups are and whether the symbols add up to a coherent narrative. As much as they are cited, there are a few questions about what the circulating symbols signify.⁷⁵⁶

⁷⁵³ For a discussion of how digital affordances favour the remixing and recontextualization of content, see Whitney Phillips and Ryan M Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018). For a more positive account of ‘spreadability’ of new media objects, see Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁷⁵⁴ Adrienne L Massanari and Shira Chess, "Attack of the 50-Foot Social Justice Warrior: The Discursive Construction of SJW Memes as the Monstrous Feminine," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018).

⁷⁵⁵ See, Butler, *Bodies That Matter*. Introduction; *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Introduction. It is interesting how, with the explosion of right-wing hate in the past decade, Butler now seems to have emphasized less the potentially subversive powers of *resignifying* injurious terms. (For example, compare accounts of censorship in her 1997 *Excitable Speech*, Ch. 4 and 2024 *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, ch. 3.)

⁷⁵⁶ The same signifier can often mean different and contradictory things within and across different subgroups. While commonly identified enemy - e.g. the ‘woke’ or the ‘cultural Marxism’ - are generally used to problematize race- and gender-progressive trends and practices in the “intellectual dark web,” they can get more radical formulations in evangelical, supremacist, and conspiracist groups. For the latter, more concrete formulations such as malicious attempts to ‘outlaw God’ from America, ‘dilute the White race,’ or even in conspiracies of paedophilia, human trafficking, or poisoning the water and making people gay.

A look into the term “gender ideology,” results in confused associations of pedophilia, nuclear threats, civilizational decline, conspiracist plots, and totalitarianism. Perhaps the point of using symbols is never to *understand* the world, but to gather up diverse feelings of anxieties and frustration and to produce a phantasmagoria and a pathological organization.⁷⁵⁷ Phantastic symbols are, to borrow the term from Mouffe and Laclau, “floating signifiers”⁷⁵⁸ – terms seeking not to refer to a pre-existing natural kind, but to construct a shifting paranoid frontier between the ‘in’ and the ‘out’, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ that stabilizes one’s group identity.

6.4.4. Part-Objects, Symbolic Equations

Psychosocially, symbols are ambivalent things. They can, as Laclau argues, solidify antagonistic frontiers. Under such use, symbolization effaces the particularity of the self and other, just so that the other incarnates the “notorious crime of the whole of society.”⁷⁵⁹ Yet, this is not the only way symbols function, as symbolization can prove indispensable for working through trauma, loss and enable us to sublimate our aggressiveness.⁷⁶⁰ The two types of symbols can be distinguished by how the symbol is used:

1. Productive symbol use: The progressive use of symbols mediates our interactions with others and enables creative and playful use of objects in cultural settings.⁷⁶¹ By representing of objects with symbols, symbolization provides partial substitutes for working through distressing object-relations without overwhelming feelings of anxiety and guilt associated with original objects.⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁷ Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, 3–36.

⁷⁵⁸ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

⁷⁵⁹ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 44ff. See also, Volkan’s description of large-group symbols and its relation to “entitlement ideology.” V. D. Volkan, “Large-Group Identity, Who Are We Now? Leader-Follower Relationships and Societal-Political Divisions,” *Am J Psychoanal* 79, no. 2 (2019): 141–45.

⁷⁶⁰ See, e.g. Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 435–527; Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal*, 49–65.

⁷⁶¹ See e.g., Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*. ch. 7.

⁷⁶² Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal*, 55.

2. Regressive symbol use: Symbols can also be regressively *equated* to the object instead of just representing it.⁷⁶³ Under symbolic equation, strong anxieties associated with objects can infect, unmetabolized, other objects through the symbol. This, to the degree that those in which this happens are psychotically disturbed, means that equated symbols also lock symbolized objects in rigid defensive frame where objects must be attacked/controlled and their reality paranoiacally denied.

Kleinians general focus on individual factors in discerning whether symbols are used progressively or regressively. But to understand digital paranoid politics, we also have to see how media environments can, in turn, *foster regressive symbol use*. To illustrate this, I argue that media infrastructures *lock us into a regressive use of symbols* through the manipulation and expulsion of alterity by ‘*framing*.’

Frames predate digital media. In the era of televised and print media, manipulation of frames involves editorial decisions surrounding the presentation of scenes to support dominant phantasmatic narratives that often serve the purposes of exclusion and abjection. Curated images orchestrate how ‘faces’ appear as familiar, heroic objects fit for identification, or as evil, ugly, repugnant abjects for disidentification.⁷⁶⁴ On the internet, frames, though less results of centralized editorial decisions, are no less prevalent. For instance, memes portraying caricaturized ugly, sick, unfit SJWs and feminists have been in circulation in right-wing forums before they became mainstreamed.⁷⁶⁵

In many cases, stylised images substantiate a group’s fantasy of its abjects and reinforce its in-group identifications. This happens when, first, the framed image gives the worst caricatures of its other, distorting and fetishizing their humanity while *equating its image representation with its place in the exclusionary (paranoid) discursive frame of the group*. Then, as the image is taken out of contextual complexities, it readily interpellates people to join the in-group by

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 46–65, 101–20.

⁷⁶⁴ See, Butler, *Frames of War; Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁷⁶⁵ Massanari and Chess, "Attack of the 50-Foot Social Justice Warrior: The Discursive Construction of SJW Memes as the Monstrous Feminine."

sharing easy laughter, hate, and resentment towards this imaginized abject.⁷⁶⁶ This ease of the image to command affects arguably explains why fetishized framing tactics often feature in reactionary and exclusionary movements that have commanded wide followings.

Understanding the power of fetishized frames allows us now to reconstruct how contemporary digital affordances amplify paranoid frames. The best illustration of this effect now is the proliferation of ‘shorts’ and reels on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Being short, vertical-format clips, the ‘shorts’ form limits narrative complexity, encouraging engagement strategies by citing familiar discursive tropes. In this case, political shorts often draw upon tested and proven paranoid frames and their phantasmatic splits in mainstream reactionary politics. Shorts and reels created in this light present ‘good’ star politicians and influencers as being relatable and spontaneous bodies in action, or as calm, reasonable men in argumentation.⁷⁶⁷ On the other side, ‘bad’ ‘woke’ enemies are portrayed as emotional, deluded, self-righteous, robotic, and/or ugly in a variety of scenes.

This is only compounded as content reproducing dominant paranoid frames produce greater emotional engagement and encourages ‘shares’ and ‘likes,’ meaning that they will be favoured by algorithms. This leads to more people being drawn into fetishistic frameworks, with more creators remixing and producing content adhering to these established and proven styles.⁷⁶⁸ Meanwhile, paranoid frames are evoked, shared, spread, and reproduced, and abjects become ever more abjected in the vast universe of networked content.

Couple this with the filter-bubble effects of algorithmic clustering and the vast extension of on-screen time in our lives, symbolic equation, namely the equation of paranoid symbols with the fetishized object-presentations, seems inevitable. This can occur quite apart from an

⁷⁶⁶ On fetishization and derealization of the other, Phillips and Milner writes: "When everything is flattened to pixels on the screen, it's easy to forget the people standing behind those pixels, how being flattened might hurt them, and how our everyday actions might make that hurt worse. Fetishization, as we will see, is supercharged by the white racial frame, and the white racial frame is supercharged by fetishization." Phillips and Milner, *You Are Here*, 52.

⁷⁶⁷ Paolo Gerbaudo and Iago Moreno, "The Moving Body as the Articulator, Meme and Affective Link in Political Communication on Tiktok," in *Fast Politics: Propaganda in the Age of Tiktok* (Springer, 2023).

⁷⁶⁸ For stylistic imitations on TikTok, see Diana Zulli and David James Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the Tiktok Platform," *New media & society* 24, no. 8 (2022).

individual's psychological propensity to regress. Bombarded with and enthralled by suggestive images that repeatedly confirm the paranoid frame and having little means to check against its reality, people are easily cajoled into accepting paranoid group fantasies.

6.4.5. Degraded, Paranoid Communications

It has become a staple in contemporary discussions of social media that algorithmic clustering and personalized recommendations are locking us into “echo-chambers” and “filter-bubbles.”⁷⁶⁹ The argument goes that as algorithms know more about our preferences, the more they recommend things that match our pre-existing preferences, and the further we will be left to interact *only* with people who share our interests and opinions online. The result, as it is so argued, is that people become overly confident about their views, and “disagreements either do not exist or are avoided.”⁷⁷⁰

Applied to fan-based groups of political influencers, this is quite accurate. Stream chats, YouTube comment sections, ‘chans’ and Discord channels are segregated spaces where people of alternative views will have little interest in joining. Disagreements and dissenting views are rarely observed, and if they do, these are usually intrafamilial, and discussions in this area thus fall far short of publicity. However, for other spaces, while algorithmic profiling also presumably also occurs, this seems less accurate. As Hartmut Rosa once argued, the “radicalisation or hardening of positions [on social media] seemed to take place precisely through the encounter with dissenting opinions” and not (merely) through segregated discursive spaces produced by personalized filters.⁷⁷¹

It takes a few scrolls on Instagram or Threads to confirm Rosa's suggestion that platform politics are hardly segregated echo-chambers. Any comment section of posts that contains allusions to divisive political and social content is almost guaranteed to have a chaotic

⁷⁶⁹ See e.g. Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin, 2011).

⁷⁷⁰ Fuchs, *Social Media*, 354.

⁷⁷¹ Hartmut Rosa, "Social Media Filters and Resonances: Democracy and the Contemporary Public Sphere," *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022): 25.

comments section littered with people of different opinions engaging in cut-throat disagreements. If anything in the online world that resembles ‘public’ spaces open to diverse opinions, it is the comment sections of news posts.

Of course, these are hardly good spaces for public discussion. On the one hand, platform design guarantees that political content and discussions are fragmented by entertainment contents that precede and succeed news,⁷⁷² ensuring that we get politics when we are most unprepared. Where people felt a sincere need to contribute to the discussion, they are limited by the space to express themselves in a few words or simply leave a ‘like’.

Constrained by platform affordances, such ‘public discussions’ online highly resemble Turquet’s observation of regressive large groups:⁷⁷³ overwhelming streams of responses and comments whose addressees are unfixed, issued by an anonymous mass of people whose identities are unknown and unfamiliar. One’s contributions are lost in the stream of comments, if they are not misinterpreted, attacked, and trolled. Indeed, in online spaces, Turquet’s problem of “response bombardment” and threats to individuality are amplified. Aside from the fact that groups are far larger, and people are practically anonymous, the sincerity of the other’s contribution is uncertain with the long history of ‘trolls’⁷⁷⁴ and the rise of bots⁷⁷⁵ on the internet. Besides, the meanings of words, memes, and emojis are easily misinterpreted in online spaces without sufficient context.⁷⁷⁶

It is understandable why comment sections operate the way Turquet described for large groups.⁷⁷⁷ Threatened with ‘ego loss’, people either withdraw or participate minimally in the

⁷⁷² Finlayson, "This Is Not a Critique," 37–38.

⁷⁷³ Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group."

⁷⁷⁴ See Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Mit Press, 2015).

⁷⁷⁵ Samuel C Woolley, "Automating Power: Social Bot Interference in Global Politics," *First Monday* (2016).

⁷⁷⁶ Cf. "Because it's often impossible to know exactly who is present – and furthermore who is paying attention or cares – at any given moment on any given platform, it is very difficult to know how best to craft a particular message. It is similarly difficult to predict what might happen to that message once it is posted: things that were originally intended to be private, or at least semi-private, can easily be swept up into public discourse, where countless new observers may be pulled in.[...] More problematic still, a person can't discern much from these messages online simply by looking at them – there is simply too much that could be happening." Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, 121.

⁷⁷⁷ Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group."

form of likes. For those who are triggered to post something, their responses either evoke ‘slogans’ drawing on existing group symbols or are simply trolling and name-calling. Circulation of slogans, trolls, and name-calling does little to foster dialogue. If anything, it only confirms the image of the other as unreasonable, uninformed, intransigent bigots. As meaningful contributions to understanding are discouraged in digital public spaces, exchange of words degrades into symbolic rituals confirming one’s allegiance to paranoid ideologies, and mocking the fetishized, caricaturized other.

6.4.6. Digital Paranoia

We now have a better picture of digital platforms as paranoia-inducing spaces: Beginning with platforms that prize monetizing engagement, radicalizing and partisan content becomes more successful. Influencers and influencer culture divided and radicalized segments of the public into distinct, semi-public fandoms. The success, in particular, of right-wing reactionary ideologies fermenting in online circles lies in their ability to funnel paranoid symbols into the mainstream. As symbols are readily cited and hardened by circulating framed images, abject others of paranoid discourses are stereotyped, fetishistically equated with paranoid symbols. Although some online spaces are not simple echo chambers or filter bubbles, most online venues for public discourse have degraded into spaces for slogans, trolling, and name-calling. This only confirms stereotypes of ‘others’ as intolerant and reinforces in-group identifications.

In the digital world where politics becomes sensationalized into private spectacles, speech overwhelmed and weaponized by many as tools to incite identification, leaving no room for understanding our socio-economic realities or reflecting on why one feels what one feels. Still less effort is put into communicating with and resonating with people holding different opinions and pursuing other ways of life. The paranoid universe of symbols, frames, and interactions offers a perfect complement to neoliberal survivalism in the real world: Those who do not belong to our group are out to get us, dupe us, deceive us, and exploit us. Listening and empathizing with them spells fatal weakness, and ‘we’ – as a group and as self-identified

morally upright individuals – shall triumph, hold onto our ‘truth’ and defend against those who are coming to harm us.

6.5. Paranoid Effects: From Zero-sum Survivalism to Antagonisms and Hostility

Let us return to paranoia in operation. There is a reason why paranoid-schizoid pathological organizations are the hardest to handle.

In the first instance, group paranoia is acted out through hostile provocations, which can lead to retaliatory responses that, in turn, confirm the original hostility and induce a similar hostility in the antagonized. A couple of cycles of retaliatory actions, and it is no longer discernible who incited whom, as antagonism socially realized as mutual hostility and distrust becomes a social reference point where ‘everyone can live’ is displaced by paranoid survivalism.

Furthermore, paranoid attacks also powerfully shape the phantasmatic understandings of the shared situation towards a paranoid direction. According to the Kleinian theory of projective identification, projection is an attempt not merely at ridding oneself of bad bits, but at *communicating* phantasmatic meanings to the object by dramatizing “control” over the object and inducing it to act in the capacity of the sadistic persecutor.⁷⁷⁸ As such, a person’s paranoid attacks carry within them not only the ‘bad bits’ but also the *very phantasmatic frame which makes the projection meaning-laden*.

In psychoanalytic practice, paranoid currents in the analysand are felt by the analyst most clearly in the countertransference as a felt impulse to react from a sadistic persecutor or paralyzed victim role. Outside the clinic, heated political provocations also often involve not only aggressiveness, but also attempts to identify the other with the symbolic place in one’s phantasies. This is best reflected in the impulse of the provoked to defend, retaliate, or argumentatively defeat against the provocateur while adopting the symbolic position projected,

⁷⁷⁸ Herbert Rosenfeld, "Contribution to the Psychopathology of Psychotic States (1971)," in *Melanie Klein Today*, Volume 1, ed. Elizabeth Bott Spillius (London: Routledge, 1988).

or by distancing from that position but implicitly joining to disparage the projected position.⁷⁷⁹ *Paranoid exchanges, unless engaged differently and alternatively, often reproduce the symbolic structure held by the provocateur; and perhaps more destructively, the persecutory dynamic that someone has to be blamed.* Under such dynamics, it is the right or the wrong, the persecutor or the persecuted – *only one can live.*

However, especially in our age, when social reality increasingly resembles survivalist role-play games, emancipation cannot reinforce survivalism. Murderous social structures need to be dismantled, capitalist cannibalization the masses need to be held responsible for reparations and compensations, although no witches (and wizards) need to be hunted and burnt. Yet, to the degree that paranoid frames recruit ever more, left or right, to join their paranoid frenzy, paranoid object-relations become part of pathological organizations that reproduce themselves by producing temporary emotional gratification/relief, while destroying emancipatory ways out.

Paranoid-schizoid defences escalate anxiety levels. Paranoid-schizoid defences rid the ego of anxieties of annihilation and give the disintegrating ego means to displace anxieties by dramatizing (imagined) control and triumph over external objects. While the threat of annihilation is externalized, it also receives *confirmation*: For the paranoid subject, any encounter with the object reanimates the disowned fears and becomes itself threatening. Fear is confirmed when attempts to destroy its object cause the ego to fear the object for real and phantasized retaliation.⁷⁸⁰ Paranoia-structured interactions, therefore, result in escalating spirals of threat-fear-retaliation until the ego finds an endgame where object relations are completely excluded or until the fantasized object is annihilated.

Once the paranoid spiral begins, it is extremely difficult to halt the march to the endgame because group paranoid dynamics have a strong centripetal pull. We saw that any meaningful way of going beyond paranoid universes requires a cohabitative encounter with the other. It

⁷⁷⁹ For example, when being accused of wokeness, the Left may either defend 'wokeness,' or distance from the symbol in favour of a more 'reasonable position,' implicitly joining in with the right's denunciation of 'wokeness' – the symbol of 'woke' is paradoxically reinforced by intersubjective collusion.

⁷⁸⁰ Yeung, "Psychoanalyzing Democracies," 37–39.

involves the loosening up of paranoid symbolic equations that lock the abject in its place. In a world where paranoid attacks have already been made, this involves not only a friendly, empathetic stance towards the other, but a reparative stance of rivals ready to acknowledge and own up to past misunderstandings and harms done to the other.

Yet, even setting aside how far paranoid phantasies already demonized the object, making any encounter with the object threatening, the upwelling of remorseful feelings (what Kleinians call, depressive anxieties) may be unbearably intense. These feelings may, in turn, also be re-externalized in the paranoid frame as testimony to external threats. Furthermore, to the degree that paranoia is embedded in group identifications, engaging in reparative projects as an individual may well be seen as a violation of group norms. This further opens the subject to anxieties relating to the loss of group belonging. Besides, reparative efforts initiated by one group may well be distrustfully received or aggressively disparaged by the other, preventing reparative efforts from ever getting off the ground.

All these do not mean that reparation is impossible once paranoid group-dynamics spread, but only that it can be painfully difficult and can best be initiated at the group level. Building upon ideas of psychoanalytic therapy, we will look into how mournful practices of group “containing” may help ease cut-throat provocations in Chapter 8.

Part III – The Mournful Way Forward?

Chapter 7. Mourning Neoliberalism I – Recovering Freely-associative Receptivity

7.1. The Self and the Sirens

Any realistic account of the psychosocial deadlocks of neoliberalism demands that we attend to the complexities inherent not only in psychology but also in ideologies, cultural tropes, governing institutions, and economic structures – none of which allows for gross simplifications. For that reason, the concluding chapters will not attempt to tie up all the threads that have been opened.

However, if one is to give a reasonable snapshot of neoliberal subjectivation, the image of the *Odyssey* springs to mind. Early in 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer evoked the image of “the hero of the adventures” in Homer’s epic to be “the prototype of the bourgeois individual, whose concept originates in the unwavering self-assertion of which the protagonist driven to wander the earth is the *primaeval* model.”⁷⁸¹ Eighty years later, in 2025, one of Odysseus’s mythical encounters again made it to the title of Chris Hayes’s bestseller – *The Sirens’ Call*. Hayes’s account surveys how the Sirens of digital capitalism exploit our involuntary attention to its benefit and proposes the need to reclaim our (voluntary) attention and remake our “attention markets.”⁷⁸²

Hayes was not alone in evoking the Sirens. The ‘nudgers’ we saw in chapter 5 also spoke of resisting contemporary temptations using the example of Odysseus.⁷⁸³ The central problem for them is self-control – the balance between long-term interests and short-term desires. The tempting voices of the Sirens are compared to temptations such as “addictive” “high-caloric, low-cost processed foods and sweetened sodas” and “the manipulative information environment,” all of which steer us away from “self-control,” “health, wealth and other

⁷⁸¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.

⁷⁸² Chris Hayes, *The Sirens’ Call: How Attention Became the World’s Most Endangered Resource* (New York: Penguin, 2025).

⁷⁸³ Sunstein, *Why Nudge?*, 38; Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, ch. 2; Reijula and Hertwig, “Self-Nudging.”

dimensions of human flourishing.”⁷⁸⁴ Their solutions are ‘nudges’ to be rationally installed before the Siren songs take irreversible effect, much like the wax-plugs Odysseus gave to his crew as they leave Aeaea.

In this chapter, I do not challenge the anthropological depth that Odysseus’s struggle – the struggle with temptations predates capitalism. Nor do I dispute the importance of resisting the digital colonizations of our attention. What I challenge, however, is the *Odyssean* representation of such predicaments that is one form of the functionalist mode of problematization so endemic to neoliberalism.

I follow Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critical reading of the *Odyssey* and deploy this as a critique of neoliberal socialization. This reading exposes how Odyssean representations of the world bespeak an antagonizing separation from (external and internal) ‘nature’ which produces nature as alien, hostile, threatening and, yet paradoxically always seductive. The Odyssean subject mimics and assumes the hardened form of its threatening objects in order to outwit and dominate them. He prides himself on mastering the external world, rendering its ‘seductions’ innocuous enjoyment, but also to the exclusion of reflecting *whether this separation is itself rational and whether his horror at the seductiveness of the Sirens is not partly the effect of such antagonising separation.*

This reading, I believe, describes a deeper predicament of neoliberal subjectivation than most social commentators acknowledge. This is because the mainstreamed Odyssean story only problematizes temptations and ignores the subject of self-control.

The object of digital and consumerist seduction is not just any subject, but the *neoliberal individual* under strong precarizing pressures. This subject is not merely seduced, but normatively expected (and demanded) to overcome *social* obstacles through control and self-discipline. Not unlike Odysseus’s cunning mimesis, such a subject is also forced to adapt to a hostile world by mimicking imposed images and social metrics. The neoliberal Odysseus is

⁷⁸⁴ "Self-Nudging," 2–3.

both seduced and rational. As they are seduced away, they are also compelled to ‘rationally’ restrict their ‘excessive’ enjoyments and crowd out and mute ‘unwanted’ thoughts with psychotropics and manic/paranoid rituals. Here, indulgence is socially counterbalanced by the demand of self-control. But by focusing only on the temptations, we miss a part of the dialectic.

It is perhaps in this light that we can begin to ask *whether* the so-called neoliberal crisis of attention is more a matter of the weakness of self-control in the face of the seductive Sirens, or the upshot of a subject mutilated by compelled self-control, who can only defend its hopes by projecting them onto a seductive other and closing it off. Relatedly, we can ask whether the problems of seduction and addiction are to be mastered by strengthening one’s volitional self, or, paradoxically, by giving in to the tempting Other to rid the self of its obsessive need to project genuine hope as self-destructive yielding to temptations. As with Adorno and Horkheimer, this chapter seeks to experiment with the counter-Odyssean alternative. In particular, the ideas that:

- (i) there is no proper resolution of contemporary psychosocial deadlocks *without acknowledging* the “injuries” and “scars” that the capitalist expectations of identity and self-control produce in the subject⁷⁸⁵; and
- (ii) however horrifying the Sirens call appear, there a hint of emancipatory “beauty” in the repudiated, non-purposive states that should be recovered individually and collectively.⁷⁸⁶

In this chapter, I give substance to Adorno and Horkheimer’s puzzling suggestion that emancipation from the horrors of capitalism does not involve more *purpose-directed endeavours*, but involves reconciliation with what is deemed horrifying, in an almost regressive “remembrance of nature within the subject.”⁷⁸⁷ In section 7.2, I give Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reading a psychoanalytical interpretation: the Siren’s ‘song’ is the *unconscious remainder of capitalist socialization* – the flipside of the repressive, self-controlled self.

⁷⁸⁵ “Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self-the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings - was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood.” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 26.

⁷⁸⁶ On being threatened to misrecognize the Siren’s call, Adorno and Horkheimer write: “Anyone who wishes to survive must not listen to the temptation of the irrecoverable, and is unable to listen only if he is unable to hear.” and those who cannot hear “know only of the danger of the song, not of its beauty” *ibid.*, 26–27.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

Neoliberal subjectivation, here, involves a self-injurious, self-disruptive psychic structure that tracks capital's instrumentalist imperatives by treating internal and external nature as horrifying objects for repressive mastery.

Continuing this psychoanalytic line, I contend that a crucial aspect of resolving the psychosocial deadlock we face lies in establishing open and free-associating spaces for a more receptive relationship with ourselves and others – one that reduces compulsive self-control, eliminates the need for aggressive and paranoid projections, and restores our emancipatory imagination. (7.3) The discussion then concerns how receptivity and free association can be practiced without it becoming either an empty slogan or another individualistic neoliberal ruse. (7.4-6) The final sections also provide examples of counter-Odyssean strolls and rest practices as modest beginnings, paving the way for proactive and collective practices of resisting neoliberalism.

7.2. Inventing Horror: The Dialectic of Repression and Its Return

How did the Siren's calls of the unconscious become objects of absolute terror, and how does it get reproduced not only subjectively, but intersubjectively? To ask this is already to problematize prevailing modes of functionalist and instrumental thinking so endemic to capitalist subjectivation. Such problematization interests none of the neoliberal economists. For them, life has a purpose, and there are optimal ways to achieve it. Anything that stands in the way of us achieving goals is a distraction. Nudges are means to master distractions. In no way is it asked whether the life being distracted can also be worthy.

Adorno and Horkheimer challenge the idea that achieving one's goals in the most rational and efficient way is truly rational. For them, the instrumental obsession with instrumental *purposes* exemplifies civilization's blind compulsion towards barbarism, a form of self-mutilation that is locked in a cycle of paranoid fear and repressive control. Such a reading questions *how* the mythical encounters of Odysseus became terrifying threats to self-preservation. It proposes that Odysseus finds the Sirens horrifying not so much because they are *simply* so. The horror of the

‘obstacles’ to Odysseus’s voyage speaks more about what has become of Odysseus’s resolve to *return to Ithaca by all means possible* than to the nature of mythical beasts themselves.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of the *Odyssey* highlights how Odysseus interprets the lawless, harmless, and even beautiful nature of mythical distractions as overpowering and threatening, whereas in the epic, the most apparent threat to Odysseus and their crew are “forgetfulness and loss of will” – problematic, but much less destructive than is represented by Odysseus’s drastic reactions.⁷⁸⁸ Indeed, the Siren songs are even described as “beautiful.” It is his resolve to return home that Odysseus disfigured his encounters into hostile distractions, and, hence, sealed his and his crew’s fate to have to repress all contact with the foreign, making themselves either unable to hear the Siren’s songs, or to hear them only when hearing has “no consequences for him.”⁷⁸⁹

For Adorno and Horkheimer, our propensity to identify with Odysseus illuminates *our relation to the world as unnecessarily repressive and self-mutilating*. Hoping to break our blind submission to repressive instrumental thinking in favour of something beyond, Adorno and Horkheimer expose the paradoxes within, the damages done by, and the blindness involved in our totalizingly instrumental mode of world-comportment that has tightly gripped capitalist civilization and all of us within it. As such, the *Dialectic* uses Odysseus to reflect on how our ‘enlightened’ schema blindly projects onto the world horrors of *abject* ‘chaos’, ‘barbarity,’ and ‘femininity’ to be repressively mastered by instrumentalist cunning, irretrievably cutting off our receptive, “mimetic” relations to the world and ourselves in the process.

Throughout the *Dialectic*, the logic of abjective projection, instrumental shutting off, and its return as horror is outlined in different instances. The most notable one concerns scientific knowledge. Adorno and Horkheimer describe how for the scientifically minded, “the mere idea of the ‘outside’ [to instrumental understanding and control] is the real source of fear,” and

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid., 49. The distortive representation of the mythical others is highlighted in their reading of the encounter with Polyphemus in *Ibid.*, 51-3.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., 26-27.

“nothing is allowed to remain outside” our rationalized conceptual schemas.⁷⁹⁰ We find peace only when we can flatten nature and extract from it a lawful conceptual order that enables our technical manipulation, because the world of un-conceptualized objects is – like the Sirens – compulsively represented as enslaving: “mere veils of chaotic matter” and such “matter’s influence on the human agent as enslavement.”⁷⁹¹

On the psychosocial front, Adorno and Horkheimer trace how the “primitive” fear of unpredictability transmutes into a repressively, later ‘scientifically’ managed social system that confronts each with the “abstract fear of the collective.”⁷⁹² The survivalist fear of being cast out, rooted in individual drives for self-preservation, coerces individuals to *identify* ever more closely with the demands of the system, making their psyches ever more socially malleable.⁷⁹³ Testifying to socialized fears, the repressive socialization of the instrumentalist, goal-directed subject involves “terrible injuries[...] repeated in every childhood” that creates a “system of scars.”⁷⁹⁴ In Adorno’s reading, such ‘scars’ deaden the receptivity of the self,⁷⁹⁵ and reach potentially murderous expressions in antisemitism – in a logic quite similar to our earlier account of paranoid politics.⁷⁹⁶ In the *Dialectic*, antisemitism originates from “false projection,” which paranoically demonizes the ‘other’ for the repressed self that one cannot acknowledge:⁷⁹⁷

“It is the reverse of genuine mimesis and has deep affinities to the repressed; in fact, it may itself be the pathic character trait in which the latter is precipitated. [...] [It] displaces the volatile inward into the outer world, branding the intimate friend as foe.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁹² Ibid., 17, see also 148–49. Cf. “the fear of being cast out, the social sanctions behind economic behaviour, have long been internalized along with other taboos, and have left their mark on the individual. In the course of history this fear has become second nature.” Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology I,” 71.

⁷⁹³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 124–25.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., 26. Theodor W. Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2014): 328.

⁷⁹⁵ See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 44–45. On the ‘deadness’ of the well socialized, see also Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, A 36.

⁷⁹⁶ See chapter 6.

⁷⁹⁷ For a more extensive discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of antisemitism, see Fabian Freyenhagen, “Adorno and Horkheimer on Anti-Semitism,” in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020). Most relevant to the current discussion is how Freyenhagen describes their view of antisemitism as having “nothing essentially to do with ‘Jews,’ but with certain problematic aspects of anti-Semites – notably, their inability to make experiences in the sense of an openness to the world [...] Often the only truth content of the “image of the Jew” is one about not the object of anti-Semitism but the anti-Semite.” (117–118)

Impulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim.”⁷⁹⁸

In both cases, Adorno and Horkheimer, the ‘primitive’ terror for one’s survival is reproduced, produced by one’s instrumentally *repressive relation to self and others*. Conceiving the world in repressive/defensive terms of instrumental reason, the Enlightenment subject is thus ‘fated’ to find everything horrifying:

“The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in the panic which is ready to break out at any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue, to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are powerless.”⁷⁹⁹

We *are* this power insofar as this is what we have abjected from ourselves, but we remain powerless against it, so long as we remain incapable of regaining mimetic contact with what we fear. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the true resolution of the dialectic of horror and control depends less on the *dominating control* of ‘contingencies’ and ‘obstacles’ that the ‘nudgers’ dream of, but in *reconciling ourselves to nature* through non-instrumental, “mimetic” relations to them in a “remembrance of nature within the subject.”⁸⁰⁰

7.2.1. The Psychosocial Underground of the Dialectic: Repression or Integration?

Insofar as the *Odyssey* remains an evocative image of capitalism extended to our neoliberal present, and that the repressive socializing forces stay in force, thinking through the conundrums of the *Odyssey* may help us better conceptualize our present and seek ways out.

⁸⁰¹ Adorno and Horkheimer’s provocative disclosure of Enlightenment’s reason is itself a preparation for something beyond repressive instrumentalist reason, although its psychosocial prognosis is slightly confused (as I suggest now).

⁷⁹⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 154.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁰¹ There might be significant differences between Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s times and ours, especially with regards to their discussion of conformity under industrial capitalism. As I hopefully have shown in this Dissertation, despite the nominal openness to diversity of ends under neoliberal individualism, the socializing threats are even augmented under neoliberal precarity. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s idea of our dependency on a system we have no control over and under which we are – in their words – “precarious” is still relevant 80 years after the *Dialectic*’s publication. See, *ibid.*, 121–24.

The purported ideals and their account of psychic formation in the *Dialectic* have been matters of contention. C Fred Alford highlighted how their model of reconciliation excludes realistic considerations of aggression. Benjamin Fong and Whitebook, respectively, referred to how the *Dialectic* fails to adequately distinguish between the ego's regressive, undifferentiated taking over of the objects and the ego's integrated state, where subjects and objects are in contact but differentiated.⁸⁰² Moreover, despite the centrality of exposing the logic of repression-horror-projection/control in Adorno's works,⁸⁰³ Jessica Benjamin showed that Adorno and Horkheimer became too committed to the repressively formed *bourgeois individual* as a supposed bulwark against the perceived threat of late capitalism's *direct* manipulation of our unconscious.⁸⁰⁴ In this reading, the authors of the *Dialectic* sided with the (authoritarian) ego and the superego against a constitutively 'destructive' id to dispel late-capitalism's looming threat to the psyche.⁸⁰⁵ Yet, if this is the strategy, psychic resistance becomes anachronistic (as it draws upon the lost bourgeois ideal of individuality), while a powerful motif in the *Dialectic* is undermined, as it now holds the Sirenic *repressed* (id) accountable for their lack of submission to the now-liquidated repressor (ego/superego).

Leaving aside whether Adorno and Horkheimer really idolized the repressive bourgeois ego and demonized the id,⁸⁰⁶ their accounts of mimesis and occasional references to going "beyond

⁸⁰² Benjamin Y. Fong, *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 91–94. See also Whitebook's charge that Adorno (and Horkheimer) is committed to a return to "presocialized nature" Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*, 149–52.

⁸⁰³ This is most apparent in the section on antisemitism as "false projection" that "displaces the volatile inward into the outer world, branding the intimate friend as foe. Impulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 154. See also Adorno's discussion of freedom in relation to pre-egotized impulses in and when he describes psychological fascist-disposing 'hardness': "Whoever is hard with himself earns the right to be hard with others as well and avenges himself for the pain whose manifestations he was not allowed to show and had to repress." Adorno, *Critical Models*, 198.

⁸⁰⁴ Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology," *Telos*, no. 31 (1977); See also, Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*, 136–40.

⁸⁰⁵ Jessica Benjamin makes a similar point in Benjamin, "End of Internalization," 46.

⁸⁰⁶ While it is obvious that Adorno and Horkheimer is committed to bourgeois individuality as a necessary step in the realization of freedom, it is not entirely clear whether they, all-things-considered, think positively of the superego and negatively of the id/instincts, or whether those are *qualified* defences in face of the threats of the last bastion for emancipatory resistance. Adorno's overall reading of the superego is negative, while his criticism of the id's destructiveness is careful enough to address *only those drives that have been socially manipulated*. Indeed, in Adorno's later writings on practical reason, he refers to the ego's need to reconcile with pre-egotized drive impulses. See, e.g. Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures, 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 213; *Negative Dialektik*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 267–71; "Sociology and

repression”⁸⁰⁷ are sketchy, if not confused. To move forward, we may follow the footsteps of later commentators of Adorno and Horkheimer in supplementing the arguments of the *Dialectic* with post-Freudian theories of healthy individuation, not as repressive, but as receptive and potentially integrative.⁸⁰⁸

Joel Whitebook, following the work of Hans Loewald, proposed two currents in the works of Freud: the “official” Freud, also somehow shared by Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reading of Freud, treats psychic growth as repressive adaptation/resignation to hostile reality aided by the identification with a paternal authority. In this version, the strong superego and the reasoning ego are the guarantors of psychic stability in an antagonistic world, as drives and desires incongruent with survival must be forcibly repressed for the emerging self to stand a chance of meeting the demands of a hostile reality.⁸⁰⁹

This version of the ego is contrasted with the “unofficial” Freud, for whom adaptation involves gradual disillusionment aided by a supportive environment that allows the budding ego to integrate both internal and external worlds. Here, the strong need for repression and the formation of a punitive superego are seen more as developmental/environmental failures than as necessities for autonomous subjectivity.⁸¹⁰

Most post-Freudian versions of psychoanalytic theory accept some version of the unofficial Freud. Expanded from the Freudian clinical idea of free association, unconscious ‘reception’⁸¹¹ replaces ‘repression’ and the ‘strong,’ authoritarian ego, modelled upon the punishing father, whose role is to ward off the obsessive influences from the id and the commands of the superego.⁸¹² Instead of *repressive* strength, the idea of unconscious reception opens inquiries

Psychology II,” 79. It is also notable how Adorno did not blame the id as such when he argues that it is the social exploitation of the psyche, “not [the] spontaneous primary expression of instincts and urges” that contributes to fascism. *The Culture Industry*, 151.

⁸⁰⁷ *Negative Dialektik*, 277.

⁸⁰⁸ See e.g., Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*; Fong, *Death and Mastery*; Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*; Alford, *Melanie Klein & Critical Social Theory*.

⁸⁰⁹ Whitebook, *Freud*, ch. 5.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹¹ See Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, 28–31.

⁸¹² In Freud, the vicissitudes of the ego’s masterful “conquest of the id” is best represented in the *Ego and the Id* (Freud, SE 19: 45-59), and partially revised in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety* (Freud, SE 20: 97-100). See Whitebook’s

into what enables the ego to live better with its internal and external objects, so that it does not have to regard every sign of the alien as a threat to be purged.

This involves a more *tolerant, loving superego* modelled upon interactions with a (maternal) other who is not threatening, but can realistically but lovingly contain horrifying experiences for the developing ego, helping it receive the real joys and pains of the world.⁸¹³ Once set up, this superego will still hold us accountable to ideals, but can ironize its rigid perspectives, supporting the ego in receiving evocations from the unconscious and paving the way for the ego to welcome non-repressive/non-defensive modes of relating to the world.⁸¹⁴ In this picture, the integrative psyche neither collapses into psychotic non-differentiation, nor repressively holds itself together. Indeed, the capacities of the ego are augmented only when the severity of the superego diminishes, and one becomes stronger and appreciative of perspectives disclosed by one's encounter with the other without ever losing oneself.⁸¹⁵ This account assumes an understanding of ego-strength – undertheorized in Adorno and Horkheimer – that is realistic and receptive without being repressive and rationalistic. Strength in this sense comes from an internalized steadfastness that allows the ego to *receive* and *tolerate* pain, frustration, and ambivalence arising from inner and outer realities, realistically perceiving the possibilities opened up by the world without falling into distortive and self-escalating phantasies manic-

discussion of this shift in *Perversion and Utopia*, ch. 2. In Loewald's terms, the need to represent the ego as defensive reflects an unwitting acceptance of the obsessive representation of reality. See Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 21–32.

⁸¹³ This is very clearly demonstrated by Melanie Klein's middle-period works, where she disagrees with Freud by arguing that a punitive, tyrannical superego leads to heightened sadism and anxiety "responsible for the behaviour of asocial and criminal persons." (251) A strong superego stalls realistic engagement with internal and external world due to distrust of "real objects" because they are either "felt to be in complete opposition to the demands of the superego" or "too closely identified with the dreaded internal [objects]." (245) These paranoid tendencies are supposed to be corrected subsequently when superego is supported by "beneficent and helpful imagoes" supported by earlier impressions of a "generous kindly mother, which approximate more closely to the real objects." (252) See Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 245, 50–52. We will look at containment further in the context of therapeutic change. For containing/holding, see Thomas H Ogden, "On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 85, no. 6 (2004).

⁸¹⁴ For ideals of non-defensive ego, see also Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 174–77; Whitebook, *Freud*, esp. ch. 5; Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*. For an account of irony – flexibility of one's internal perspectives rooted in erotic commitments to the world – as a therapeutic

⁸¹⁵ Various accounts conceive of a less defensive form of 'repression' where one's conscious and unconscious remain separated, but the boundary remains permeable and 'communicative.' See e.g. Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 253–54; Ogden, "On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming," 1354–55. Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal*, 78–79.

depression and paranoia, with promises of potentially enjoying the possibilities and good the world may present.⁸¹⁶

The notion of a receptive ego coheres well with the overall pitch of the *Dialectic* in countering the self-proliferating horror of repression. It also echoes Adorno's allusions to emancipation as the "remembrance of nature in the subject," a "love of things," or "peace" as a "state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other."⁸¹⁷ These various passages arguably allude to receptive, integrative subjectivities who no longer feel compelled to mutilate themselves and destroy others out of terror but can begin to reconcile with repressed nature through receptive 'mimetic' practices in which the ego is led by object, rather than obsessively controlling the latter.

7.2.1. The Psychic Life of the Neoliberal *Odyssey*

Of course, I am in no way proposing that the integrative/receptive version of the ego is sufficient. Lest we forget that Adorno's sharpest criticism of 'revisionist' psychoanalysis is not in his reading of psychic structure, but his objection to the psychoanalytic hubris that assumes that inventing psychic ideals is itself emancipatory. For him, post-Freudian analytic theories of psychosocial integration degrade proper emancipation into social adaptation, especially when the bad social context hindering the true realization of integrative ideals is ignored.⁸¹⁸ In this case, a consideration of receptive ego may help us better conceptualize emancipatory practices

⁸¹⁶ This account is drawn mostly from Kleinians, who regard psychic health as defined by realistic capacities to receive, love, and tolerate ambivalence. Other accounts, as those espoused by Winnicott, Loewald, Lear, Whitebook, Adam Phillips, and McWilliams, seem to emphasize less on tolerating pain and more on the enjoyment and creative side of psychic integration. As have been raised earlier, I am agnostic as to what is the theoretically *ideal* model of psychic-integration, but under traumatizing social circumstances as ours, the Kleinian model seems to be one that is most plausible. For an affinity between the Kleinian model of psychic integration and critical theory, see Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, ch. 2. For Klein's image of the integrative psyche, see also, David W. McIvor, *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 24–29, 107–12; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," *The South Atlantic quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007).

⁸¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 32; Adorno, *Critical Models*, 147; *Negative Dialektik*, 190–93.

⁸¹⁸ "Revisionist Psychoanalysis," 335; "Sociology and Psychology II," 83. Most relevant for our purposes is his critique of Ferenczi in *Negative Dialectics*, which challenges not so much whether the superego can be benign *as such*, but more on whether it can be benign under existing social circumstances, and how the "critique of the superego ought to become the critique of the society which produced it." *Negative Dialektik*, 267–71. See also "Sociology and Psychology II," 82.

only if we refrain from (i) assuming that full integration is viable, or (ii) that it can be accomplished by private clinical practices alone.⁸¹⁹

In the following, I emphasize the need to facilitate *receptive* egos capable of receiving unconscious and worldly impressions without much distortion, leaving open whether an *integrated* ego enjoying full enjoyment and adaptiveness is possible. The ideal I advocate aligns more closely with Kleinians', which emphasises not full integration, but a sense of subjective "cohesiveness" involved in a receptive "ability to tolerate ambivalence, ambiguity, and conflict."⁸²⁰

In this light, let us adopt the unofficial Freud in reading the *Dialectic* and neoliberal socialization. Earlier, we saw how individuals under oppressive socialization, are forced to comply with normative social demands to survive. Building upon Butler's theory of "passionate attachment" we saw how (neoliberal) socialization takes advantage of every neonate's need for survival through recognition, compelling individuals to variably internalize the shaming and prohibitive gaze of the system they depend upon.⁸²¹ For many, such a gaze is introjectively set up as a superego fixated upon the moral authority of society's prevailing

⁸¹⁹ This reinterpretation of the psychosocial scene as expressed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can better respond to Adorno's many objections to psychoanalytic revisionism for if we accept neither (i) that full psychosocial integration is possible without emancipation from capitalism, nor (ii) that requisite emancipatory changes can be brought about by private therapeutic practices alone. As will be clearer in subsequent sections, what I consider individual 'cure' imply better but incomplete reconciliation with inner and outer nature, and the cultivation of a form of psychological open receptivity that can withstand consciousness and resistance towards dissonant social realities.

⁸²⁰ Allen and Ruti, *Critical Theory between Klein and Lacan: A Dialogue*, 19.

⁸²¹ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*. I do not dispute, as with Freud and Klein, that this internalization process is (i) produced in phantasy, and (ii) the superego's severity tracks not (merely) the strength of the external authority, but potential constitutional aggressiveness of the developing infant. There may be pathological cases where the superego phantasies are disproportionately severe and made up of madly idiosyncratic contents in ways that result from no apparent "environmental failure." However, I think it is wrong to imply that superego structures can be analyzed from the perspective of drives and phantasies alone (understood as individual psychic realities cut off from social reality). Of course, psyches ridden by constitutively severe superegos can render later social interactions unduly rigid, foreclosing curative progress. However, one should also note that even in quite extreme cases the psyche's rigidity may also be reinforced by an demanding institutional environment which leaves the ego with the no space to work through the constitutional phantasmatic knots in the psychic structure. In more ordinary cases, psychic structures receive continuous (though never unrestricted) influences – both in terms of form (intensity, structure) and content (normative interpretations) – through social interactions structuring continuous processes of introjection and projection.

norms, ready to exhort the ego to defensively disown normatively incongruent parts of itself as *objects* through projection. (See Figure 5)

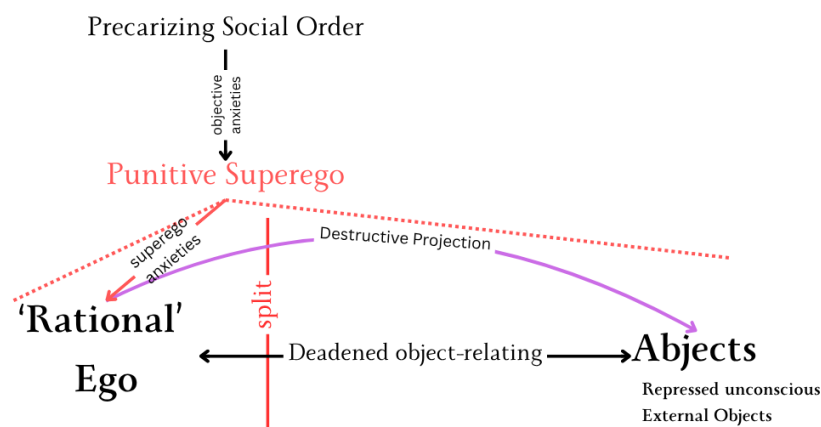


Figure 5 The Repressive Neoliberal Ego

The internalization of social authority as superego translates objective anxieties of the neoliberal order into psychoneurotic anxieties of the superego. As the superego mirrors its punitive contexts, it reproduces the order's severity, meaning that transgressions of the internalized norms are met with negative affects such as worries, shame, guilt, or anxiety.⁸²² To please the internal judge, then, the feeble ego must repressively defend against transgressive traces of the unconscious, remaking itself into the ideal marketable, 'rational' and manically omnipotent self as sanctioned by social norms. Meanwhile, what it cannot recognize as self (dependency, 'laziness'), is projected onto to social objects and disowned.⁸²³

To the degree that the superego is severe, potentially transgressive currents of the unconscious mind are forcibly denied and accessible in fragmented dream images that have escaped

⁸²² This is not the same as saying that can be no transgression – people can transgress norms and to live in shame and guilt, for example as masochistic self-punishment. The punitive, relentless, severe superego is very powerfully represented by Adam Phillips, who highlights how it the readiness of the superego to shame/punish the ego in a falsely "omniscient" manner is all too ready to inhibit thoughts and actions for its supposed crimes, thus suffocating the ego's capacity to think, act, and experiment. Adam Phillips, "Against Self-Criticism," *London Review of Books* 37, no. 5 (2015).

⁸²³ There is often quite some irony in abjection through projections, where the projected quality of the self is simultaneously repudiated but reproduced during the act of projection. Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer's observation that antisemites "indulge in the outlawed drive" when "acting with the unquestionable aim of expunging it." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 151. See also Christopher Bollas, who discussed projections in Trumpist populism. Bollas, "Civilization and the Discontented."

censorship, from passing thoughts that could never develop because they have been manically crowded out, and from fragments trashed onto abjected others. In any case, the *superego* – as a loyal spokesperson of the neoliberal order – guarantees that all internal currents from the unconscious must be disguised, or rendered innocuous, if they are not to trigger an outbreak of shame and anxiety.⁸²⁴

To be sure, this does not necessarily entail a life of suffering and constant anxiety. When a pathological organization is forged between the ego, the superego, and the social environment, the self may be able to avoid anxious breakdowns and find satisfaction in specific forms of life and object-relating. Yet, as I argued in previous chapters, these perverse satisfactions are often damaging to oneself and others in the long run; and are maintained precariously. To the degree that one's superego is severe, one may only be steps away from abject horror; and horror returns when one's body, mind, and objects fail to be cajoled into complying with the superegotic schema.

Besides, repression is deadening. The fear of not standing in line with one's internalized authority entails lost possibilities of living, thinking, and relating to the world, even in cases where we are under no social compulsion to do so. Even where the self may be stable enough under a pathological organization, the savage superego stalls change and imaginations of change. This is why undoing the internalized terror of the neoliberal superego may be essential for the emancipatory dismantling of the precarizing economic system.

The knowing gaze of the superego rigidifies the self in the way the Odyssean discipline impoverishes the self, who, despite his pride, must stay on course, cannot act on the beauty of the Siren songs, and “be lost in identification with the other but takes possession of itself once and for all as an impenetrable mask.”⁸²⁵ This is one productive way to tell the untold

⁸²⁴ Cf. “The nimble-witted man survives only at the cost of his own dream, which he forfeits by disintegrating his own magic along with that of the powers outside him. He can never have the whole, he must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce; he may not eat the lotus or the cattle of Hyperion, and when he steers through the narrows he must include in his calculation the loss of the companions snatched from the ship by Scylla.” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45.

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

intrapsychic story of the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: The ego, taken hostage by internalized social demands in the form of a severe superego, can only find peace in inhibiting its thoughts and acts, wax-plugging its attention, repressing and deflecting all traces of transgression. The intrasubjective rigidity of the ego and the intersubjective violence it mounts at projected objects are signs of superegotic tyranny writ large.

7.3. Transforming the Unconscious: Transference, Free Association, and Mourning

If the rigid superego is a primary means of embedding neoliberal social norms within us, using defensive anxiety and shame to deter change and encouraging abjection, the obvious question is how to liberate ourselves from its control.

We can reject outright two insufficient solutions: First, merely having *conscious knowledge* that the self is taken hostage by a repressive superego may be necessary but insufficient to bring about the requisite changes. Pathological organizations are reproduced by intra- and intersubjective logics driven by unconscious tropes inaccessible to conscious understanding and rational reform.⁸²⁶ Besides, the psychosocial deadlocks we face *cannot* be resolved at the level of the individual alone. As I emphasized, the challenge is that our attachments to the order are not only sustained by internalized structures, but are forced upon us by objective forces *regardless of whether we internalize them or not*.⁸²⁷ While *individually* transcending our wounding attachments is useful in chipping at the tightening neoliberal grip on everyone, ultimately, emancipation can only come in the collective remaking of the system. We will return

⁸²⁶ For an account of unconscious causality beyond rational, propositional control, see Gardner, *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*. In his typical stoic restraint, raising to reflective consciousness “the mechanisms that render people capable of [fascist] deeds,” remained the only sustained recommendation Adorno gave in face of the corroding effects of the evil social order. This chapter and the next wonders if this is sufficient, and, if not, how such consciousness can be supplemented by means to undermine social internalizations. See Adorno, *Critical Models*, 191–204 (quote from 193); *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 167–76.

⁸²⁷ Cf. “Consequences irrational for the society also prove irrational for the individual. To this extent, certainly, the forms neurosis takes would be derivable from the structure of a society in which they cannot be abolished.” “Sociology and Psychology I,” 78. See also Hartmut Rosa’s remarks on the insufficiency of individual reform in resisting social acceleration. Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, 156–59.

to this in the final chapter. In the rest of this chapter, I will outline the essentials of an environment that dismantles internalized structures by examining psychoanalytic practice, which arguably offers the most realistic and intricate model for transforming internalized character structures.

7.3.1. Free Association – anti-Odyssean beginnings

In analytic therapy, the move from repression to reception and potential integration begins with the demand to “free-associate,” where the analysand is encouraged by the “fundamental rule of psychoanalysis” to speak whatever comes to one’s mind without censorship or concerns about relevance, appropriacy, and self-image. This open speaking is received by an analyst who is committed and open to listening and responding in ways that allow the analysand to continue speaking their mind without advising, judging, or even consciously seeking to remember.⁸²⁸

Although the rule is simple, encouraging one to open up and wonder about what their mind truly thinks is a training ground for an exceptional state of non-purposive wonder. This state guides us on a decidedly counter-Odyssean journey, which eschews any attempt at wax-plugging and selection– including selection from the goals of therapy. What is aimed at in the ideal analytic setting is a state that is so free from internal and external judgements that it is “non-purposive,” and one where one’s sedimented unconscious traces can be gathered and emerge.⁸²⁹ Most significantly, perhaps, is how, with the suspension of all conscious purposes, one’s struggles with the internalized gaze of prohibition and shaming can unfold, and that horrors internalized can be gradually confronted, and thoughts unthought, enjoyments unacknowledged can have space to develop.⁸³⁰

⁸²⁸ As Freud describes since his early analytic writings, the “fundamental rule of psychoanalysis” for the analysand is to “say whatever that goes through [one’s] mind” with completely honesty, while that for the analyst is a non-judgemental “evenly-suspended attention” – to listen without conscious intentions in mind. Freud, SE 12: 109-144.

⁸²⁹ Adam Phillips is using terminologies adopted from Winnicott. Adam Phillips, *The Cure for Psychoanalysis* (Confer Books, 2021), ch. 2.

⁸³⁰ The idea of something always known but never thought about is first found in Freud’s paper on remembering and repetition (Freud, SE 12: 148). Here I am emphasizing the negative dimensions of the “unthought” as related to Bion’s idea of “nameless dread” (Bion, “A Theory of Thinking.”) For a more positive version of the “unthought

7.3.2. Transferential dynamics and its interpretation

Obstacles emerge as free association progresses. In Freud's terms, what has not been properly "remembered" gets "repeated" in transferences. As the bond between the analyst and the analysand develops, previously acquired ways of relating come to be reenacted in the interactions of the analyst-analysand dyad in the "transference."⁸³¹ Transference, in a nutshell, involves the analyst experiencing the analytic other *as if* they were various objects in a past situation and expecting the analyst to respond as their internalized tropes expected them to do. What cannot be free-associatively thought, is enacted relationally. (For instance, we may see a punitive superego in play when the dynamics involve the patient repeatedly expecting and provoking the other to chastise them or find ways to chastise the analyst for the faults they presumably have committed.)

As long as the superego has been internalized, transferences shape mental processes within the analytic setting and without. Yet, in analysis, transferences are welcomed⁸³² and invited to be thematized during free-association. The analysand's transferences are neither accepted just to be courteously set aside, nor rejected as inappropriate (even though, as transference, it is likely to *be* maladaptive and inappropriate to the situation or the purposes at hand). In cases of negative affects surfacing, it can be painful for both analyst and analysand, and transferential dynamics often carry deep anxieties screaming for retreat into pathological organization.⁸³³

Yet, despite the shared wish to break off and retreat, the persistence of the analyst's desire to persist and understand ensures that transferences – whether punitive, erotic, or aggressive – are

known" see Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁸³¹ For Freud's discussion, see Freud, SE 12, 97-108. See also James Strachey, "The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis," in *Essential Papers on Transference*, ed. Aaron H. Esman (New York: New York University Press, 1990); Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 302-14.

⁸³² As Lear puts it, transferences are not themselves abnormal, but they become abnormal only because the patient "is obliged to confess" transferential feelings to the doctor. Lear, *Freud*, 122-24.

⁸³³ Defences can range from simply changing the topic to psychosomatic symptoms, panic attacks, and hallucinations. For a general account, see For an illustrative account of Ratman's superegotic transference to Freud in the form of a cringe, see *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). [page number]

allowed to run their course, develop with proper affective intensity, and are understood *as* transferences that can be contained, understood, and modified.

For psychoanalytic therapy, *progress from defence to reception cannot properly start until the repressed is properly confronted as transferential horror*. Cure, paradoxically, only begins when the blockages of thinking unwind, pathological organizations challenged, plunging the subject into horrifying regression. Encapsulated in a formulation drawn from the *Odyssey*, Loewald describes how “ghosts” of the unconscious mind must “taste blood” and “haunt” the present in the transference for development to resume in a later stage.⁸³⁴

7.3.3. Containment and Interpretation

The return of the repressed in its full intensity may retraumatize as it may lead to change. Much depends on how the setting can be remade to *alter* the rigid transference and “choose a new solution” to the repeating problem.⁸³⁵ The analytic other’s ability to stay calm enough to ‘contain’ and metabolize the anxieties of the dreading analysand is key. Some of this is manifest in the interpretation of the transference. The analyst, feeling the force of the affective scene and aware of the vulnerability of the analysand, tries to put into honest, non-retaliatory words what the experience may be, connecting what one might be dreading at the present, how it feels to receive the projected parts of the self, how one might have felt in the past, and how it might be that the past is relived now. Words are experimentally chosen, taken up, and negotiated to try to express the emerging painful experiences.

Good analytic interpretations may lessen the anxiety felt by allowing the analysand to feel understood,⁸³⁶ but even when it is off the mark, it can be of ‘use’ in calming the anxiety and

⁸³⁴ Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 248–49.

⁸³⁵ Strachey, “The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis,” 54.

⁸³⁶ Consider Klein’s remark on her interpretations of Richard: “Very painful interpretations [...] have the effect of reviving hope and making the patient feel more alive. [...] bringing a very deep anxiety nearer to consciousness, in itself produces relief [...] that the analysis gets into contact with deep-lying unconscious anxieties gives the patient the feeling of being understood and therefore revives hope.” Melanie Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis: The Conduct of the Psycho-Analysis of Children as Seen in the Treatment of a Ten-Year-Old Boy* (London: Vintage, 1998), 100.

evoking further wonder and exploration as to what makes an experience so painful.⁸³⁷ The practice of free-association is therapeutic, not necessarily because it reaches the right answer, but because it is open-endedly revisable in light of the new materials that emerge. It allows violence and scars to be considered, talked about, and momentarily resolved with the help of a supportive other eager to understand. The analyst's courage to interpret – despite knowing their fallibility and precariousness of the shared situation – may be the best exemplar that it is possible to think about the dreaded without defensively falling back onto omnipotence, repression, and crowding out.

Besides, by emotionally attuning to and putting into words difficulties in freely-associative reception⁸³⁸ and the analysand's transference projections, the analyst creates a space for a more loving, supportive superego⁸³⁹ and opens the room for both to learn from the continuous unfolding of the transference experience. When going well, the analysis involves continuous dialogue between two persons with both conscious and unconscious parts, trying to figure out the meanings congealed in internalized structures that were forcibly internalized and unmoored. The hope is that the repressed can be made tolerable, and past traumas can be approached in a different and more open-ended manner. This way, the tight grip of pathological organizations can be loosened, while the problems in the real situation can be addressed in more realistic terms.⁸⁴⁰

⁸³⁷ "I think I interpret mainly to let the patient know the limits of my understanding. The principle is that it is the patient and only the patient who has the answers. We may or may not enable him or her to encompass what is known or become aware of it with acceptance." Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 116. See also Bollas's account of how interpretations can be evocative sometimes precisely because they do not have to be confirmed and accurate. Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, 26–27.

⁸³⁸ Freud, SE 22, 68–69.

⁸³⁹ Strachey, "The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis," 59–60.

⁸⁴⁰ There are different ways 'realism' is understood, although most psychoanalytic accounts do not take psychic (and perhaps social) realities as brute givens, but considers them as capable of some level of change and development. Bollas describes how psychic receptivity allows development of a 'thinker' and contents of the mind. Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, 39–40. Kleinians such as Robert Hinshelwood describes how the transition to the mournful "depressive position" reduces the need for fantasies of splitting and therefore contributes to more 'realistic' understandings of self and other. Abram and Hinshelwood, *The Clinical Paradigms of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott*, 72–73. Following Loewald, Lear describes how the analytic process undoes repression and defence, allowing the agent to 'self-consciously' integrate and intervene in hitherto foreign aspects of one's unconscious (and the world). Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness*, esp. ch. 10; Freud.

7.3.4. Mourning and Acceptance of the Inevitability of Pain

Free association and the unfolding of transferences are not a bed of roses. As the internalised gaze of shame and/or guilt is gradually undone, chaotic affective and historical meanings of symptomatic enactments begin to condense and become increasingly articulate.⁸⁴¹ Coughs, panic attacks, or repeated failures in relational life may hold memories of a trauma, a bond that was traumatically cut short, a death wish at an inappropriate time, a slight one felt debilitatingly helpless to defend against, or an expectation of care unrequited. The symptom is often formed to hold and reanimate compensatory, wishful fantasies of those helpless times, when love and hate were all-encompassing yet conflicting, and wishing was so omnipotent that it was always horrifying.⁸⁴² This horror must be re-experienced, and for the deeply disturbed, the situation may feel depressively ‘barren’ as they do not see any way forward.

Under widespread societal traumatization⁸⁴³, this is expectedly painful because undoing one’s collusive and wounding attachments to the system requires us to face its contradictions and our enduring traumas. For the self to progress, whatever phantasmatic collusions we unconsciously formed with the system to recover from trauma have to be undone to rid the unconscious of its abject terror and for the defensive ego to no longer need to be defensive. This involves dismantling people’s phantasmatic lifelines.

The ideals and phantasies that convinced the ego of its viability, satisfied the id of its omnipotent need to triumph, and fulfilled the superego for its severity – is now to be *mourned*.

⁸⁴¹ A good interpretative act does not simply – forensically – help the analysand ‘discover’ some preexisting hidden mental contents, instead the interpretation works within the transference field as an extension of the loving/containing function of the analyst that prepares the analysand’s mind, integrates its contents even before any significant interpretation is made. See, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, ch. 4.

⁸⁴² References to such ideas too numerous. For the earliest discussion of infantile ambivalence and omnipotence, see Freud’s seminal study of the Rat Man Freud, SE 10, 155-318.

⁸⁴³ It is an open question whether life is *constitutively* painful and ridden with loss, as Freud puts it, or as Winnicottians put it, potentially playfully enjoyable when given a ‘good-enough,’ facilitating environment. In any case, the more pressing issue is how a bad socializing environment – characterized by transmitted fears of falling – likely conditions most to deficient socialization. As Adorno puts it, under the bad world, “character” is like a “system of scars, which are integrated only under suffering, and never completely.” Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” 328. See also a discussion of the threats to socialization under Winnicottian and relational frameworks in Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*, 42-44; Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*.

Whether it is fantasies of the self's and the other's omnipotence, or the unrealistically idealistic/paranoid images of self and others, they have to be parted, and such parting with internalized structures produces grief, guilt and anxiety.⁸⁴⁴ Concurrently, in the analytic setting, the ideal image of the all-containing analyst will also need to be gradually let go, as the analyst – however loving – is also a finite person with a separate existence, and will not purely be an object of one's projections.⁸⁴⁵

Under loss, the once projected destructiveness towards others and loving parts of oneself is returned and reinternalized. The past of one's ruthless projections may then be experienced in a depressive sense of concern and fear that the self and the containing other may not survive this shift.⁸⁴⁶ Aggression and menace sustained by past paranoid/manic-triumphal phantasies need to be *mourned and given up* for the self to emerge from internalized horror, repair damages, and reconcile with one's psychic and external realities.

In analysis, the hidden meanings and grief in unconscious processes are exposed under vivid emotional intensity, open for the analysand to reprocess. In the containing environment, the ego is invited to realize *how its pathological organizations are reproduced, what superegotic fears underlie it, what perverse "substitute satisfactions" one reaps from wounding attachments,*⁸⁴⁷ *what compensatory fantasies the ego weaved around its traumas, and what they would rather not know by disrupting and displacing their consciousness.*

Luckily, under the continued periods of free association in a containing environment, such pain is to be repeatedly felt but shared. The analytic other, gradually more realistically perceived as separate, imperfect yet loving, continues to help the subject receive the unconscious and move

⁸⁴⁴ On the grief of development, see Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness*, 195–201. Kleinians share similar insights when they consider the 'depressive position' the hallmark of individual (and social) development.

⁸⁴⁵ Steiner describes the functioning of the analytic process in two steps: the containing of paranoid anxieties and anxieties of loss, then the experiencing and mourning of loss. Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 61–63. On the simultaneity of mourning phantasies and objects, see Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003), ch. 11.

⁸⁴⁶ This is known in object-relations psychoanalysis as the depressive position. Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 262–369; Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 262–77.

⁸⁴⁷ E.g. Freud, SE 19: 196–197. In Lacanian terms, this is the *jouissance* of the symptom. See, e.g. Ruti, *Singularity of Being*.

beyond repression. In Bion's formulation, analytic development accompanies the analysand in their task to "*suffer*" the inevitable mental pain of human life, so that they will no longer have to "evade" it defensively and make themselves and others suffer *from* it in pathological organizations.⁸⁴⁸

The continued presence of the real, supportive environment, willing to withstand the horror of projections and verbalize the difficult, coupled with their belief in and support of the independent mental capacities of the analysand, may enable mourning to continue transformatively. If the traumatizing past has led the self to internalize a disruptively critical version of the superego, the experience with the supportive, containing analyst gradually allows the analysand to set up a more supportive superegotic figure within, which enables psychic receptivity and irony.⁸⁴⁹ Rid of the inner punitiveness, the need for abjection and repression also abates. Here, unconscious haunting 'ghosts' of the past may properly be set in peace as "ancestors."⁸⁵⁰ (See Figure 6)

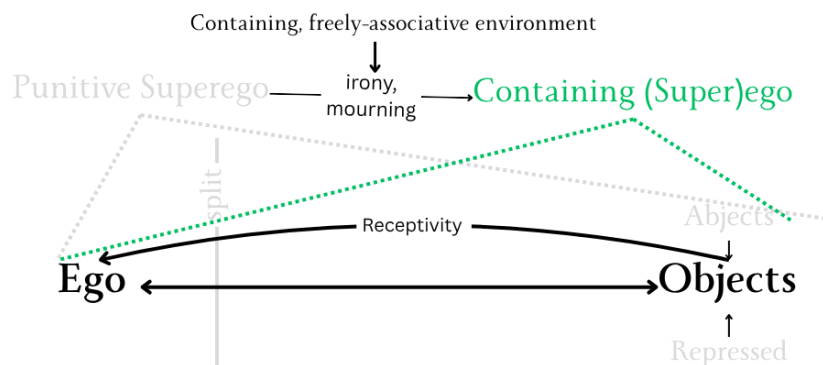


Figure 6 Therapeutic Process from Repression to Reception

Rid of the internalized authorities compelling us to stay in line, the subject becomes also more capable of ironizing its socially indoctrinated schemas of thinking, perceiving, and judging and

⁸⁴⁸ Wilfred R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, ed. Chris Mawson, The Complete Works of W. R. Bion, Vol. 6 (London: Routledge, 2014 [1970]), 224-41. For an interesting elaboration of this idea, see, Vic Sedlak, *The Psychoanalyst's Superegos, Ego Ideals and Blind Spots: The Emotional Development of the Clinician* (Routledge, 2019).

⁸⁴⁹ "By means of the work of interpretation, which transforms what is unconscious into what is conscious, the ego is enlarged at the cost of this unconscious; by means of instruction, it is made conciliatory towards the libido and inclined to grant it some satisfaction, and its repugnance to the claims of the libido is diminished by the possibility of disposing of a portion of it by sublimation." (Freud, SE 16, 455)

⁸⁵⁰ Loewald, *Essential Loewald*, 248-49.

does better justice to what – to use Adorno’s term – is “non-identical.”⁸⁵¹ Not needing to *disown* unconscious horrors, the self becomes more capable of accepting responsibility for one’s unconscious acting-outs and making amends for them.⁸⁵² Here, instead of policing the ego for its faults, the new superego can support the ego to be creatively lost in receiving the many facets of its unconscious, now less terrifying, while relating to others in more loving and identificatory ways.

7.4. On Spaces of Receptivity

While some practitioners take it for granted that receptivity and psychic integration are only available in analysis,⁸⁵³ I do not share this assumption. Questioning the supposed sufficiency of therapeutic practices, Adorno has raised three challenges: namely, that the difficulty of “loving” fascist-inclined personalities, that freely associative processes are difficult to maintain in therapy under bureaucratically administered culture, and that psychic “integration” coming from socially-uncritical therapeutic practices is neither normatively desirable nor possible.⁸⁵⁴ The challenge of conducting therapy in the face of administrative pressures that implicates *both* the client and the therapist is echoed by socially-conscious therapists, who similarly remark on the difficulty in resolving them in the clinic alone.⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁵¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*.

⁸⁵² On psychoanalytic assumption of responsibility and its inhibition by the punitive superego, see Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, esp. ch. 6.

⁸⁵³ Here are some notable instances even in otherwise deep psychoanalytic writers: “It is only the analyst’s desire that allows the analysand to overcome this “wanting to know nothing,” sustaining the analysand through the painful process of formulating some kind of new knowledge.” Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, 7–8. “The transference relationship can develop only in the psychoanalytic setting.” Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal*, 70. “In speaking the ‘mother tongue,’ the analyst tries also to reflect back to the psyche an image of itself as a conflicted whole. No one else in the analysand’s world is able to do this.” Lear, *Open Minded*, 74. Cf. Winnicott, who argues that “it would be narrow to suppose that psychoanalysis is the only way to make therapeutic use of the child’s playing.” Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 67.

⁸⁵⁴ Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology II,” 82–83.

⁸⁵⁵ Rizq, “Perversion, Neoliberalism and Therapy: The Audit Culture in Mental Health Services.”; Butler, “Falling through the Cracks: Precarity, Precocity, and Other Neoliberal Pressures.”

In light of the above limitations, we will not look into the generalization of therapeutic practices *per se*, but explore how free association and containing may be practiced and facilitate the formation of a non-repressive, receptive psychological formations.

The first lesson in analytic practice for emancipatory practices is its conception of cure. The progress from repression to reception is wrought with pain and suffering. Insofar as the “scars” of socialization are internalized, undoing them involves being in touch with inner horror that may reach the heights of self-annihilation. Cure also involves a mournful acceptance of a reality within which no one is omnipotent, including phantasized objects to which one is woundingly attached. One consequence of human finitude is that striving for a better life, both individually and socially, can only start if we give up our omnipotent expectations for painless solutions and easy fixes to our helplessness.⁸⁵⁶ In the words of Amy Allen, part of analytic “cure is that there is *no cure*” (if cure means omnipotently setting everything straight).⁸⁵⁷ This does not mean life is always a vale of tears, for mournful acceptance of necessary losses *can* drive creative living, repairing, and sublimating.⁸⁵⁸ However, it does show us how people stuck in pathological organizations – paranoid projections, manic crowding out, and disruptive repressions – confront what is painful but necessary to be emancipated.

The second lesson is that an integrative, non-purposive frame of mind emerges from micro-practices that sustain such ideals. In therapy, feeling contained in one’s free associations requires interpersonal spaces that tolerate unconscious reception and transference enactments. Here, the mind *can* be transformed not (only) by rationalist sorting or ‘nudges,’ but by letting associations unfold and speaking openly about them. Such a process begins with one’s conscious decision to do so (upon accepting the “fundamental rule of psychoanalysis,” to say whatever comes to one’s mind), in a containing environment that subverts both social and internalised conventions about what one can say and think at any given time.

⁸⁵⁶ See Lear, *Wisdom Won from Illness*, 201. On Freud’s version of mourning, see Whitebook, *Freud*, ch. 10.

⁸⁵⁷ Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, ch. 4.

⁸⁵⁸ Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*, 360.

For those whose social scars are not deep, it is perhaps sufficient for us to resolve to let our minds rest and find ways of collectively organizing ourselves to dream, free-associate, and attend to what comes through our passing thoughts, our bodies, and our affects.

For many of us, the scars might be more deeply embedded – perhaps within individual psychic histories and repeated impingements from the neoliberal environment – making it difficult to contain the horrors within alone. Here, analytic therapy shows how spaces of non-retaliating, non-judgemental containment with others can be therapeutic. The analyst contains insofar as they are ready to receive and be implicated in an emotionally intense process – sometimes even accepting responsibility for evoking it.⁸⁵⁹ Seeking to undo the punitive superego, the analyst opens up a space for thinking by *embodying a position of empathy, where no one needs to be shamed, blamed, or slighted, even if something bad is experienced*.⁸⁶⁰ Containing, thus, can be an important corrective to “only-one-can-live” neoliberal survivalism, where someone must be blamed and humiliated for their faults.⁸⁶¹

During containing, negative affects may encroach, positive affects are transitory, but the space *persists and contains* even when hopes of progress appear minimal. During this process, the other functions as a *persistently real, not phantasmatic, object*⁸⁶² – an object willing to *endure* transferences but not collude with the analysand’s unconscious roles for easy ways out. In her capacity as a *container*, the analyst delivers a “gift of meaningfulness”⁸⁶³ where one’s unconscious, unmetabolized horrors – objects that have been expected to be meaningless particles to be expelled to the other, are allowed to stay with the other, and eventually *returned* as meaningful objects to be taken in and understood.⁸⁶⁴ They thus emerge as a “whole” loving

⁸⁵⁹ Despite perhaps at first feeling that one may have nothing to do with the transference, empathetic identification with the patient, coupled with the readiness to assume responsibility for one’s unconscious enactments, allows the therapist to even feel “remorse about having participate in replicating a painful early experience” and actively repair and contain the damages done. Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy: A Practitioner’s Guide* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 159–61.

⁸⁶⁰ For a lively discussion of the contrast between the sadomasochistic position of survivalism and the identificatory, empathetic position, see Phillips, “The Magical Act of a Desperate Person.”

⁸⁶¹ See Benjamin, “Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma.”

⁸⁶² Strachey, “The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis,” 63.

⁸⁶³ Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, 130f.

⁸⁶⁴ Bion’s essay on psychotic mechanisms evokes a meaningful image of containment: “When the patient strove to rid himself of fears of death which were felt to be too powerful for his personality to contain he split off his fears

object capable of disrupting phantasmatic expectations while lending mental space for understanding and transformation.

7.5. Addressing the Fractal Psychosocial Unconscious

Our social environment affects people's receptivity to unconscious processes. Neoliberal environments, structured by strict prohibitions, and strong threats of loss of love, shame and blame conditions wounding, superegotic internalizations. Such internalizations disrupt self-understanding, mourning and produce intrapsychic conflicts, compelling the agent to act in symptomatically destructive ways. Here, the hope is that containing spaces where freely-associative speech and mournful reception can undo the damages. But what kinds of individual and social experiments can provide for such a space?

We will explore different ways theorists and socially-conscious practitioners conceptualise ways forward, but now I am more concerned with a general problem – one that emerged with particular irony as I write, one that concerned the abstract, omniscient insistence theories to dictate the *right way forward*.

For a long time, I was surprised by theorists when they proposed that something *is the only means to break the oppressive structure*, and any alternative that falls short of their proposals is misguided. Despite masterfully deploying psychoanalytic explanations, their use of theory sometimes appears to flatten the exploratory and experimental side of unconscious reception. Descriptions of cure and emancipatory practices sound like magic. At its worst, the writer reads like someone paradoxically performing an omniscient account of unknowingness, a grandiose account of humility and fallibility. Defensiveness in the face of some unnamed anxiety seems suspiciously present when doctrinal allegiance is held with rigid insistence.

and put them into me, the idea apparently being that if they were allowed to repose there long enough they would undergo modification by my psyche and could then be safely reintrojected." Bion, "Attacks on Linking," 96. This model for containment is developed later upon a model of the mother-infant relationship: "A well-balanced mother can accept [feelings of death] and respond therapeutically; that is to say in a manner that makes the infant feel its frightened personality back again but in a form that it can tolerate – the fears are manageable by the infant personality." "A Theory of Thinking," 178.

I neither consider all such impressions accurate nor consider myself immune. However, the suspicion of knowing prescriptions stands. Many attempts have been made to describe psychopathologies, creating breakthroughs in understanding and clinical technique, but the *overreliance on structural explanations can also be reifying*. In my reading, theoretical abstractions neglect how pathological patterns are only approachable through open-ended reception towards the phenomenon, and that theory is only as useful as its application in guiding us towards therapeutic intervention of the phenomenon as it unfolds.⁸⁶⁵

7.5.1. Lear and the Psychoanalytic Fractal

It is at this juncture that it is useful to consider Lear's characterization of the "fractal" nature of the unconscious.⁸⁶⁶ The 'fractal' nature can be seen as a response to a common problem in clinical practice, where agents already have (structural) knowledge of their mental blockages but are unable to recognize transferences as they unfold and intervene properly. In Lear's terms, what such patients are missing, and what is central to psychoanalysis, is the *skill to master the "fractal nature" of the unconscious*.⁸⁶⁷ Fractals are geometrical objects whose structure is constituted by repeated patterns across magnifications, and Lear uses this term to capture how structures of the unconscious are constituted from unthought, repeated patterns on the micro-level. Grasping the fractal structure not only requires us to grasp its *overall* shape, but also how the structure is repeating at every *microcosmic* level.

This is why useful analytic interpretations must target micro-moments of the fractal in the transference here-and-now to help the person "accurately [grasp] those conflicts *at the right*

⁸⁶⁵ It is arguable that psychoanalysis since Freud has always adapted technique to diverse clinical realities, and theories should always be understood as fallible generalizations which helps with approaching such reality. The psychoanalytic technique on women diagnosed with hysteria emerged from the chance finding of Dora's self-hypnotic cure, to active attempts to hypnotize, and only began venturing into associative drifting when Freud failed to hypnotize some patients. (Breuer and Freud, SE 2, 267-283) Concerning his theory papers, it is remarkable how his *Three Essays on Sexuality* concluded with a note that "know far too little [...] to be able to construct [...] a theory adequate to the understanding alike of normal and of pathological conditions" in human sexuality (Freud, SE 7, 243) and how he began his sections on the death-drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with "what follows is speculation" (Freud, SE 18, 24).

⁸⁶⁶ Lear, *Freud*, esp. ch. 1. In chapter three, Lear describes Freud's failure to grasp his own transferences unfolding, despite knowing about his troubles with "amounting to something" in his father's eyes through his self-interpretation of dreams.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

level” so that they can “make a conscious, efficacious intervention in [their] own thinking and acting [on the macro structure of their lives].”⁸⁶⁸ Interpretations have to be made *at the right time, at the right level, in the right analytic mindset to make a useful difference*. Interpretations that are abstract, intellectualizing, or premature are unlikely to produce therapeutic effects, while those which suggest to the analysand the analyst’s stubborn insistence on their ‘correctness’ are counterproductive.

7.5.2. Adorno’s Psychosocial Fractals

As Allen argues, Lear’s concept of the “fractal” nature of the unconscious fits surprisingly well with Adorno’s version of critical theory,⁸⁶⁹ which sought to capture the fragmented experience of individuals under the domination of conceptual and social totalities.⁸⁷⁰ For Adorno, the self-repeating, ‘fractal’ structures reproduce themselves at the level of *antagonistic social totality* dominated by instrumentalist logics. Inasmuch as individual life reflects the horror of the whole, Adorno writes in the dedication of *Minima Moralia*, “social analysis can learn incomparably more from individual experience” than the Hegelian insistence on historical totalities.⁸⁷¹ If “society has [...] assumed the sickness of all individuals,”⁸⁷² the task of “an analytic social psychology” is “to uncover decisive social forces in the most inner mechanisms of the individual.”⁸⁷³

Elsewhere, he argues that the task of “philosophy as interpretation” is to provide “keys, before which reality springs open,” and:

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid., 55. See also Strachey’s classic paper on ‘mutative interpretations’ Strachey, “The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis.”

⁸⁶⁹ Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, ch. 5.

⁸⁷⁰ On Adorno’s critique of conceptual systematization, see J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 2.

⁸⁷¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 17.

⁸⁷² Ibid., A 36.

⁸⁷³ Adorno, “Revisionist Psychoanalysis,” 330.

“the size of the key categories [must be] specially made to order. The old idealism chose categories too large[...] Pure philosophic sociology chooses them too small.”⁸⁷⁴

In Adorno’s version of critical theory, then, interpretations must gather individual and social perspectives by capturing the fractal nature of our predicaments *at the right level* with sufficient *contextual sensitivity*, in the same way as a key must be of the right ‘size’ to open the deadlock.

7.5.3. Free association and the Unwinding of the Fractal

While Allen’s essay on Adorno emphasizes ‘interpretation,’ I would like to supplement it by emphasizing the role of *freely-associative reception*. This does not contradict Allen’s reading, but indeed, supplements it as, clinically, free association is the process through which interpretative ‘keys’ are constructed.

Consider again ‘repression’ at the core of psychosocial pathologies⁸⁷⁵: Freud defined “the essence of repression” as “turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.”⁸⁷⁶ While it is possible to evoke elaborate talks of structure and technique, in this definition, *repression is simply the idiosyncratic way the mind drives away, at any moment, thoughts and ideas because of the pain it evokes if allowed into consciousness*. This simple idea underlies the plethora of elaborate explanations of how the receptive mind is disrupted to pathogenic outcomes. Psychoanalysts variously dissected ways the psyche weaves its defences to escape from experiencing mental pain.⁸⁷⁷ Whether the obsessive’s obsession with substitute moral dilemmas, the hysteric’s somatization of repulsive thoughts, or the psychotic’s

⁸⁷⁴ “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos* 1977, no. 31 (1977): 130. Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, ch. 5.

⁸⁷⁵ As Laplanche and Pontalis observes, “repression” can be defined narrowly or broadly. In the narrow definition, repression involves attempts to “repel, or to confine to the unconscious, representations which are bound to an instinct.” In the broad definition, repression is analogous to what we refer to as “defensive formations.” Throughout this thesis, the latter definition is taken, and “repression” is used mostly interchangeably with defence. Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 390–94.

⁸⁷⁶ Freud, SE 14: 147.

⁸⁷⁷ For defences as unconscious self-disruptive processes, see Lear, *Freud*, esp. ch. 1. For Freud’s typology of resistances (defences) in relation to psychic agencies, see e.g. Freud, SE 20: 158–60. For projection destruction of the mind, see Bion, “Attacks on Linking.”

destructive projection of their mind, pathology results from psychic processes keeping painful thoughts at bay.

In the analytic microcosm, routinized self-disruption manifests as interruptions of freely-associative thinking, as thoughts are transferentially *acted out* rather than contained and expressed verbally. Interpretative techniques are means, catered to the specificities of the moment, to deal with internalized ‘ghosts’ blocking freely-associative reception and facilitate the transformation of the fractal structure through verbal remembrance.⁸⁷⁸

Over the past chapters, we have extended the psychoanalytic imagination and described how disruptions in psychic reception can be *social* as well as *psychic*. Neoliberal pathological organizations are also induced and maintained through forced participation in groups, institutions and social practices. Manic culture is embedded in workplaces and schools structured by disciplinary ideals of grinding, achievement, and endless self-improvement; self-sedation and compulsive self-care are promoted by the psy-professions branding medicalization, positivity/fitness standards, and even disciplinary coercion as ‘care’; paranoid politics is augmented by digital communications disposing us towards group-sanctioned paranoid phantasies. *In these instances, participation in pathogenic cultural activities can crowd out freely-associative receptivity whether their values are internalized as wounding attachments, although some internalization is quite expectable.* Here, freely-associative receptiveness needs not only to disentangle one’s wounded entanglements with the system, but also to do so to prepare us for non-distortive and potentially critical relations to social evils.

⁸⁷⁸ Despite flaws, one of the best readings of Freud along such lines is Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests*, where he reconstructs how Freud derived “the structural model from experiences of the analytic situation” and argue that explications of the id, ego, and superego “must refer back to its context” to remain clinically relevant and meaningful. (244-45) This is a right and underemphasized insight, although his overall reconstruction of psychoanalysis suffered from his interpretation intrapsychic communication (what we call in this context ‘receptivity’) to the model of “public communication” and “communication in ordinary language.” (238) This disposed his account towards cognitivist, rationalist understandings of analysis as “self-reflection,” underplaying the unlinguistifiable nature of unconscious primary processes and the lovingly transformative nature of the transference relation. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987), ch. 10. For critiques, see Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, ch. 5. For a non-cognitivist reading of psychoanalytic interpretation, see Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, , ch. 4.

The degree of internalization arguably determines what and how drastic therapeutic interventions are required to undo wounding attachments to the order. Those for whom the attachments are weakly internalized may well resolve and resume receptivity when given opportunities for free association and rest, while those whose attachments are ingrained in pathological structures may require collective practices of containment. What may be *useful*, and the course improvements will take, however, can only be figured out in practice and the rest of this chapter can be read as waypoints.

7.6. Fractal Unwound: The Case of Walking

There may be many ways to discover the resistances and unwind the fractally constituted unconscious. Here I am concerned with one, which I practiced after coming across a suggestive comparison of two models of walking by psychoanalysts. Adam Phillips once used the metaphor of walks in describing two visions of therapy and ways of living. In one model, an adult takes their child for a walk; in the second, the child leads their adult.⁸⁷⁹ The former always knows where to go, but the other is “walking in circles,” with no putative end in mind.

I recall a recent time when a woman, carrying a schoolbag on one side and holding her little boy’s hand on the other, rushing him somewhere in a train station. The boy, unaffected by the mother, had his curious gaze fixed on a few construction workers, even turning his head to catch more glances as he was rushed. Comparing with the earlier sketch of my commute, everything was so optimized. In 30 minutes, I listened to the news, got my daily workout sorted, while taking the most efficient route and arriving on time to work. There was no child, and no wandering child.

Well-neoliberalized adults are Odyssean. We don’t let ourselves drift into temptations and intrusive thoughts. Our walks are calculated. Headphones on, strolls, workouts, and commutes are optimized rushes towards predefined destinations within set time and goals – rationally

⁸⁷⁹ Phillips, *The Cure for Psychoanalysis*.

planned, potentially indulgent, but always with minimal room for exploration and surprises. In our world, even a night jog, a sightseeing trip, or binges are fillers within rationalized time-plans,⁸⁸⁰ if not structured by schedules and itineraries. As Adam Phillips and Marion Milner remind us, our everyday goal-directed journeys are “narrow-minded.”⁸⁸¹

For those within, we “flow”—to use the chic term in positive psychology.⁸⁸² In the flow, some take pride in how smoothly our rationally planned lives merge into unintrusive, easy, and well-optimized living. Siren calls are crowded out by manic gadgets in digitalized mania. Smartphones are portals into a ‘nudging’ world where attention, and emotions are increasingly optimized for the tech-capital profits. We replace sirens we hear on the streets with the less jarring Sirens curated by the stream (though, as Hayes points out, there is a like danger of losing oneself). If outside noise threatens to overwhelm the stream, the wax plugs that Odysseus’s crewmen are tasked to wear are now upgraded with ‘noise-cancellation,’ blocking noisy ‘distractions’ while gratifying us with pleasurable, curated contents. We *flow* in the curated stream of medio-passive walking.

As flows are only maintained through meticulous planning and control, they also break down. If the rationalizing structure of our journeys is not apparent, slight disruptions testify to the narrow-minded nature of walking. A traffic jam evokes a frown and a tight chest, coupled with anxieties of being late or missing important things and rage at whatever/whoever stands in the way. This is a microcosm of our neoliberal anxieties and wounding defences: we worry about missing an important appointment, anticipating the troubles and frustrations. Someone is to blame or shame, whether ourselves, the abject, irresponsible driver in front, or both. In this regard, Phillips describes how our everyday worries involve an “intensity of feeling” that forces us to imagine a future that forecloses possibilities of living and desiring, assuming “a pragmatic

⁸⁸⁰ For a discussion of leisurely time use under late capitalism and how it degrades the meaningfulness and long-term enjoyment of free time, see Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, 131–48.

⁸⁸¹ Marion Milner, *A Life of One's Own* (London: Routledge, 2011 [1981]).

⁸⁸² Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “The Concept of Flow,” in *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

self bent on problem-solving.⁸⁸³ Adorno goes deeper, speaking of bus chasing as “unwittingly bearing witness to past terror” – arguably the terrors of a repressive socialization.⁸⁸⁴

But Phillips reminds us of another mode of walking and living. When the child leads the way, they “go around in circles” without a sense of purpose, missing the destination. Yet, Phillips also describes the child’s walk as “enlivening” precisely because her lack of rational purpose attunes her to receiving surprises from chance encounters and discovering what one desires.⁸⁸⁵ Comparing adults’ tendency to perceive from conceptual generalities, Frédéric Gros sees the child’s stroll as Adorno sees art: unaffected by generalities, receptive to particularities in their “poetic” but potentially “intimidating” beauty.⁸⁸⁶ Whether these are exaggerations, the image of the child’s walk evokes Freud’s free-association ideal, Winnicott’s “non-purposiveness,” and even Adorno’s non-identical – playful receptivity to the world of objects and the unconscious not fully suffocated by concepts and functions.⁸⁸⁷ The child’s joy in playing with what adulthood finds horror is perhaps the promise of living well with the unconscious.

We can interpret the metaphor of a child-led walk as a ready model of a good life. But given the critical discussions above, I think such a metaphor is more usefully read as open-endedly anticipatory. It is a provocation to imagine the possibilities of playful, ‘non-purposive’ living that challenges (culturally) prevalent understandings of rationalized living. This anticipation is a ‘what if’: We may not have a reliable roadmap to emancipation.⁸⁸⁸ Nor can we promise that capital’s tight grip can be loosened. But what if we can suspend our goal-directed attention for a moment? What if we begin to value our acts not instrumentally, and walk as if the “point of

⁸⁸³ Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 55–57.

⁸⁸⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, A102.

⁸⁸⁵ Adam Phillips and Josh Cohen, "In Conversation with Adam Phillips, Author of 'the Cure for Psychoanalysis'," (2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2OeA4tgj1I>. Of course, not all children can wander without anxiety. Playful wandering is especially inhibited for children under environmental stresses.

⁸⁸⁶ Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking* (London: Verso, 2014), ch. 19.

⁸⁸⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 74. As Phillips puts it, psychoanalytic cure allows analysands to be “on better terms with one’s primary process” and “bear one’s fundamental chaos” Phillips, *The Cure for Psychoanalysis*.

⁸⁸⁸ The irony is that a roadmap is purposive and therefore can suffocate emancipatory imaginaries it seek to capture.

the destination [to only be] a form or a container for the possibility of being surprised” so that one is “willing to look around as you aim to go there”?⁸⁸⁹ Will new possibilities open? Will repeated “tiny act[s] of will” – commitments to free association – allow us to shift from ‘narrow attention’ to the wide, receptive attention of the child to “change the face of the world, to make boredom and weariness blossom into immeasurable contentment” – as Milner discovers?⁸⁹⁰ What will that do for us individually and for a collective so deprived of emancipatory imaginations?

7.6.1. Free Association in Practice

Phillips’s evocative image says little about why adults lost their receptivity. But our earlier discussion hopefully had this ready: we have been rid of a sufficient containing environment for receptivity. Between the socialized self and the Sirenic beauty lie neoliberal culture that seduces us away from and punishes us for attending what should not be heard. Internal(-ized) and external authorities that expect every walk, every activity, to ‘function’ in the overall scheme of one’s life is too noisy, threatening adults with objective and superegotic fears for our non-compliance. For the repressively socialised, purposelessness embodies the horror of meaninglessness. It is perhaps for this reason that free-association, since Freud, arrives in analysis in the form of a “fundamental *rule*” – an insistence held by the analyst in countering resistances to free association.

Yet, powerful as culture may be, there may still be room for the unconscious. Aside from symptoms, what we encounter during the day can reappear in dreams.⁸⁹¹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge referred to fantasy – “dream-work, mourning-work, the work of the capacity to fantasize” as pointing beyond the “valorization interest of capital” into a “reappropriation of the historically marked dead labor of human beings.”⁸⁹² The unconscious *registers and*

⁸⁸⁹ Phillips, *The Cure for Psychoanalysis*.

⁸⁹⁰ Milner, *A Life of One's Own*, 78.

⁸⁹¹ Freud argues that “day’s residues” (what we encounter during the day) are vehicles of unconscious wishes to be represented in dreams e.g. Freud, SE 5: 573-4

⁸⁹² Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 37.

interacts with the world, despite capital's narrowing of our immediate conscious attention into functions.

In *Cracking Up*, Bollas describes how unconscious and conscious currents can interpenetrate in a “wakeful unconscious life.”⁸⁹³ In his example, he was strongly gripped for no conscious reason by an ad for Phillip Glass's opera, leading to diverse trains of thought. Similarly, the objects we contingently come across can also evoke diverse feelings of joy, nostalgia, or grief, as thoughts linking past, present, and potential futures come to mind – all happening as though unconscious contents are awaiting the right objects for their expression.⁸⁹⁴ This is, perhaps, an everyday version of the Siren's calls – elements seducing us towards aimless, associative thinking that tracks our unconscious processes.

While thoughts are passing, Bollas believes that intense trains of thought occurring during the day are condensed into dream images (in his example, the image of a glass) that can then be “disseminated” in waking life during free association.⁸⁹⁵ Freely associative work here gathers contents from day's thoughts to unconscious traces – potentially even spanning decades and generations before – in the here-and-the-now so that they can be thought.⁸⁹⁶ If one's unconscious use of objects is not shoved aside but time and again brought to focus and expressed, free association may “[free] the subject from character restraints and intersubjective compliances.”⁸⁹⁷

While Phillips and Bollas are concerned with therapy, their discussions gesture toward a *psychically receptive, and socially resistive way of living*. Their point is *whether one can harbour the space (physical and psychic) to attend to intensities as they arise spontaneously*,

⁸⁹³ See, Bollas, *Cracking Up*.

⁸⁹⁴ Bollas refers to this phenomenon under the title of “evocative objects.” See, *The Evocative Object World*.

⁸⁹⁵ This evocativeness of the everyday becomes particularly salient during experiences of recent loss, as every present object reanimates the pain of loss, sometimes to the debilitating of everyday functioning. In mourning, what Freud refers to as “innumerable unconscious traces” of the lost object are reanimated in our everyday encounters, and their intensities are only gradually attenuated as we work through them painfully. (See Freud, SE 14: 256)

⁸⁹⁶ See Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, 33–37.

⁸⁹⁷ *Cracking Up*, 69.

*build links between emerging thoughts, evocative objects, and one's life contexts, and revisit the same process when similar thought reemerges.*⁸⁹⁸

“If one is free to be disseminated [...] then the individual will encounter new objects, or old objects subject to new intentions. [...] It is *entirely a matter of whether one can or cannot experience a psychically intense moment and then, crucially, whether we can be lost in thought* when the nucleus of the experience explodes along fissures of separating and dividing interest. If this occurs, then one will approach new experiences in life in-formed, rendered into a being with depth.”⁸⁹⁹

Bollas's theory of receptivity in walks, dreams, and free associations – in one's “waking unconscious life” – connects well to the fractal theory of our psychosocial unconscious, in that receptivity is non-mysterious, and opens up when one grabs the chance in every here-and-now to uncover something potentially significant. Here, Freud's idea of dream-like unconscious mental processes springs alive, as objects become a potential key to something more than their functions in the system – disclosing more about the subject, its objects, and perhaps repressed histories and our socialised injuries.

Even where our time is increasingly colonized by the neoliberal apparatus, is there room for such receptivity? Can we non-purposively stroll the streets? The hope is that, with repeated practice, the mind becomes more receptive to oneself, and can gradually *contain* similar troubled states for and with others.

7.6.1. Receiving the Sirens: a broader perspective

I chose Lear, Phillips, and Bollas because their accounts are more continuous with the psychoanalytic ideas exposed in this Dissertation. However, ponderings surrounding the

⁸⁹⁸ Bollas's example of condensed meanings around the dream-image of the glass involves registration to diverse trains of thought not only retrospectively after the dream, but during the day events. One might argue, therefore, that the free-associating around the dream is not only retrospective reception, but is always-already prepared by a conscious/preconscious mind that is ready to be temporarily lost in thought. Ibid., 49–51. This reading of receptive also coheres with his other formulations about how “reverie” and free association occur also in everyday waking life, during our use of objects “in the real.” Bollas, *The Evocative Object World*, 84, 92–94.

⁸⁹⁹ *Cracking Up*, 65. Emphasis mine.

psychosocial weight of walks and the productivity of free-associative receptivity can be found in philosophical traditions across historical times and localities.

The first Book of the ancient Chinese text *Zhuangzi* used “wandering” (*you* 遊) as exemplary practice and metaphor as ideal spiritual and ethical living.⁹⁰⁰ Related to freely-associative containment, Book 4 also contains a recommendation of “fasting of the heart” while living under a tyrant:

“Unify your attention. Rather than listen with the ear, listen with the heart. Rather than listen with the heart, listen with qi. Listening stops at the ear, the heart at the tally. As for qi, it is the emptiness which waits to be roused by things. Only the Dao accumulates the emptiness. Emptiness is the fasting of the heart.”⁹⁰¹

In the enigmatic style typical of the *Zhuangzi*, practicing *xinzhai* is said to give the subject an ability to be flexible enough to “wander in the [tyrant’s] cage” without compromising one’s resistance, and intervene only at the right time. Reading this in our context, the *Zhuangzi* is arguably an instance of how containment for a tyrannical other and inner free association may break deadlocks within the repressive psyche, on the basis of which abjection and projection no longer become necessary.

In Western traditions, the image of walking has long been seen as a practice.⁹⁰² The latter becomes more subversive especially after capitalist urbanization. In critical theory, Adorno remarked on the degradation of bourgeois “walking” into terrorized rushing in *Minima Moralia*⁹⁰³ and Benjamin’s famously discussed the displacement of *flaneurial* “composure” into “manic behaviour.” Londoners of the 19th Century, as Benjamin quotes Poe, were already either purposefully walking with a “satisfied business-like demeanour” or “restless” with “flushed faces.” *Flaneurs*, in Benjamin’s and Adorno’s mid-20th-century view, are “out of

⁹⁰⁰ In the words of Chris Fraser, wandering connotes “rambling or roaming without any fixed direction, a pleasurable jaunt or sightseeing excursion, and play or recreation.” Chris Fraser, *Zhuangzi: Ways of Wandering the Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 51.

⁹⁰¹ Zhuangzi, “The Writings of Chuang Tzu,” (1891 [350BCE – 250BCE]), Book 4.2. English translation adopted from Zhuangzi and A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, trans. A. C. Graham (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), translation modified.

⁹⁰² Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*.

⁹⁰³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, A102.

place,” a form of bourgeois leisure that nevertheless has something integral and potentially emancipatory about it.⁹⁰⁴

If Adorno and Benjamin’s readings are too pessimistic in seeing strolls as bourgeois privilege, perhaps we can link Bolla’s theory of evocative objects with Negt and Kluge’s obstinacy and fantasy. Negt and Kluge revised Adorno’s theory of the culture industry highlighting how even capitalist objects can give symbolic expression to proletarian wishes by embodying people’s fantasmatic excesses.⁹⁰⁵ Like Bolla’s evocative objects, even encounters with commodities can open up meanings beyond their socially integrative functions. For them, cultural commodities *as such* are not deadened, but commodified images are barred from being imaginatively, collectively, and freely associated around by the deadening, “quantifying time of the [capitalist] production process” and made to “strengthen superego structures or identification with roles from the past.”⁹⁰⁶ There is always a potential for objects to point beyond their functionalized contexts, and the question is whether we can grasp those transient phantasmatic moments.

Closest to our neoliberal present, poet and activist Tricia Hersey gave voice to an account of “rest as resistance.” Describing neoliberal “grind culture” as the embodiment of racist and capitalist exploitation of our bodies and our “DreamSpace,” she conceptualized and experimented with how collective rest practices (e.g. collective napping) may allow us to gradually “go deep into the cracks to examine and to understand” our system, “[deconstruct our] beliefs and behaviours that are aligned with white supremacy and capitalism,” reconnect with the histories of exploitation, and revitalize our capacities for mutual support.⁹⁰⁷

If taking breaks, resting, and strolling appear far from being resistive at first glance, our exposition in this chapter has hopefully made it less so. Properly exercised, individual

⁹⁰⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Harry Zohn, Leon Wieseltier, and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1955]), 170–74.

⁹⁰⁵ See, Ricardo Samaniego de la Fuente, “The Persistence of Resistance and the Emancipatory Power of the Aesthetic: On Negt and Kluge’s Critical Theory” (University of Essex, 2021), esp. ch. 3.

⁹⁰⁶ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 34, 176.

⁹⁰⁷ Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (Hachette UK, 2022).

wandering practices are no mere breaks in manic strivings, but potential windows into precarious spaces for free association. If ‘defensive autonomy’ of the neoliberal subject is sustained by abjections that license systemic violence and self-mutilation, the reception of the other in free association may help us recover the beauty in the repressed and regain connection to *others*. Freely associative practices possibly undo survivalist phantasies, open us to alternative modes of relating, and loosen compulsive need to feign omnipotence and speed.

7.7. Practicing Free-Association

It may be objected that my suggestions miss the point. They are unactionable and too individualistic. We need *collective, revolutionary* practices that target injustice and damaging structures deep within the socio-economic structure.

Here and in the final chapter, I emphasise the necessity of collective and revolutionary action, but without *excluding* the potential of more local practices seeking to reinvent shared fantasies. If neoliberalization is not narrowly economic but also *psychosocial*, that is, neoliberalism reproduces itself by shaping not only flows of capital but shared phantasies around such flows, then there needs to be room for *both* coordinated actions targeting the system and experiments opening up individual and collective spaces for reimagining fantasies.

Of course, there is also no denial that rest and free-associative practices have become neoliberal ruses. Individualist atomism, so typical of neoliberal culture has colonized rest and free-associative practices. In the form of ‘wellness’ and ‘mindfulness’ initiatives, rest practices have been reshaped under the sway of total functionalization into rest and mindfulness routines aimed at increasing productivity.⁹⁰⁸ If free-associations are non-purposeful states challenging the instrumentalized, narcissistic ego, their non-purposiveness and expansiveness have arguably been inundated by the structural obsession with routinization, optimization,

⁹⁰⁸ Coeckelbergh, *Self-Improvement*.

functionalism, and individualized well-being. (I am reminded of the eerie experience of witnessing the grimaces of joggers discharging their daily workout duties on the harbourside.)

Otherwise, if rest practices were not totally functionalized, they can degrade into “very demure, very mindful” practices of “chill,” relaxation and caring less. Ideals of the painless, carefree life, arguably, embody at once class privilege and an impossible fantasy of a life free of troubles. As class privilege, chill depends on the consumption of goods, symbols of ‘good vibes’ that one may feel guilty about not sharing online. As an impossible fantasy, ‘chill’ promotes individualistic self-invention, rid of ‘unnecessary’ concerns for things that ‘don’t matter’ – including, of course, for the world and many others crippled by the system.

If rest practices are to promise meaningful resistance, they *must not* fall into the traps of neoliberal functionalization and individualism. Hersey, in her manifesto, has warned against “shallow wellness work that doesn’t speak about dismantling the *systems* that are making us unwell.”⁹⁰⁹ For her, meaningful rest must confront the difficult, and must do so by engaging with communities of others who are similarly suffering. In the spirit of the psychosocial picture I reconstructed, properly free-associative practices are also not liberating in a naively ‘chill’ sense. While it may free us from everyday worries that occupy our purposive attention, it also opens us up to pains, sufferings, relational troubles, and the ‘system of scars’ shoved aside by mundane worries and pragmatic concerns. In the spirit of Klein and Bion, perhaps free association do not lead to painless enjoyment of the Siren’s singing, but may *ready us to tolerate the necessary pains of life, so that our minds can see the barren world as it really is and make attempts at rebuilding it with mournful understanding of our finitude.*

Of course, even when ideally practiced, freely associative walks and rests on their own are merely preparations for social changes. But, hopefully, with the right critical consciousness, such practices will not become *individualistic*. Emancipatory experiments must start somewhere and everywhere. In this chapter we see how individuals may start by experimenting with rest, but this is just a beginning. By way of the ‘fractal’ analogy, the intervention at the

⁹⁰⁹ Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*.

level of the microcosm does not aim to change the microcosm alone, but becomes the Adornoian '*key*' to meaningful structural changes.

Moving beyond the realm of neoliberal fantasies, there are no promises and no money-back guarantees. But it may be worth seeing how far we can go as we give ourselves the space to experiment and err, and how far such 'futile' endeavours can help us in reconfigure a world overshadowed by a realistic sense of doom.

Chapter 8. Mourning Neoliberalism II – Collective Containing, Mourning, and Resisting

Loose ends in the previous chapter need to be addressed. Free association on the individual level can only be an experiment in that there is no guarantee that the superego is not too *strong* for one to overcome individually, especially when the objective pressures of neoliberal functionalism and pragmatism remain. Those liberated from internal compulsions have yet to confront the realities of our neoliberal order – and perhaps with greater ego-dystonicity and pain.⁹¹⁰ So much so that those who are disaffected can end up in defeat and resignation, if not (re)identification with the aggressor.⁹¹¹ Individual practices – however experimental – are at best a partial ‘cure’ for psychosocial deadlocks by *removing the inner distortions* we harboured in confronting such threatening realities, potentially opening us to non-wounding or non-survivalist types of object-relating, allowing us to contain one another in doing the same. At times when we fail to contain thoughts inside, we need others to meet us halfway. Most importantly, emancipation from the order can only be carried out by the group.

Yet of course, as we see in digital spaces, collectives do not necessarily contain the individual, sometimes they amplify our psychotic, blindly aggressive parts, rendering us feeling desperate rather than receptive. More generally, confronting the question of collectives is tricky, for in the absence of a shared view of emancipation, conflicting images of what constitutes the right kind of political action and resistance abound. One might consider a version of politics built upon ideals of containing, mourning, and free-associating as too unfrontational, too passive in the face of the capitalist cannibalization of the masses. Witnessing the severity of the

⁹¹⁰ There is almost an antinomic balancing act in articulating our predicaments. On the one hand, *pace* some of Adorno’s exaggerated claims, we are not entirely unfree in navigating through life with more experimentation and less identification with the system. (Tricia Hersey is right in claiming that part of rest as resistance is reclaiming spaces to dream, and it can turn ideological when we shut such space off by claiming rest is a privilege. *Ibid.*, Introduction: Tenet 3.) On the other, one cannot underestimate how, especially in contexts of neoliberal organizations, how obstinacy and maintaining boundaries of right living are penalized. Resistance, in this sense, is for those who can bear the psychic shocks and costs resistance requires.

⁹¹¹ See Section 3.3.3.

situation we are in, it is natural to deduce that what is needed is *revolutionary action*, or collective mobilizations that organize the masses into an anti-capitalist People.

This final chapter has two aims: In the first parts (8.1-2), I offer a qualified defence for radical anti-capitalist movements that may well explode any conceivable frame of ‘democracy.’ This, however, does not remove the need for mournful and containing spaces, as such spaces are helpful for curbing paranoid survivalist tendencies in resistance movements, sustaining a sense of realism undistorted by phantasies, maintaining their imaginative vitality, and honouring their moral-political calling. Mourning and militant activism should not be an ‘either-or,’ but a tension-ridden ‘yes, and.’ In the second part (8.3-5), I discuss examples that demonstrate mourning practices, followed by a general discussion of how such spaces can be sustained in the spirit of mutual containing.

8.1. Psychology or socio-economic change?

Few existing discussions of collective mourning are directly connected to anti-capitalist revolutionary practices. In most accounts, mourning is discussed in the context of injustices along ethnic, racial, and gender lines with less explicit consideration of how those function with and through economic relations of production and distribution.⁹¹² In cases where class and distribution are discussed, the economic is shrouded by the language of ethics or psychodynamics, with insufficient attention to how capital’s power interests beyond psychodynamics determine our psychosocial present.⁹¹³ The relative failure in the psychosocial literature to explicitly articulate how containing and mournful practices should respond to ills in the socio-economic structure leaves the terrain open for counter-articulations of fanatical revolutionary/resistive subjectivities in ways that reject mourning as deluded and reactionary.

For instance, Jodi Dean shows forcefully how the call for ‘democracy’ paralyzes left politics by domesticating the utopian “space of hope” within existing practices while ignoring how democracy keeps “crucial [economic] determinants of our lives and conditions outside the

⁹¹² See e.g. McIvor, *Mourning in America*; Butler, *Frames of War*.

⁹¹³ See e.g. Benjamin, "Wolf's Dictionary."; "Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma."; Peltz, "The Manic Society."; Altman, "Manic Society."; Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis*.

frame of contestation in a kind of ‘no-go zone.’”⁹¹⁴ She also questions how democratic politics fails to own up to the necessities of force, division, and decision in emancipatory struggles, becoming too hesitant even to condemn the evils of the system.⁹¹⁵ More recently, Dean challenges “resistance” as too reconciliatory, as it concedes the terrain to “performing resistance to keep the illusion of democracy alive enough to ward off revolution.” In Dean’s vision, leftist politics must act through the organization of an international “party form,” instead of futilely idolizing local insurrections stranded in a world where communicative flows were fragmented by capital-dominated networks.⁹¹⁶

Dean’s criticism is sharp and an exemplary articulation of the family of radical proposals that consider genuine political action to be revolutionary action. Dean’s polemic, of course, evokes important questions and challenges, for instance, whether calling out on social evils demands commitment to decision and division to the effect of muting mournful, self-critical reflections.⁹¹⁷ But there is one aspect of Dean’s ‘communist’ proposal I would like to affirm with little hesitation.

In a world ruled by precarizing logics overdetermined by capital, capital must be challenged and dismantled. Emancipation calls for economic arrangements not oriented to the accumulation of capital, but to satisfying the needs of all with due recognition of our interdependent natures.⁹¹⁸ This requires infrastructural changes that wrest our production,

⁹¹⁴ Dean, *Democracy*, 76–78.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 136–43.

⁹¹⁶ Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism and Revolutionary Form,” *Millennium* 47, no. 3 (2019); Butler, *Frames of War*.

⁹¹⁷ There is also a question of whether ‘democracy’ really is unambivalently reducible to the Lacanian discourses that she assigns it to. See McIvor reflections on Dean on her unambivalent view of democracy in McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 167–77. Following Jessica Benjamin’s suggestion in one of her essays, one may also question what confronting social evils and injustices involve: does it involve more of divisively condemning *people* or just the *crimes* committed? If the former is required, how can we prevent it from falling victim to the shortcomings of a paranoid-schizoid, omnipotent rendering of friend/enemy without some degree of self-critical mournfulness? See, Benjamin, “Wolf’s Dictionary.”

⁹¹⁸ Various articulations of this exists. The most famous is Marx’s in his formula “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 531. Dean also refers to “forms of life that are free of oppression, materially secure and empowered, open for collective steering by the collective in order to satisfy needs rather than secure private gain.” Dean, “Communicative Capitalism,” 337. For Adorno’s continuity with Marx’s ideal of emancipation, see Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 30–41.

consumption, attention, and socialization from capitalist commodification and extraction, and involves no mere *reforms*, but challenges against *the material logics of capitalist cannibalization*. Whether ‘democratic,’ ‘revolutionary,’ or ‘communist,’ any account of resistance that falls short of naming capital and confronting it as a suffocatingly intransigent object for reform not only fails to address an ineliminable cause of our predicaments. It also condemns our emancipatory efforts to futility.

Indeed, there is a psychosocial reason to challenge capitalist reproduction. Insofar as psychosocial splits of neoliberal culture find their home and reproduce themselves in regimes of exploitation and expropriation, failing to reconfigure economic structures would also severely limit the reach of psychopolitical experimentations, as the material vehicle of the survivalist worldview remains.⁹¹⁹ Our precarizing socio-economic setting powerfully conditions people’s identifications with neoliberal ideals, sustains wounding attachments, and suffocates emancipatory imaginations. This means that collective *psychological* emancipation can only properly take off if objective socio-economic conditions are revolutionized.

Of course, the conclusion is not that the psychological work is ‘superstructural’ to emancipatory shifts in the economic ‘base,’ as if the latter can emerge without agents ready to resist. Emancipatory structural reforms can, arguably, only come from agents who are (psychologically) prepared to resist and revolt against such a structure with obstinacy, persistence, and genuine concern for the needs of all.⁹²⁰ Failing this, changes in the economy may never gather enough steam, or be instrumentalised by potentially insidious motivations of power, abjection, and paranoid destruction – replacing capitalism with something more cannibalistic.⁹²¹

⁹¹⁹ By ‘material vehicle,’ I mean the capitalist markets where inequalities and zero-sum competition are endemic, giving the material embodiment to phantasies where only a select group can live and survive.

⁹²⁰ “Prepared” here does not mean demanding a complete set of knowledge, virtues, and strategies ready before one begins to resist. Some of the psychological, epistemic, and strategic readiness are likely only learnt during resistive actions and their many inevitable failures. The point here is that psychological and cultural work is not – in any significant sense – secondary to material emancipation, as *former also determine the possibility of the latter*.

⁹²¹ This is what we find in far-right, anarchocapitalist articulations of neoliberalism, where capital shall ‘exit’ being ‘bogged down’ by concerns for public good. See Slobodian, *Crack-up Capitalism*. Here Freud’s remark is also relevant: “In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments [...] but we have

One of the central contentions of this Dissertation is the mutual imbrication of psychic and socio-structural logics under neoliberalism: On the one hand, our survivalist economy, while exploiting and expropriating the masses, disposes us towards wounding attachments to the order. On the other hand, our attachments – formed from our struggle for psychic ways to survive – compel us towards reproducing the economic order by shaming deviance, seducing efforts, and disrupting emancipatory imaginations. Under neoliberal socialization thus far, the socio-economic and the psychic work synergistically, and emancipation is deadlocked.

We should neither categorically separate the two nor reduce one to another, but should disentangle the fractal structure imbricating the psycho and the social. Separating one from another would likely land one in a chicken-and-egg situation, where a stubborn economic base limits psychic transformations, and structural changes cannot take off with no one psychologically ready to stand for it. Let us not mince words: *all resistance remains ideologically suspect until it finds a way to seize both society and psyche from the grips of neoliberalism and capitalist survivalism.*

8.2. Mourning or Revolution?

If the structure is to be remade, what is needed to bring that about? The Marxist revolutionary tradition, which Dean draws upon, believed that the engine of economic emancipation is *struggles* that uncompromisingly take down the system. In Marx's vision, this is the class struggle of the proletariat, the agent whose position in the class structure will guarantee both the necessity of revolution and its moral redemption.⁹²²

in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature. Aggressiveness was not created by property." (Freud, SE 21: 113)

⁹²² According to Marx, due to its objective position in the economic structure (having "nothing to lose but their chains" Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W W Norton, 1978).), the proletariat will not only feel the need to struggle against the bourgeoisie, but their resistance will also emancipate *everyone* (including their enemies) from universal alienation by capital. (See *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, 64.) This implies that as long as the historical materialist determination of class struggle is accurate, the proletariat's revolutionary struggle is guaranteed, and their struggles admit of no moral restrictions until it reaches its emancipatory goal.

Yet, the cogency of the Marxist promise has soured since the World Wars (although its conception of revolutionary struggle lives on). While capitalist cannibalization continued, workers failed to effectively challenge the totalizing grip of capital. The mid-20th Century saw fascism as a capitalist response to economic immiseration.⁹²³ More recently, under the neoliberal worldview, progressive political energies have been captured by a (neo-)liberalized, consensual model of politics emphasising coexistence under formal conceptions of equal rights and social recognition. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the supposed recognition of preceding evils of fascist terror (an idea sometimes assimilated to revolutionary action *in general*) by liberal discourses has symbolically dethroned revolutionary political imaginaries, hammering ideas that justice is attainable within liberal democratic capitalisms.⁹²⁴ As we have seen, the irony of all these is that the material triumph of the few over increasingly precarized masses is left unchecked under this (neo)liberal political universe. Consensus- and reconciliation-oriented politics have now become the pretext for global capitalist expropriation and exploitation.⁹²⁵

The derailment of progressive politics under false promises of reconciliation renders liberal promises of reconciliation suspect, and presents dilemmas for those radical enough to see through the liberal façade. For some who find the ideals of liberal justice too irredeemable from within,⁹²⁶ the waning of revolutionary challenges to capitalism is lamentable, and the way to move forward is to revitalise the Marxist concept of revolutionary struggles.

⁹²³ See Mattei, *The Capital Order*; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁹²⁴ Meister describes this in terms of the replacement of “revolutionary, political justice” with a (falsely) reconciliatory politics that assumes that “evil is past” despite people still benefiting from past injustices. Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), ch. 2.

⁹²⁵ Dean, *Democracy*; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹²⁶ The alternative model of critique considers the problem to be the capitalist distortion of neoliberal ideals, so that we should work *with* the model of liberal justice tapping into the institutionalized “normative surplus” of existing (capitalist) liberal democracies. This approach is taken by successors of the early Frankfurt School such as Habermas and Honneth, who both believe that the normative commitments of liberal democracies, if taken seriously, will explode its current capitalist form. See, e.g. Honneth and Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition*; Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014). I shall not discuss this conception, for it now seems naïve to believe that liberal normative ideals can be separated from their neoliberal contexts of application. Immanent critique at the level of ideal normative reconstructions risks affirming too much, challenging too little, and becoming much indistinguishable from liberal ideologues. It is telling perhaps how in his rejoinder to commentaries to *Freedom's Right*, Honneth finds himself perceived a “staunch

8.2.1. Pitfalls of Revolutionary Fanaticism

Criticizing the limitations of reconciliatory and consensual tropes of liberal politics, some theorists try to break from our post-revolutionary, post-political present. For ‘radical’ democrats and ‘communists,’ political action proper arises from collective, even revolutionary actions that are radically anti-system, challenging sedimented social ideologies, policed ways of sensing, and the capitalist order.⁹²⁷ By presenting normative theories as ideologies of the system while positing their solutions as radically anti-system, they champion a revolutionary, anti-systemic, anti-normative stance as their ultimate ethic. Against the comfort of private living, they see much virtue in revolutionary sacrifice that threatens one’s ‘symbolic’ survival, and stress the importance of staying ‘faithful’ to the anti-systemic dedication.⁹²⁸ In these theories, the supposed subject of resistance is one who ‘fights on,’ and who does not give in to pressures and seductions of the system (including the need to justify one’s position against tendencies of evil).⁹²⁹

However, although such theories acknowledge the necessity of revolutionary action, they seem unconcerned with how their anti-normative position can block meaningful self-reflections, making them vulnerable to brute decisionism.⁹³⁰ Robert Meister, being also a staunch critic of

defender of the contemporary social order” and needing try to defend his version of a normative “End of history” that allows for “institutional revolution.” “Rejoinder,” *Critical Horizons* 16, no. 2 (2015).

⁹²⁷ See e.g., Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996); Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2014); Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001).

⁹²⁸ For a structured summary of this the more revolutionary side of radical political theories and their inspiration from Lacanian theory, see Ruti, *Singularity of Being*, chs. 3–4.

⁹²⁹ Cf. Badiou’s formulation of his ethic of truths: “the ethic of a truth is the complete opposite of an ‘ethics of communication’ It is an ethic of the Real [...] And consistency which is the content of the ethical maxim ‘Keep going!’ keeps going only by following the thread of this Real”; “A crisis of fidelity is always what puts to the test, following the collapse of an image, the sole maxim of consistency (and thus of ethics): ‘Keep going!’ Keep going even when you have lost the thread, when you no longer feel ‘caught up’ in the process, when the event itself has become obscure, when its name is lost, or when it seems that it may have named a mistake, if not a simulacrum.” Badiou, *Ethics*, 52, 78–79.

⁹³⁰ In the words of Mari Ruti: “one of the biggest problems with contemporary progressive theory [...] is that it’s conceptually greedy [...] For instance, it routinely denounces normative ethics in favour of unmitigated antinormativity, yet when a given critic’s back truly is against an (ethical or political) wall, they often fall back on quasi-Kantian ways of deciding what the right course of action should be. It feels to me that we can’t have it both ways: we can’t ridicule all norms but then resort to them whenever our argument happens to demand them.” Allen and Ruti, *Critical Theory between Klein and Lacan: A Dialogue*, 197.

the liberal debasement of revolutionary imaginaries, remarks on the limitations of revolutionary calls to action:

“the political trajectory of revolutionary justice is to create enemies until it is eventually defeated by the enemies it creates—first morally and then politically. In revolutionary justice the victim is to become victor; the problem with this concept is that nothing counts as winning except continuing the fight.”⁹³¹

For Meister, any “adequate successor of the revolutionary project” must incorporate the ‘moral’ ideals supported by reconciliatory justice without abandoning the issue of material distribution.⁹³² Although he is more interested in exposing the ideological psychodynamics of liberal justice,⁹³³ Meister also discusses the psychodynamics of justice. His account shares common features with the Frankfurt School’s critique of revolutionary actionism and pseudoactivity.

Remarking on the terrors of Soviet communism, Adorno suggested that the privileging of (revolutionary) praxis over critique can lead to “the malicious derision of critical critique”, establishing conditions for terror. The need for revolutionizing is no excuse for unthinking action. Unyielding calls for praxis bespeak “anxiety” that produces “a repressive intolerance to [true but unactionable] thought,” degrading progressive praxis into “pseudoactivity” and, worse still, a basis for reproducing the oppression of their oppressors.⁹³⁴ Espousing a similar line of thought, Negt and Kluge warned against the tendency of proletarian movements to “reify [themselves] and turn [themselves] into an instrument [of fighting] the enemy,” which “unconsciously reproduces the mechanisms of the bourgeois public sphere: exclusion, pseudopublicity, dictatorship of procedural rules” and, as such, renders the movement vulnerable to fascist regression.⁹³⁵ Elaborating on Adorno’s ideal of “untrammelled thought”, Negt and Kluge argue that the Left needs not only the resoluteness to revolutionary action, but

⁹³¹ Meister, *After Evil*, 22.

⁹³² Ibid., 69–70.

⁹³³ See, *ibid.*, 32ff, 146ff, 220ff.

⁹³⁴ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 290–92.

⁹³⁵ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 61, 63.

work on fantasies – to “work through” and “reorganize fantasies in order to make them capable of self-organization.”⁹³⁶

The critiques from Meister and the Frankfurt School are particularly relevant, because while affirming the necessity for revolutionary changes, they do not consider revolutionary actions self-validating.⁹³⁷ What such analysis exposes is the irrepressible ‘moral’ challenge for revolutionary movements, i.e. how it is possible to maintain its fidelity to the revolutionary cause,⁹³⁸ efficiently strategize to take down the system, refuse compromises, but *without itself degrading into a fanatic instrument of oppression and repression, mirroring the capitalist forms it so rejects*. If liberal reformism becomes too close, too intimidated by the cannibal, revolutionary rejection of cannibals risks mirroring them.

This problem is at once moral and psychodynamic. Meister’s formulation of the revolutionary’s wish “to become victor” and to do so by “[creating] enemies until it is eventually defeated by the enemies it creates” is a warning against the survivalist and paranoid object-relations implicit in calls for revolutionary action. This happens when the fidelity to the revolutionary cause slides into the *fanatical* idealization of everything in-group, and the demonization of everything out-group – the same psychodynamics that mirror paranoid politics and the survivalism of

⁹³⁶ Ibid., 174–76.

⁹³⁷ Understood in relation to the collapse of the Marxian theory of revolution, the revolutionary ethic of our age has only filled the motivational vacuum left by the collapse of class-consciousness in the post-revolutionary present. What it ignored is how the collapse of the objectivist teleology of history into a history of revolutionary terror also opens up the question of the *moral validity* of anti-systemic, revolutionary action. The question of how revolutionary praxis can turn evil is *hardly just* a ruse of counterrevolutionary ideology, but a challenge every revolutionary should be concerned about, *if they care about emancipation*. It seems quite irresponsible that Badiou presses his formal theory of ‘fidelity’ as a recommendation for people to move (blindly) forward on the revolutionary cause even when harbouring doubts that what one is doing “may be a mistake, if not a simulacrum [i.e. Evil].” (*Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, 78-79) With full acknowledgement that even the “formal characteristics of [Evil as simulacrum] are exactly those of a truth” (79), he still thinks fidelity is worth defending simply because “there can be Evil only in so far as there proceeds a Good” (71) from the truth event. Badiou, *Ethics*. It is an irresponsible and schizoid move, on the part of Badiou, to believe that the only two options in revolutionary action are rejecting doubts and pressing forward (fidelity) or giving in to doubts (betrayal).

⁹³⁸ Beyond Badiou, it is an open question how ‘fidelity’ to an emancipatory cause can be practiced (and psychoanalytically what ‘superego’ functions it involves). In this schizoid interpretation, fidelity probably means that one is of resolutely one mind. In another, fidelity can involve what Lear calls a “capacity for irony” – where one may suspend and question one’s supposed practices *for the sake of realizing object of one’s erotic commitment, in line with the acknowledgement of the finitude of one’s means*. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony*, ed. Cora Diamond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

neoliberal capitalism.⁹³⁹ Pure and intransigent allegiance to ‘the cause’ can disguise subjective decisionism, excluding anyone who does not fit the narrow ideal as deluded, revisionist, and counter-revolutionary *enemies*.

As we shall see, without an awareness of psychodynamic pitfalls, the much-needed call for revolutionary justice can become consumed by omnipotent and omniscient fantasies, features disguising a refusal to accept loss and finitude for one’s position, and an intolerance of perspectives that deviate from what the fanatic is psychologically compelled to sustain. In this case, the neoliberal superego may have acquired resistive contents, but its severity, repressiveness, and its need to aggressively project and abject are kept intact.

8.2.2. Mournful Containing as Corrective

It is in light of the dangers of the degradation of fidelity into fanaticism that it should be asked how *it is possible to mobilize people’s opposition to the system without succumbing to paranoid forces that may hijack the progressive goal for psycho-defensive purposes*. In this section, I argue for the work of mourning as a corrective for the fanatical temptations of every revolutionary movement. My point here is not that the latter should replace revolutionary resistance, but rather that they should be the latter’s necessary corrective.

To say that revolutionary calls are grandiose and paranoid does not mean that they are useless. Schizoid narratives (even conspiratorial ones) are very good at mobilizing people’s resentment, sparking confrontation over perceived injustices – as we see in digital publics.⁹⁴⁰ The paranoid movement’s romantic talks of revolutionary sacrifice are also useful in attracting people’s identification with a collective cause. This is an advantage over everyday cynical and passive attitudes where people recognize the evils but do not actively oppose them.

⁹³⁹ See e.g., Yeung, "Psychoanalyzing Democracies."

⁹⁴⁰ The dilemma as exposed by the digital politics of our age is that while paranoia is very good at mobilization, it is not so good at retaining people’s resistive energies nor at containing them morphing into psychotic, conspiratorial thinking. See e.g., Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). See also, Fisher, *Chaos Machine*.

Yet even if resistance can start grandiose, it, arguably, cannot remain stably so. *Any kind of resistance that is not just performing a transient spectacle must, at some point, reckon with a reality that shatters fantasies.* Fundamentally, however strong our callings and convictions, there is no guarantee that we are always right and our message taken up by the collective. Organizing involves insistence on ideals as much as the ability to enduringly work with allies who disagree. Furthermore, romantic fantasies that initially spark the revolutionary collective's sacrifice can soon meet the *Ananke* of one's limited power and knowledge. Oppressive powers shatter the naive optimism that believes progress is collectively accessible, and show that we are not as knowledgeable and powerful as we imagined, challenging our initial narcissistic fervour. If resistance faces systemic oppression, failures and the unforeseeability of victory may even challenge the belief that eventual victory can justify the sacrifices of one's comrades. Hostility and oppression can rub in regrets for failures and survivor's guilt,⁹⁴¹ generating anxieties towards uncertainties in strategizing, potentially augmenting disagreements within the resistive organization.

The multitude of real and phantasmatic losses that accompany the real resistance are difficult to theorize, and theorists can be tempted to fantasize about rather than engaging with resistance's complications. Indeed, *pressing on with fidelity against all doubts cannot be unqualifiedly ethical* because we are finite. Neither omnipotent nor omniscient, we have lessons to learn from the doubts we harbour and the tangled web of frustrations, anxieties, and guilt associated with losses. This does not mean that we should not *commit* to resisting, but only that resistance demands (mournful) reflections to be deserving of its name and avoid mirroring repression and Terror. Shattered fantasies need to be mourned and reconstituted, not pressed on. We who resist should learn through losses to distinguish between forms of 'giving up' as passive resignation to the bad world, and those that reorient us better to realize our

⁹⁴¹ Crackdowns on resistance threatens movements with tangible losses (deaths, injuries, and imprisonment of comrades) that inspire persecutory 'survivor's guilt.' The feeling of 'survivor's guilt,' sparked by the conflict between revolutionary's fatigued wish of giving up and unmourned, superegotic introjection of lost comrades' – can exhort movement members to react blindly and desperately as defence against internal guilt. Relatedly see, Yeung, "Psychoanalyzing Democracies," 39.

emancipatory commitments in a hostile world. These are what straightforward revolutionary calls miss.

Especially during active resistance, anxieties and regrets, together with the lack of mournful containing spaces to think through them, can convert ‘fidelity’ into excuses for pathological organizations, where splitting, witch-hunting, and parochial rage at difference becomes phantasmatic lifelines sustaining the threatened revolutionary ideal for an in-group. Without the means to mourn idealizing fantasies, the only easy way the movement can sustain itself is by paranoically deflecting its frustrations.⁹⁴² In paranoia, the ‘other’ becomes a scapegoat,⁹⁴³ as the movement’s sense of its tasks becomes shaped less by realistic perceptions of the situation, but by the need to repress pains it disavows. This is how paranoid fanaticism can maintain fidelity at the cost of distorting reality.⁹⁴⁴

If resistance is not to degrade into fleeting uprisings or the maintenance of ‘fidelity to the cause’ by paranoid means, but must become a sustained, coordinated struggle, then the collective needs spaces to reflect and mourn losses accumulated in its confrontation with systemic forces. There must be space to undo psycho-defensive denials by addressing the emotional ambivalence evoked by multiple losses, to reopen the collective mental space for maintaining a realistic view of (psychic and political) possibilities and a healthy emancipatory imagination. All of these demand the ethic of psychic receptivity accorded by collective mourning.

Mourning is the difficult affective work with which infantile fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence are given up in the face of the ubiquity of losses confronting the finite self. The

⁹⁴² Isaac D. Balbus, *Mourning and Modernity: Essays in the Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Society* (New York: Other Press, 2005), ch. 7.

⁹⁴³ Cf. “The Other serves the subject – relieves and props him up – by embodying the discarded, abject elements, as in the scapegoat function. Too often the negatives in this binary are opposed by ostensibly positive values, vaunted by liberation ideologies that are actually defensive, for example, invulnerable, triumphant.” Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 225.

⁹⁴⁴ Yeung, “Psychoanalyzing Democracies,” 37–38. While compelling reasons exist for the hatred of the system and fidelity to the obstinate desire to oppose it, there are less justifiable grounds for the movement in displacing acknowledgement of the limitations inherent in its resistance and its ability to know what is right. If any movement is not to fall into naïve romanticism, required is the painful acknowledgement that one’s vision, however cherished, may neither be right nor possible, or that even when they are possible, difficult compromises are part of effective strategizing and mobilizing.

lessons of psychosocial development apply equally to individuals as to groups: Infantile wishes are to be abandoned; losses are endemic; growing up sometimes demands that we painfully sort out what we can meaningfully strive for and what is reality-denial. Mourning deciphers the psychic weight of losses to loosen the grip of unrealistic fantasies, preparing ones that are politically creative, psychically sustainable, and realistic. But this is never easy because experiencing losses repeatedly in an oppressive environment heightens the trauma of loss. As accounts of militant activism show, unmetabolized losses can harden the fighting, fanatical self. But such a self does not always confront the real enemy, as fighting can also be used to keep dying hopes alive and consciousness of despair at arm's length.⁹⁴⁵

Against this fall from idealization to despair, and from hopeful fidelity into paranoia, every movement needs mourning. Mournful spaces are also required because every loss of a something/someone dearly loved demands a process of psychic sorting out – one of “hypercathecting and detaching the hopes and memories associated with the [lost] loved one.”⁹⁴⁶ But objects of collective mourning point beyond lost persons to lost possibilities and fantasies – in some sense, the former is a poignant case of the latter.

Following Noelle McAfee, loss accompanies every act of decision-making and action. Choosing one option means that the idealizations associated with the other option will never materialise, and this is especially pronounced in collective decisions.⁹⁴⁷ Without mourning, one's choices are narrowed to fighting on or resigning. In this way, political deliberations are never just a matter of agreeing upon the best course of action. It involves mourning as:

“an affective process of working through the costs and consequences of any given policy direction, of coming to terms with what will have to be forgone in order to move in one direction or another, of realizing that there are no perfect solutions and that other human beings who hold other views are not devils incarnate. Political deliberation is a matter of coming to terms with ambiguity and ambivalence, loss and uncertainty, dashed hopes and imperfect prospects.”⁹⁴⁸

⁹⁴⁵ See, Deborah B. Gould, "Political Despair," in *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, ed. Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson (New York: Continuum, 2012).

⁹⁴⁶ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989): 7.

⁹⁴⁷ McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, 178–80.

⁹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

Whether we understand ourselves as democratic citizens or revolutionaries, difficult choices must be made under terms not of our making. Disagreements are endemic to any collective, and ambivalence and regret are unavoidable, regardless of what we choose to do.

Group infantilism occurs when its members refuse to give up unrealistic phantasies of omnipotence – when one assumes one has the sole *knowledge of what is right, antagonizing anyone holding a different opinion for obstructing the realization of one's idealized vision*.⁹⁴⁹ Acknowledging one's limitations evokes guilt and anxiety. We may feel like losing the sense of self-righteousness, giving in and betraying our cause. At times, it is easier to press on than to acknowledge limits. However, failing to recognise finitude, we risk succumbing to the weight of our hubris, severing potential alliances, undermining our commitments, and stifling our emancipatory imaginations.⁹⁵⁰ Worse, the refusal of grief can be played out paranoically and abjectively as terror. Here, mournful practices, as the painful sorting and reconfiguration of phantasies, may help us be open-minded enough to receive the lessons fabric of pains revolutionary failures and hostilities evoke, and in catching how compensatory fantasies may form in place of confronting such pain.

8.2.3. Revitalizing Emancipatory Imaginations

Of course, all the above may sound too grim. Not all resistance meets suffocating oppression, and mournful practices can be productive.

Aside from correcting pitfalls of revolutionary fanaticism, we saw, in the previous Chapter, how freely associative receptivity may open individual possibilities foreclosed by neoliberal socialization. As long as the individual remains largely powerless against prevailing social forces, collective containing may help transform individual fragments of resistive

⁹⁴⁹ Knowingness can also come in the form of firm convictions that others are 'stupid,' 'irrational,' 'gullible' – in the same way as the cynic is 'supposed to believe' in Žižek's terms. On cynicism, see 3.3.3.

⁹⁵⁰ For the failure of mourning the suffocation of emancipatory imaginations, see Balbus, *Mourning and Modernity: Essays in the Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Society*.

consciousness into collective emancipatory imaginations. Ideally, they may even allow collective free-association in the reconfiguration of fantasies Negt and Kluge imagine.

Being open-minded together, we may trace how one's scarred socialization continues to infect our subjectivity and object-relations. We may recognize that the psycho-defensive need to *abject* is not just a feature of the hyper-competitive environment, but is imbricated in selves so traumatized by the socially inherited racial, sexual, and class-based fears. Such an ability to be reflective of our present defensiveness and its connection to a past collectively suffered may pave the way for us to escape unconscious repetitions of our wounded pasts. Associating and organizing with real others may also correct previous splits, countering abjective framing and allowing new resistive alliances. Collective containing, therefore, holds the promise to undo the colonization of resistive and liberation imageries by neoliberal individualism.

Especially in less directly hostile environments, the mourning of neoliberal wounded attachments can tap into hitherto repressed spaces of receptivity to refurbish our barren democratic and emancipatory imaginations. *The hope is that by acknowledging the ways we unconsciously mirror the social order (even when we are resisting such order), we find ways of organizing, dreaming, and winning that do not assume that only some deserve to survive, nor that evil is always other – embodied only in those who fail to be converted.* As Jessica Benjamin suggests, we must “deconstruct rather than reverse the [survivalist, F.Y.] binary of doer and done to and conceptualize a position in which victims of oppression can demand liberation and empowerment without retaliatory reversal of power relations.”⁹⁵¹ This, arguably, involves being able to call out wrongness of both perpetrators and implicated beneficiaries of the system, resisting obstinately and actively, but doing so without paranoically antagonizing others and exculpating oneself from the capacity and desire to become accomplices of social evil.

As members of the global North, we are implicitly benefited by the system we may criticize. As potential holders of wounding attachments, we may carry the same abjective/repressive

⁹⁵¹ Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 224.

wishes as our ‘enemies.’ ‘We’ should call ‘them’ out for the evils they do and the injustices they help perpetuate, but the ‘they’ should not become the scapegoat with which our guilt for complicity is projected outwards in disproportionate vindictiveness.⁹⁵² After all, winning a struggle for emancipation need not be triumphing over, and the latter is usually suspicious of projective disavowals. *We* are not immune. Neoliberal attachments function through all of us, and it takes collective effort to detach ourselves from such attachments.

8.3. Democratic and Resistive Spaces of Mourning and Containing

The need for mournful and containing spaces does not guarantee their existence. Our psychosocial world is thus far defined by deprivations, abjections, mania, and paranoia – signs of failed containing.⁹⁵³ In this sense, part of the task for us is to *build* such spaces, and some existing practices are already embodying promises for a better public that we may learn from.

8.3.1. Deliberative Spaces

The most obvious place to seek collective containing is where people talk. After all, psychoanalytic practice arrived at such ideas by engaging with the analysand’s speech. Yet, arguably because of the hegemony of liberal rationalism, ‘public deliberation’ now carries the connotation of disinterested – if not epistocratic – discussions solely oriented to norms of rationality, often to the exclusion of incongruent affects and expressive speech.⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁵² As I will argue, good containing spaces should even allow us to (partially) *identify with* ‘perpetrators’ so as to acknowledge, work through destructive and sadistic parts of the self we may also harbour. Beyond the fact of benefiting from an unjust system, perhaps there is also a need to recognize our guilt for harbouring hate and aggressive wishes we share with perpetrators against the vanquished. For example, Benjamin remarks how supposed ‘bystanders’ should rediscover one’s ‘monstrousness’ and the reality of hatred behind one’s inability to protect the vulnerable. In therapeutic contexts, Steiner has also observed how the failure to acknowledge one’s own aggressiveness will give rise to symptoms of vindictiveness which may be no less destructive. Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, ch. 7.

⁹⁵³ See, Altman, “Manic Society.”

⁹⁵⁴ For classic defences of public deliberation under the liberal, rationalist framework, see e.g. Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 239–52; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), esp. 212–54. Under the current political climate, there are good reasons to hold destructive and paranoid affects at bay with the liberal democratic commitment to openness, inclusion, and publicness. Yet, to do so by restraining destructive affects by

In this regard, Noelle McAfee's reworking of deliberative ideals, based on the affective life of deliberating processes is an indispensable corrective. In McAfee's reading, politics proper has no predestined end,⁹⁵⁵ disagreements and potentially disruptive unconscious processes penetrate social coexistence,⁹⁵⁶ and collective decisions worthy of the name can only come from difficult talks taking into account the plurality of perspectives in the public.

Drawing upon her experience at deliberative projects, McAfee reconceptualizes deliberations as processes that discover and make collectively acceptable decisions by working through the unconscious weight of coexistence and collective decision-making. Rejecting rationalist privilege of 'reasons' over supposed 'passions,' McAfee considers deliberations as involving difficult affective processes calling forth "memory, affect, and grief around past and possible future losses."⁹⁵⁷ In particular, she highlights the sense of *grief* involved in collective decision making, as each individual grapples with the loss of their ideal solution when negotiating with others who disagree in a context of socio-political *Ananke*. Such grief, if not properly processed, can lock people into paranoid-schizoid 'syndromes of ideality' that halt meaningful engagement with others and breed reality-distortion, vengefulness, and mutual distrust.⁹⁵⁸

As an antidote to paranoid tendencies, McAfee compares well-designed deliberative practices with psychoanalytic 'talking-cures' that embody '*everyday mourning*' during interactions. Here, the grief of having to give up ideals in collective decision-making is shared and worked out bit by bit.⁹⁵⁹ In line with the therapeutic, McAfee imagines deliberative spaces as ones where 'emotional' narratives of 'felt concerns' are exchanged without censorship, as even

opposing it with the rationalist understandings of 'civility' and 'force of the better argument' is likely only aid the *repression* of such affects, preserving them in their ferocity, much to the detriment of the spirit of inclusion and publicness. For the affective deficit of rationalist models of deliberation, see Yeung, "Psychoanalyzing Democracies."; Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2009).

⁹⁵⁵ McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, ch. 1.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid., 54–58.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid., 178–80.

phantasies of paranoid kinds are allowed to be expressed so that they can be debated, worked through, and origins collectively understood.⁹⁶⁰

McAfee envisions how small, deliberative groups can enable their members to exchange stories and narratives across social divides. In-person interactions in small groups across social divides offer an antidote to paranoia as sharing narratives “changes [people’s] view of others and others’ views,” making the alien other less threatening and more “human and familiar.”⁹⁶¹ This facilitates mutual understanding of their disagreements, allows collaborative exploration of the costs and losses associated with choices, thus helping decide ways forward that effectively integrate diverse perspectives.⁹⁶² The hope is that such spaces of understanding and mourning can diminish collective paranoia, paving the way for a “position that can tolerate loss, ambiguity, and uncertainty” endogenous to our socio-political realities.⁹⁶³

Although McAfee’s proposal involves substantive commitments towards broadly republican ideals of the public sphere which we may not share⁹⁶⁴, her ideal of deliberation as affectively integrative is relevant to political practices outside the republican democratic frame. Her emphasis on the ineradicable losses during interaction and collective decision-making counters idealizing ideologies of limitless possibilities, which are so endemic to paranoid politics and revolutionary fanaticisms. Even more importantly, against fractured digital spaces of trolling, mocking and paranoid antagonization, McAfee shows that we need neither a return to epistocratic rationalism nor fanaticism. Striving beyond the simplistic binary of normalizing submission or fanatical antagonization, McAfee can be read to have demonstrated the importance of spaces for interaction that allow the narrativization of ‘felt concerns’ and emotions in any political community regardless of their political orientations. As such, McAfee offers a model of collective spaces for containing, where grief of collectively deciding can be

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid., 186–87.

⁹⁶¹ Ibid., 164–65. See also, McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, 168.

⁹⁶² *Fear of Breakdown*, 154–66. See also, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, ch. 9.

⁹⁶³ *Fear of Breakdown*, 178.

⁹⁶⁴ McAfee draws much inspiration from Hannah Arendt and John Dewey. See, e.g., *ibid.*, ch. 1; McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, ch. 6.

recognised and transformed without sparking unrealistic fantasizing, offering a vision for creating realistic yet imaginative engagement with our uncertain political futures.

8.3.2. Spaces of Acknowledging Trauma – Truth and Reconciliation Initiatives

While ‘everyday mourning’ may be handled in deliberative mini-publics, there might be non-everyday mourning that strains her deliberative model. Such ‘non-everyday’ forms of mourning arguably include deep-rooted psycho-social traumas caused by long-standing disenfranchisement, political crimes, violence, and precarization.

Social traumatization reinforces defences, which creates an unconscious that shows up as abject horror and resists free association. In severe cases, McAfee argues, social trauma locks its victims into the private realm of symptomatic repetitions, “banishing [them] from fellowship in [the public realm]”⁹⁶⁵ Beyond victims themselves, historical trauma also afflicts perpetrators and beneficiaries alike with guilt, fuelling their desire to dissociate past wrongs.⁹⁶⁶ Unrecognized trauma compels the collective to collude in avoiding painful elephants in the room, shooting messengers who bring the repressed to the table.⁹⁶⁷ As David McIvor puts it, even groups “explicitly motivated to address the pathologies associated with social misrecognition” can “actively police against difficult (or “controversial”) subjects of conversation, rarely interrogate the boundaries of the group, and avoid disagreements that are seen as threatening to the obvious good of ‘doing good’ within the community.”⁹⁶⁸

The collective tendency to evade painful pasts, therefore, calls for practices that address collective trauma. Following McIvor and McAfee, this is work in Truth and Reconciliation

⁹⁶⁵ *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, 85.

⁹⁶⁶ Benjamin, "Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma." See also Meister's account of liberal humanitarian witnessing as a form of melancholic denial in *After Evil*, 220–25.

⁹⁶⁷ A group psychoanalysts observe, regardless of trauma, group collusions against anxieties are constant dangers in large-group and small-groups alike. This is only amplified in groups cut by socio-political divisions with histories of violence and injustice. See e.g., Volkan, "Large-Group Identity, Who Are We Now? Leader-Follower Relationships and Societal-Political Divisions."; Kernberg, "Sanctioned Social Violence." See also earlier discussions in Chapter 7.

⁹⁶⁸ McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 181.

Commissions (TRCs).⁹⁶⁹ TRCs refer to a broad spectrum of initiatives that are “broadly motivated to uncover and publicise episodes of state violence, traumatic social injuries, or patterns of abuse, neglect, and marginalisation.”⁹⁷⁰ The aims of TRCs are diverse, with some resulting in institutional reparations and changes in state policies,⁹⁷¹ but here I focus on their psychosocial functions.

In McIvor’s reconstruction, TRCs’ solicitation of testimonies from victims, perpetrators, and bystanders chips away at the falsehoods of dominant narratives and allows repressed, multi-layered accounts of social injustices to come to public light.⁹⁷² Through public exchange, the supposed divides between ‘bystanders’ and ‘perpetrators’ can also be challenged, allowing systemic determinants of traumatic events to be revealed and new understandings of collective responsibility for social injustice to emerge.⁹⁷³ Commenting on the psychosocial functions of TRCs, McIvor considers the interactions between conflict-ridden parties to serve as ‘potential spaces’ where people encounter one another across social divides people as *whole*, “viable others” irreducible to their symbolic positions within large-group dynamics.⁹⁷⁴ Such potential spaces can “unsettle the perceptual-affective habits within the paranoid-schizoid position” in a way that “solicits a rearrangement of spaces [of misrecognition].”⁹⁷⁵

Jessica Benjamin’s experience in organizing small-group discussions in the “Acknowledgement Project” in Israel and Palestine echoes observations of McIvor in America, with practices of listening, receiving and speaking overcoming the paranoid frames shaping large-group identities.⁹⁷⁶ For Benjamin, spaces of acknowledgement allow people to reconsider

⁹⁶⁹ Ibid.; McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, ch. 5.

⁹⁷⁰ McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 136.

⁹⁷¹ Ibid.

⁹⁷² Ibid., 136–39.

⁹⁷³ See, esp. McIvor’s account of the Greensborough TRC in *ibid.*, 150f.

⁹⁷⁴ Ibid., e.g. 155.

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid., 96–99, 121. McIvor’s borrows the concept ‘potential space’ from Winnicott. It is arguable that Winnicott’s concept of potential spaces is more optimistic than McIvor’s use of it. For Winnicott, the inhabiting of a ‘potential space’ is natural (and happy) extension of the well-integrated child’s play with transitional objects, but McIvor’s Kleinian reading of TRCs is more precarious and demands much more of tolerance ambivalence and pain. In this sense, McIvor’s use can be read as more synonymous with what we refer to as Bionian spaces of ‘containing’ in this Dissertation. For Winnicott’s concept, see Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, ch. 7. For McIvor’s use of the concept, see McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 22–32.

⁹⁷⁶ Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 236f.

their denials and implications in the traumatic event, and, more importantly, ‘contain’ difficult affects arising during mutual exposure, paving the way for participants to empathize with one another’s suffering. Narrative and interactive processes allow victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries and complicit bystanders to come together to confront the past and enduring social evils in a mutually empowering way, hoping to recover ‘humanity’ in perpetrators and undo the felt *powerlessness* of the victims and implicated bystanders.⁹⁷⁷

Drawing on analogies with the psychoanalytic process, Benjamin describes how the acknowledgement of trauma occasions the experience of what she calls a (moral) ‘third’ where paranoid-survivalist fears of “only-one-can-live” so endemic to our neoliberal worldview are undone.⁹⁷⁸ Here, acknowledgement holds open the space for perpetrators and bystanders to assume responsibility for the evils they have participated in, while the victim’s rightful grievances and hopes for emancipation are recognized. The creation of spaces of truthful containing of collective wounds discloses to participants how possibilities exist where justice and peaceful coexistence can prevail despite past wrongs, as those who participated in oppression still deserve survival, recognition, and protection.

When practiced properly, truth initiatives can compel difficult dialogues with ‘abjects’ as ‘viable,’ flesh-and-bone human beings, undoing abjective social splits. By concentrating on race and ethnic conflicts, TRCs refuse to consign painful histories to oblivion and aim not only to truthfully depict past traumas but also to trace the ongoing psychological and social impacts past events congeal. As traumatic pasts and strong disagreements are expressed and contained, emancipatory ideals beyond identitarian survivalism, hitherto foreclosed by repressive denials, may emerge. Although not directly addressed at economic issues, truth and reconciliation initiatives may be a significant step in chipping away at abjecting dynamics supporting the neoliberal present.

⁹⁷⁷ Ibid., 241–43.

⁹⁷⁸ Benjamin, "Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma," 402.

8.3.3. Mournful Resistances

Any account of mournful spaces cannot ignore public mourning. Rituals of mourning enable the affective constellation surrounding losses to be made conscious and contained in a group. Although the loss of particular persons and groups that induce social mourning rituals may appear distinct from the mourning of social phantasies we have been emphasizing, the former can well be the occasion for the latter.

More specifically, rituals of public mourning often point beyond the sole focus on particular persons lost, and can extend into impassioned interrogations of the (psychic and social) contexts of the loss, along with negotiations of one's relationality and existing fantasies.⁹⁷⁹ Judith Butler captures aspects of the reverberations of grief when she describes how grief disorients the self-sufficient 'I,' revealing the relations and bonds that constitute it.⁹⁸⁰ Such disorientation can, through mourning, occasion a recognition of common vulnerability that counters fantasies of omnipotence and invulnerability and impels us to value the lives of others.⁹⁸¹

In his more recent reflections, Butler focuses on how public mourning of abjected groups harbours potential for a 'mournful' form of resistance and coexistence. Given how, under existing social norms, mourning of social abjects is often policed and repressed, public mourning of the socially abjected can escalate into a form of Antigonean resistance.⁹⁸² Butler argues that when groups deemed abject publicly mourn and persist on the street in the face of police crackdowns, their persistence resists repressive forces that deem their lives unworthy of social support. By demonstrating the persistence of abjected bodies against social forces, public mourning also brings into view, performatively, the systemic forces that dispossess and precaritize.⁹⁸³ This reclaims public spaces against abjecting forces and presses a "bodily

⁹⁷⁹ Jack Santino, "Public Mourning: Displays of Grief and Grievance," in *Exploring Grief* (Routledge, 2019).

⁹⁸⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21–23.

⁹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

⁹⁸² See Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 80–83.

⁹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 83.

demands for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity.”⁹⁸⁴

Psychosocially speaking, reclaiming public spaces of mourning is likely to be an essential step in sorting out the particularly tangled emotions, traumas and losses stigmatized groups are forced to carry under the abjecting regime.⁹⁸⁵ From within the assembly, containing affects are *shared* through corporeally embodying the idea of mutual support and interdependence. Beyond the group itself, Antigonian resistance can also disrupt dominant phantasies and potentially expand social spaces of containing to include abjects. Aside from the image of vulnerable, injured bodies’ calls to empathetic identification,⁹⁸⁶ mournful, persistent abject bodies refusing to be dispersed is “a way to put the body on the line in its insistence, obduracy, and precarity”⁹⁸⁷ for public view in a manner comparable to the transference return of the horrifying abject as whole and real in the psychoanalytic setting. In important senses, insofar as our psychosocial order tries to dispose of its unwanted parts by flattening and eradicating their abject carriers, the rebellious assembly of bodies on the street to mourn the ungrievable performs the ineradicability of the abjected, by insisting on their right to appear and to be protected. In this sense, the persistence and appearance of the abjected to mourn their losses emphatically demands the recognition of socially invisibilized suffering, and enacts a vision of social coexistence where everyone's life could and should be safeguarded.

8.3.4. Limitations for Existing Proposals and the Need for Counterpublics

⁹⁸⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁸⁵ For a brief description of how social stigma hinders mourning, see Volkan and Zintl, *Life after Loss: The Lessons of Grief*, 51–58.

⁹⁸⁶ Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 100–03.

⁹⁸⁷ Ibid., 98.

The three examples outlined thus far inspire further experimentation. They are nowhere near sufficient to bring about shifts in consciousness and psychodynamics requisite for full emancipatory changes.

For one, mournful approaches to public deliberation are the exception. As an ideal, it runs counter to structurally overdetermined neoliberal dynamics, including the colonization of the attention economy, the deepening of paranoid splits, the acceleration of modes of living, and material deprivation. It is quite inconceivable how far such spaces can go without coming into confrontation with structural forces that insist that the economy is a zero-sum game.

TRCs are at best ‘ambivalent’ when it comes to tackling economic injustices. As commentators remarked, TRCs’ emphasis on past violence and injustice can challenge socio-material contexts and enduring beneficiaries of said injustices⁹⁸⁸, as they can marginalize those who become ‘too’ (economically) radical for refusal to be reconciled under the neoliberal order. Meister’s poignant account of TRCs warns against how contemporary narratives of transition can silence radical victims and let beneficiaries of continued injustices keep their gains by relegating sufferings and traumas to the past, favouring acknowledgement and compassionate witness for victims over material compensation.⁹⁸⁹ Without awareness of such pitfalls, reconciliation initiatives can obfuscate material deprivation and precarization that follow ethnicized and racialized lines, and can, indeed, alienate others who are similarly materially deprived under neoliberalism.

Similarly, Butler’s portrayal of the resistive and universalising effects of mournful public assemblies might strike one as romantic insofar as such effects are not guaranteed. Butler is realistic enough to acknowledge that grief’s disorientation does not always prompt reparative responses. Exposed vulnerability can as much trigger the desire to preserve the other’s life as

⁹⁸⁸ McIvor’s insightful account emphasizes the inherent “ambivalence” of TRCs, realistically charting how reconciliatory efforts can have normalizing effects of splitting-off past injustices, while showing with examples how well-designed efforts may ‘chip away’ phantasmatic narratives, opening up spaces for a consideration of injustices in broad, socio-historical contexts. With some hopefulness, McIvor also remarks that the ambivalently progressive effects of TRCs may not be entirely encapsulated by the official works, but in its more radical ‘ripple effects.’ McIvor, *Mourning in America*, esp. ch.5.

⁹⁸⁹ Meister, *After Evil*.

it can trigger defences of *projective disavowal and aggression*.⁹⁹⁰ Instead of forming inclusive alliances against precarization, groups gathering in solidarity to mourn losses and resist disenfranchisement may also do so by mirroring neoliberal survivalism – identifying ‘chosen’ groups of victims whose sole suffering should be recognized lest others ‘should’ die.⁹⁹¹ This is why Butler considers it a difficult task to hold open possibilities of mournful affirmation of vulnerability and interdependency.⁹⁹² Furthermore, even where non-identitarian alliances against precarity are formed, media coverage and spread of progressive protest imageries are likely subjected to powerful dominant paranoid abjective frames which can derail their public influence and reinforce popular support for crackdowns and fascist counter-mobilizations.⁹⁹³ Perhaps one can read Butler’s hopeful account of Antigonean mourning as betraying some form of desperation: That mournful solidarity has to be expressed as a vulnerable, *fugitive* force in so many instances, testifies to how socially and psychically unthinkable mourning is as a progressive social practice.

Aside from these practice-specific limitations, perhaps the most difficult problem with existing practices of social mourning is their indirect approach to addressing the persistence of material injustices under the neoliberal economy. The point here, of course, is not that the economic is

⁹⁹⁰ Butler’s critical reconstruction of America’s response to 9/11 testifies to how exposed vulnerability of grief can seduce the self into melancholic denial by defending one’s supposed invulnerability through murderous destruction. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 38–42. See also *ibid.*, esp. chs. 2, 5; Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), chs. 2–3. For examples of local mobilizations, right-wing identitarian articulations such as the “Unite the Right” movement, would be responses to precarization that doubles down on neoliberal survivalism, in which dependency and the equal right to live and be supported is manically denied, as the right to live is restricted to the in-group

⁹⁹¹ For discussions of identitarian, exclusionary responses to victimization, see e.g. McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, ch. 12. Benjamin captures the psychodynamic logic of victimhood very well when she proposes, as a related concept to survivalist ‘only-one-can-live,’ ‘only-one-can-be-recognized’: “For each group, the need for recognition by the other was always liable to threaten its own precarious sense of being recognized as deserving to have its own injuries acknowledged. A struggle for recognition [in the form of Hegel’s life-and-death struggle] between groups could be triggered at any moment. Each group was afraid of losing its moral status.” See Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 237.

⁹⁹² “I am trying to struggle toward an affirmation of interdependency in what I have offered here, but I am trying to underscore just how difficult it is to struggle for social and political forms that are committed to fostering a sustainable interdependency on egalitarian terms.” Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 120.

⁹⁹³ Written in early 2010s, Butler’s *Notes* seemed not concerned enough about the paranoid dynamics endogenous to digitally platformed communications, only emphasizing their resistive potentials. See, *ibid.*, 92–95. For earlier discussions on digital publics, see Chapter 6 above.

distinct from cultural and psycho-social logics.⁹⁹⁴ However, if even our most refined mourning practices can only indirectly challenge the precarizing economic order – specifically through acknowledgement and deliberative efforts that only confront violence and injustices in the neoliberal economy indirectly – then Dean might be correct in claiming that ‘democratic’ practices, including our mournful articulation of it, could serve to ideologically sustain the economy by “performing resistance to keep the illusion of democracy alive, enough to ward off revolution”.⁹⁹⁵

The conclusion is not that existing reconciliatory efforts are meaningless, but that they must meet *struggles against the socio-economic structure*. We should imagine new counter-neoliberalization, counter-capitalist public spaces, where structural logics of capitalist cannibalisation are exposed, narratives of alienation and exploitation heard, class interests of the precarious constructed, and emancipatory imaginaries negotiated. Borrowing from Negt and Kluge, what is needed may range from a resistive, ‘*counterpublic sphere*’ to a ‘*proletarian*’ public sphere (if we consider the existing, democratic public as irredeemably capitalist).⁹⁹⁶

However we name them, such spaces should prepare for a fundamental restructuring of neoliberal psychopolitics towards the universal fulfilment of needs in a thorough-going “radical revolutionizing of forms of production and thought, customs and emotions.”⁹⁹⁷ In our context, this involves, arguably, a collective reckoning surrounding the devastating effects of the capitalist economy and how our compulsive attachment to it wounds us and blocks our resistive

⁹⁹⁴ As our account of neoliberal psychopolitics showed, economic distribution intersects deeply with psychosocial regimes of identification and abjection as both are mutually reinforcing. If the economic and the psychosocial are at base imbricated, then adequate challenges to psychosocial problems would likely also inspire revolutions in the economy. More positively put, disentangling melancholic and abjective splits in the psychosocial fabric is likely a pivotal step in dismantling the essential supports for continued exploitation and expropriations.

⁹⁹⁵ Dean, “Communicative Capitalism,” 331.

⁹⁹⁶ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*. Negt and Kluge does not read ‘proletariat’ in purely socio-economic terms, nor does he equate it with self-conscious working-class as Marx does. Agreeing with Marx in considering the ‘proletariat’ as class *for itself*, Negt and Kluge see the “proletariat” as a “category of negation.” But they the idea of the ‘proletariat’ beyond wage-labourers, to everyone who “remained underdeveloped, marginalized, oppressed within our current cultural, political and economic system.” See Samaniego de la Fuente, “The Persistence of Resistance and the Emancipatory Power of the Aesthetic: On Negt and Kluge’s Critical Theory,” 256–60.

⁹⁹⁷ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 160. Negt and Kluge’s ideal is most illustrative here insofar as it names how revolutionary changes in both the economy (forms of production) and experiencing (thought, customs, and emotions) are necessary.

imaginings. More positively, what is needed are spaces of mournful containing where the knowledge of our current deadlocks may emerge, new, imaginative, and potentially revolutionary ways of living and organizing can be collectively thought and experimented, and the grief and fears involved in resistance shared and contained.

Insofar as psycho-social and historical logics penetrate the neoliberal order, such a project may draw not only upon rising discontents towards ‘oligarchic power,’ but may also forge non-reductive, non-identitarian coalitions with existing anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-sexist, and anti-psychiatric struggles. This may start hopefully by opening narratives from diverse frames and translating the critique of political economy into diverse narratives of felt concerns. Furthermore, given the colonization of media and communication spaces by techno-capital, modes of engagement and connection beyond politainment and short-form exchanges must be sought. Lessons from deliberative mini-publics and TRCs, as well as theories of public mourning, may be helpful. In the penultimate section below, I shall offer some provisional notes on what such lessons can be drawn.

8.4. Maintaining Resistive Spaces of Containing and Mourning

“Counterpublics” and “proletarian public spheres” are names for a possibility of collectively surviving and resisting neoliberal capitalism whose content must be sought through experimental practices. We do not know and should not pretend that we know what they are like until they begin to take shape. But, against the degradation of emancipatory hopes into self-righteous, infantile fantasizing within isolated echo-chambers, the following cautionary notes may be useful.

8.4.1. Avoiding Paranoid and Abjective Defences

Continuous our earlier discussions, we should avoid tendencies that mirror survivalist and repressive logics. For instance, resistance movements should avoid the pitfalls of self-righteousness and paranoid elevation of revolutionary ethics and fidelity into vengeful blaming. Of particular danger are toxic idealisations, rationalizations, and moralizations that are

defensively used to preserve the *knowing, omnipotent self* by excluding challenges to one's position. Although obstinacy and steadfastness in the face of social evils are virtues (resistance can hardly come from a compliant collective), we should warn against the vices of intransigent moralizing that bespeaks paranoid-schizoid defences against the recognition of the limits of our judgements.⁹⁹⁸ Commenting on resisting the bad influence of our world, Adorno remarks that "true injustice is always to be found at the precise point where you put yourself in the right and other people in the wrong" and the reliable antidote to self-assertiveness depends on our ability to "[reflect] on our own limitations" – a possibility, we saw, should be done in the spirit of mourning.⁹⁹⁹

Relatedly, the psychodynamics of antagonization and confronting injustices need to be rethought. Important distinctions have to be made between (i) confronting and calling out the wrongdoing of perpetrators and beneficiaries of the system and vengefully sending people to the 'guillotine,'¹⁰⁰⁰ and (ii) when vengeful retaliation is sought, the various motivations and justifications behind it. While wrongs and systemic injustices have to be forcefully confronted to honour the universal claim of the precarious to protection and justice, the connection between emancipatory aims and the vengeful desire to punish perpetrators is more suspicious.

There is no denying that anger and vengefulness may be an ineradicable part of the frame of mind that sustains emancipatory fighting.¹⁰⁰¹ However, unless such vengefulness is understood and its pitfalls confronted, the need for revenge and purity can alienate those who accrued some benefits from the system, preventing them from acknowledging their complicity and allying in

⁹⁹⁸ Kleinian theories best identify the dangers of morality deployed in a paranoid-schizoid manner, reflecting the superegotic severity that must repress all consciousness of ambivalence and impurity in order to fend off horrors of paranoid intrusion and debilitating depression. For illuminating accounts of paranoid-schizoid moralizing, see e.g. Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," 233f. For more philosophical reflections on ethical violence and the 'limits of judgement,' see also Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), ch. 2.

⁹⁹⁹ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 169.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Benjamin, "Wolf's Dictionary," 481 f.

¹⁰⁰¹ This is not a moralizing denunciation of vengefulness and anger we find in the likes of Stoics and Martha Nussbaum. Anger may very well be, as Amia Srinivasan argues, a normatively appropriate way of emotionally registering an unjust reality. Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger." The problem with anger here is *whether* anger is used defensively to prop up the omnipotent self, or is mediated by a realistic sense of ambivalence and finitude. For a discussion of the two forms of anger, see McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 45–48; Josh Cohen, *All the Rage: Why Anger Drives the World* (Granta Books, 2024), chs. 1, 4.

coalitional resistances against shared precarization. Most insidiously perhaps is how vengefulness *projectively disowns* one's material and psychological implication in the system onto the other we vengefully punish, blinding us to our own evils.

8.4.2. Opening Spaces to Conflicts

If counterpublic spheres are to be spaces of containing and potential free association, they should strive to be inclusive and should avoid degrading into echo-chambers or arenas for mutual mockery like existing digital publics. It is ironic to believe that open-mindedness can be practiced in a segregated space where people of similar identifications speak to one another. Yet, when filter bubbles burst, conflicts and clashes of opinions are likely. Indeed, if we believe in the psychoanalytic model of dialogue, then transference provocations and bitter conflicts must be confronted before a meaningful collective is possible.

Following McAfee, difficult emotions are an expected part of deliberations, and arrangements acceptable to all can congeal only if we allow participants to voice frustrations and free associate. We do not completely own our speech. When the emotional stakes of the issues are high, conflicts and enactments are inevitable. We can hardly reach a 'reasonable' solution without ploughing through conflicts, enactments, and even temporary chaos.¹⁰⁰²

An awareness of the unavoidability of difficult emotions and heated disagreements may change how we approach counterpublics. While the emergence of potentially disruptive emotions such as hate and depressive despair can destroy spaces of dialogue, psychoanalytically speaking, the moment such affects are experienced in full intensity is often also when the transference can be most effectively tackled by containing and interpretative understanding. Difficult as conflicts may be, they can pave the way to a possible resolution of deep-seated traumas and scars. Against splitting tendencies to deny guilt and complicity, the containing of transference

¹⁰⁰² Drawing upon his experience in group analysis, Bollas wrote: "the reasoned self evolves gradually out of an internal democracy of many competing ideas that, in the beginning might more accurately be described as mental chaos." Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*, 88.

conflicts by the group can also allow its members to become aware of gaps in their defensive narratives, so that guilt can be re-accessed and reparation and mourning begin.

Whether conflictual dialogue is an opportunity for working through or continuation of business-as-usual significantly depends on whether the transference is repressively shoved aside or welcomed in the spirit of containing receptivity. In this regard, the rationalist temptation to police dialogue and impose norms of ‘civility’ may well cut short working-through. Indeed, by restricting the forms dialogue can take, norms of civility can be complicit in the collective avoidance of guilt and mournful knowledge. It reinforces social denials (and exclusions) that keep unresolved antipathies, hurt, wounds, and injustices from consciousness *by outlawing their mode of expression in dialogical spaces where such wounds have the best chance to be resolved.*¹⁰⁰³ In the same way as the violently repressed returns in the individual as symptoms, the danger is that such wounds are deepened by repression and become spectres that haunt the group in evermore disruptive and unpredictable ways.

As such, the building up of a good counterpublic sphere can begin by *resisting the urge to dictate the terms for resolving conflicts (before the process even starts!)* and *the desire to police ‘irrational’ emotional expressions in public spaces (except in instances of threats or disruptions that tangibly destroy the space of discussion)*. Like the individual, progress towards maturity of a public sphere lies less in miming impossible ideals of Stoical detachment, than in the practising of open-mindedness, the ability to endure regressive conflicts, feelings of helplessness and disorientation without denial and abjection.

8.4.3. “Containing” in collectives

Of course, counterpublics should do more than test people’s emotional tolerance. They should strive to contain and metabolise disruptions so that hitherto repressed and abjected feelings of

¹⁰⁰³ Cf. McIvor’s remark: “Norms such as civility serve a psychopolitical function. They betray an anxious fear of loss (and subsequent duty of mourning) that would arise should the idealized object prove to be implicated in a history of violent persecution or misrecognition.” McIvor, *Mourning in America*, 152.

hurt and guilt can be reintegrated into the life of the collective. This is not easy, as we know with digital publics – the intensity of conflicts breeds splitting and paranoid antagonizations.

Part of the success of containing involves whether there can be a realistic sense of hope to contain the disruption and learn from it, even when conflicts are at their height. In therapy, the analyst's ability to contain the patient's disruptive emotions depends on the analyst's training. During breakdowns, the patient works with the faith they 'borrow' from their analyst, who has been in a similar painful situation but survived, better integrated because others had helped her contain her inner troubles.¹⁰⁰⁴ It would be ideological to assume that we can similarly delineate therapist/patient roles in the counterpublic (injustices and wounds of neoliberal social context afflict everyone),¹⁰⁰⁵ although it may be useful if members, better-integrated by fortunate upbringing and by individual efforts, can support the group through difficult times.¹⁰⁰⁶

Beyond such inchoate hopefulness, experience from group psychoanalysis and TRCs has also observed that in-person, smaller group meetings are better at containing conflicts with the 'whole,' embodied character of the other resisting identification with paranoid symbols.¹⁰⁰⁷ Such observations point to the need to relocate sectoral, sensationalised political communications from paranoid digital spaces to the direction of smaller-group, more local interactions, although there is also a need for small-group resolutions to be relayed to larger-scale organizing.

¹⁰⁰⁴ On 'borrowed faith,' see McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy: A Practitioner's Guide*, 42–44.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Cf. Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, 169.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Relevant here in the psychosocial literature are discussions of paranoid leaders and 'reparative' leaders, the latter using their reparative capacities to transform the psychology group culture in a reparative direction. See, Volkan, *Large-Group Psychology: Racism, Societal Divisions, Narcissistic Leaders, and Who We Are Now*, ch. 4; Alford, *Melanie Klein & Critical Social Theory*, ch. 3. Also of interest is how Winnicott describes "ordinary good homes" as "the setting in which the innate democratic factor can be created." D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (WW Norton, 1986), 246–47. The significance of private experience of being contained is another reason why individual and local practices of free association and containing must be maintained even if a larger counterpublic is yet to be formed. Without pockets of local refuges, even the faint hope of a better public will be extinguished.

¹⁰⁰⁷ See, McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, ch. 8; McIvor, *Mourning in America*; Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 236–37. For the psychotic inducing logics of large groups, see also Turquet, "Threats to Identity in the Large Group."; Bollas, "Civilization and the Discontented."; Kernberg, "Sanctioned Social Violence."

To be sure, small groups are no panacea for conflicts.¹⁰⁰⁸ In line with analytic spaces, the spirit of free-association may best be maintained if its members are committed to avoiding meeting potential emotions with retaliation or alienating judgments. There is perhaps nothing more counterproductive to understanding than when provocations are responded to with retaliation. Retaliation confirms paranoid fears and heightens the need of each party to project and disown. It accepts and identifies with the grammar of paranoid/survivalist projections that the provocateur produces, so that one party wins as the other must lose; so that one is right and the other must yield and repent. Instead of *transforming* enactments into a possibility for insight and mutual understanding, retaliation deepens scars as it confirms ‘only-one-can-live,’ sadomasochistic phantasies.¹⁰⁰⁹

Aside from straightforward retaliation, the inability to contain also shows up in premature attempts to judge, correct, and sometimes give well-meaning advice. For one, the pedagogical stance can bespeak a cold wish to demonstrate superiority from the other, setting up the self as knowing and the other as ignorant.¹⁰¹⁰ The impatient eagerness to judge and set things straight can also be a defence against the complexities of the situation, arguably out of fear of confronting the pain of mourning, guilt, and fears that the recognition of these complexities evokes.¹⁰¹¹ In either case, the premature urge to distinguish oneself from the other can be

¹⁰⁰⁸ It is Bion who observed psychotic – ‘basic assumption’ – functioning even in small therapy groups without histories of conflict. See, Bion, *Experiences in Groups, and Other Papers*.

¹⁰⁰⁹ The talk of ‘retaliation’ here arguably also covers some forms of ‘rational debate,’ especially those that now pervade online political spaces taking the model of “X defeats 20 Ys with logic.” (On nature of influencer debates, see Finlayson, “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web,” 181.) As Jessica Benjamin observes, even the exchange of justifications can turn people into self-protectiveness and self-legitimation. Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 238–39. This is not a call to replace rational argumentation, but a recommendation to also consider the affective saliences reason-giving evokes.

¹⁰¹⁰ This can be connected to Rancière’s criticism of the “science of inequality” which, by assuming that one party knows more about emancipation, establishes the separation between “the learned ones and the ignorant ones.” See Jacques Rancière, “The Method of Equality,” in *Recognition or Disagreement*, ed. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Deranty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 134–35.

¹⁰¹¹ Cf. Judith Butler’s remark: “Condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, even to purge oneself of another. Condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn. In this sense, condemnation can work against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralizes a self by disavowing commonality with the judged.” Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 46.

experienced by the other as patronizing, and risks misrepresenting the other's felt concerns through covert delegitimation.

For a model of better containing interactions, consider Bollas's extension of psychic receptivity into a model for democratic coexistence. Analogizing the life of the group with the receptive ego which can 'democratically' integrate fractious parts of the self, Bollas suggest that the group may contain without splitting. Drawing upon Bion, Bollas proposes that thoughts and feelings that emerge during collective free-association – including disruptive and painful ones – can be "reworded as a group position" because "each member of the group [may also] at certain moments experience those same sorts of feelings."¹⁰¹²

Although rewording seems straightforward, it encourages the group (*and its members*) to move beyond splitting and into *identifying with the parts (of the group and of the self) that cause disruption*.¹⁰¹³ This identification opens up the possibility that individuals who 'stir up the dirt' are included in a collective (potentially implicated) 'we' that is tackling the problem and repairing the damages.

As the group (and its members) proves itself willing to identify with and work through the pains of its parts, its members may no longer need to self-censor so much for fear of being cast out and thus can tolerate others speaking up with less censorship.¹⁰¹⁴ The hope is that, in this way, *the group, like a psychoanalyst, can begin to contain* struggles, disruptions, and enactments by holding, along with the disruption, other parts that can metabolize the disruptions, thereby working through the individual and shared traumas that motivate the

¹⁰¹² Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*, 85–86.

¹⁰¹³ This proposal can be read in relation to Benjamin when she argues that the transcendence of survivalism in the collectively constituted 'Third' involves the admission of destructive and self-protective urges "within ourselves" and the overcoming of it through examination of their sources. "It is from the position of the moral Third that we may admit this conflict [between our compassion and our self-preservative urges] within ourselves and struggle to transform it – not by denying the self-protective urge to turn away but by examining its sources." Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 229. See also her account of the difficulty and promises of admitting implication in "Acknowledgment, Harming, and Political Trauma."

¹⁰¹⁴ Christopher Bollas, "The Democratic Frame of Mind" (paper presented at the Seminar at Freud Museum London, 2 October 2017).

disruptions in the first place. When this is done to an enough extent, group containing may even revitalize our emancipatory ability to fantasize and freely associate.

8.4.4. Antinomies of the Therapeutic

Before moving to the final section, there is one important objection – that is, politics is not therapy: The present proposals have stretched the therapeutic beyond its rightful place.

Against this, I remind us that the therapeutic suggestions presented here are only meant to *supplement* the work of organization and resistance. We considered how therapeutic considerations of mourning and containing can be a corrective for paranoid tendencies in collective action and resistive organizing. However, the greater challenge remains whether a counterpublic aiming to challenge and dismantle neoliberal capitalism can *be mournful and therapeutic* – whether the call to mourn and repair internal splits can coexist with the need to fight, antagonise, and resist systemic injustices.

In his discussion of the therapist's need to 'survive' the patient's destructiveness, Winnicott remarked that "when the analyst knows that the patient carries a revolver, [analytic] work cannot be done."¹⁰¹⁵ This remark is relevant insofar as those who obtain perverse benefits from the system can bring (and will likely incite others to bring) 'guns' to the dialogue in the attempt to protect their vested interests. (One needs only to remember that far-right storms sweeping digital publics are in part the making of technocapital.¹⁰¹⁶) Relatedly, as Meister highlights, there are important disanalogies between therapeutic spaces and political ones – for while the former is oriented to therapy, the latter cannot do without justice. Victims of injustices *cannot and even should not be expected to* be 'good enough' containers for perpetrators and beneficiaries of injustice as therapists are expected to be.¹⁰¹⁷ To expect so is to add undue affective and moral burden on victims. That is, although they may well need to do so for the practical purposes of alliance-building for coordinated resistance.

¹⁰¹⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 123n.

¹⁰¹⁶ See 6.4 above.

¹⁰¹⁷ Meister, *After Evil*, 224–25.

The clash between the therapeutic and the conflictual nature of justice may be formulated as an irresolvable antinomy: *Where mourning and containing spaces are most needed to supplement our resistance against the unjust present, is also when these spaces are often the hardest to sustain, and such recommendations are morally unattractive.*

Must all conflicts be contained? Must everyone be included in a counterpublic? If our conception of a counterpublic purports to be all-inclusive, does the recommendation that ‘identification’ with disruptive views include those potentially from self-vindicating perpetrators and beneficiaries? Will the aversion to the pitfalls of splitting commit us to the reverse pitfalls of idolising mourning and containing, which ends up rendering the resisting collective too uncertain, too passive, too ‘kind,’ and incapable even of calling out injustices and wrong-doing? I believe there are no satisfactory answers that resolve such puzzles definitively theoretically. Hence, in the final section, my goal will be to further clarify aspects of containing counterpublic with the hopes of dispelling some pressing worries.

8.4.5. Excluding, Identifying, Interpreting

Arguably, one worry about experimenting with mournful and containing counterpublics is the fear that we lose the little remaining commitment to justice and emancipation. This can be paranoid exaggeration, but such worries may also be justified. It is likely that, given the depth of our psychosocial waters, some are too perversely wrapped up in their attachments to the unjust system, too toxic to be included in the counterpublic. Persons who are unrepentantly sociopathic, narcissistic, sadistic, and predatory – many of whom have accumulated much capital and influence in this perverse world – may be better objects of therapy than partners in counterpublics.

But still, the necessity of exclusion in practice is no justification for *whatever* form of exclusion. An overly rigid frontier may indicate a problematic psychosocial defence, while one that is more porously held may come from realistic assessments of the situation. In this sense, counterpublics may strive to be *ideally* inclusive without being unreservedly all-inclusive in

practice: No one should *in principle* be excluded from participation, but the counterpublic should not refrain from temporarily excluding, criticizing, and taking action against those whose inclusion would sabotage the emancipatory project of the whole.

As I have emphasized, there is no ambiguity in *whether* we should fight unjust systems. The real question is *how: how our commitments to emancipatory truth and justice can be expressed for it to make a meaningful difference for the collective, and not to mirror the self-righteous abjections of the system.* The previous discussions seek to show the significance of mourning and containing to our resistance against neoliberalism, while resisting the false dichotomy between fidelity to our emancipatory commitments and mournfully giving them up. Contrary to most accounts of resistance, the present proposal is committed to the possibility of *continued fighting while being mournfully self-reflective, containingly receptive, and non-paralyzingly in touch with the pains of living and resisting.*

The worry of losing precious resistive energies may be less pronounced if we understand that accepting and identifying with potential perpetrators and people holding ‘distorted’ views does not force the counterpublic to surrender its conscience. Containing interpretations may be a way to honour commitments to truth and justice.

Conceptually, *identification* as a feature of group-containing must be distinguished from *full, assimilatory* identification.¹⁰¹⁸ While the latter involves the agent/group fully taking over the perspective of the other as one’s own, the former involves empathetic acknowledgement of the affective position of the other *without becoming fully assimilated.* This is implicit when Benjamin and Bollas describe democratic group processes as capable of *holding ‘multiple’ and conflicting identifications* for consideration.¹⁰¹⁹ Here, the group *contains* the desperation and hurt of the disruptive parts without sacrificing other parts that carry sensitivities to truth and

¹⁰¹⁸ Psychoanalytically the difference between equating identification (where agent is confused with the object) and (partial) identification (where agent is not the same but just *like* the object) corresponds to how regressively paranoid and omnipotent the agent’s phantasies are. The more mature the agents are, the more capable they are in identifying with objects *without fearing that it will lose themselves in the identification.* See R. D. Hinshelwood, *Clinical Klein: From Theory to Practice* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1994), 144–48. The ability to hold selective identifications is also the key to successful mourning. See Volkan and Zintl, *Life after Loss: The Lessons of Grief*, 85–90.

¹⁰¹⁹ Bollas, *Meaning and Melancholia*, 87; Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*, 227.

justice, and may be capable of transforming the compulsions of evil.¹⁰²⁰ As plural and not incorporative, empathetic identification can counter splitting without sacrificing one's sense of truth and justice. Identification in this sense opens shared, containing spaces for its members to acknowledge and reflect upon the emotional gridlocks that would make evil and injustice seem necessary to some, and discover possibilities for repairing damages and moving forward. It does not entail replacing condemnation with vindication of wrongs.

The best embodiment of the commitment to 'truth' and the absence of complete identification in therapy lies in interpretations. In therapy, as perhaps in collective life, a containing environment cannot be sustained without the expression of truth and holding open the ability to think (otherwise). The challenge is that there is no shortage of self-validating assertions in theories and in the neoliberal market of quick-fixes purporting to be useful interpretations when their uses are at best questionable. Having alerted us to the pitfalls of splitting, vengefulness, and self-righteousness, we shall conclude our discussion with a consideration of the role of 'interpretative' work in a potential counterpublic.

As I argued in Chapter 7, interpretations are words that truthfully express the understanding of the underlying affective deadlocks of the (transference) situation, illuminating the right level of the fractal psychosocial unconscious where potentially emancipating differences may be made. The emphasis is on *truthfulness* and *use*: Good interpretations are truthful when they begin to undo disavowals and 'link' one's pains evoked by the situation to a broader context,¹⁰²¹ taking into account the role of one's (unconscious) enactments, interpersonal dynamics, and

¹⁰²⁰ This is already present in Bion's theory of emotional thinking through relational containing. The psychically receptive container is willing to receive and identify with the psychotic bits of projection from the contained, but is not inundated by them and can mobilize their 'non-psychotic' parts to metabolize it, returning the bits to the container in metabolized, meaningful, and understanding forms. See e.g. Bion, "The Differentiation of the Psychotic and the Non-Psychotic Personalities (1957)."; *Learning from Experience*, ch. 12.

¹⁰²¹ As Bion observed, therapeutic progress often involves building 'links' between isolated feelings with unconscious motivations and historical understanding. Psycho-pathological formations fragments interconnections between various thoughts and feelings, such that unconscious deadlocks in object-relations are not recognized as (partial) fabrications of the self and (projectively) disowned as problems/intrusions of the outside. By connecting the agent's feelings with one's enactments and (life) history, good interpretations attempt to reconnect the severed links so that new understandings of the situation are formed with less need to project. For examples of how interpretations 'link,' see Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 131–34.

their historical conditioning.¹⁰²² Interpretations are useful when they are made *at the right time and in the right way, balancing* empathetic identification with the need to facilitate confrontation of the pains of truthful understanding.¹⁰²³ While the literature on therapeutic progress offers no good existing models for ‘interpretations’ in public spheres, here may be some pointers.

Truthful to the fractal analogy, it is helpful to consider how ‘truths’ concerning social structure can be used in the manner of a good psychosocial interpretation.¹⁰²⁴ Critical work of theorists and social scientists has disclosed the structural evils of the neoliberal order and debunked ideologies, but the level of abstraction these analyses operate at can render them irrelevant or alienating to the everyday perspective. Good interpretations occur when the critique of social structures can engage the language of ‘felt concerns’ in deliberations. By connecting structural understandings to felt concerns as the substance of political emotions and deliberative conflicts, critiques can best make a difference. For example, analysing the specifics of the class structure can not only help develop theories about ‘false consciousness.’ It may also help individuals understand the limits of their (class) experience and foster greater empathy with individuals of different social classes – even when their views may seem at first repugnant.

With regards to *timing* and *form* of interpretation, I have argued against pedagogical stance that distances from and covertly delegitimizes the views of others. To make it clear, pedagogy and judgments are discouraged not because what they express is untrue, but because they are often ineffectual and self-righteous. Psychoanalysts have variously emphasized that interpretations should not cut short the development of emotions and narratives in the transference. Winnicott explained that offering interpretations that are unnecessary in the current context is like “indoctrination.” This can make the analyst feel ‘clever,’ but it may cause the patient to either

¹⁰²² Cf. “[A] full interpretation will involve interpreting the patient’s feelings, anxieties, and defences, taking into account the stimulus in the present and the reliving of the past.” Segal, *The Work of Hanna Segal*, 70. Terms such as “past” and “history” mostly refers to personal histories in Segal and other Kleinians, but in our context, we may extend it to historical and enduring socio-historical determinants of our psyche under our neoliberal economy.

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¹⁰²⁴ See also, Allen’s account of how critical theories can function as interpretations. The remarks here supplements Allen’s more formal account by focusing on how critiques may be *delivered and used* in the potential counterpublic. Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, ch. 5.

conform to or reject the interpretation, neither of which helps the other to think for themselves.¹⁰²⁵

I do not see how anyone should practice the analyst's terseness in social spaces, but adopting the virtues of *patient listening* against the temptations of premature interpretations and sounding 'clever' may make spaces more inclusive and democratic.¹⁰²⁶ After all, one's understanding of the world is only one fallible contribution to emancipatory imaginaries. To be sure, our collective fight for emancipation cannot do without knowledge of structure and psychology. Yet, values and fantasies worthy of being shared can only emerge when everyone's rightful grievances and struggles are heard and acknowledged without epistocratic bias.

With disruptive transferential conflicts, there may be little one can say in the abstract beyond recommendations to empathetically identify and be ready for bitter conflicts and painful realizations. But perhaps identification and empathy cannot be endlessly stretched without it becoming an unrealistic, masochistic burden for the counterpublic. If psychoanalytic lessons are useful here, honest and impassioned verbal expression of hate and repugnance to destructive acts of a partner in interaction may be more emphatic and powerful than passive avoidance or active retaliation.¹⁰²⁷

Let me add a final note on the role of the counterpublic sphere in the context of sustained social and economic injustices. Several psychosocial theorists saw the collapse of accountability and 'inspiring' forms of social authority under neoliberalism as the cause of psychosocial maladies. The same theorists also called for a return to accountability and authority in our society's

¹⁰²⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 68, 116. See also Bollas's account of 'extractive identification' in Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, ch. 9.

¹⁰²⁶ Perhaps too conditioned by the relentless of philosophical debates, it seems a perennial temptation for theorists – whether conservative, liberal or revolutionary – to dictate the terms of the deliberations and discussions to be made, as if they have a privileged access to a context-transcendent viewpoint. In line with Allen's characterization, I see the theorist as an "engaged participant" whose has had "the experience of having undergone a change in their relationship to their social world." Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, 175. So long as this experience is fallible, the theorist is not 'master' – it helps that theorists do not pretend that they are either in making grandiose proclamations and attend to social phenomena as a participant in open-ended, open-minded dialogue.

¹⁰²⁷ It is interesting how, in the context of discussing a difficult child, Winnicott in his discussion of hate, describes how the verbal expression of (non-retaliatory, 'objective') hate can "enable [him] to tolerate the situation without letting out, without losing [his] temper, and without every now and then murdering [the difficult child]." Winnicott, *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, 200.

institutions.¹⁰²⁸ While accountability and authority of institutions are constituents of a better psychosocial environment, the danger of such proposals is that they put too much trust in liberal institutions that have, since the beginning of neoliberalism, failed to challenge the onslaught of capital.

To the degree that the balance between cannibalistic capitalism and its liberal-democratic face is no longer sustainable,¹⁰²⁹ a good containing environment is only achievable in (anti-capitalist) *counterpublics*. There, accountability can perhaps best be expressed in the *struggle* for accountability, by obstinate counterpublic movements that refuse to let systemic injustices go unacknowledged and for wrongs go unaccounted for. Inspiring authorities are perhaps best embodied by people of counterpublic spaces demonstrating that obstinacy and resistance can coexist with free-association and containing, and where past and present evils can be called out and repaired without the need for anyone to be symbolically murdered.

8.5. Conclusion

There is perhaps a reason why the conclusion to this chapter feels more uncertain than the preceding ones – namely, that a vision for a post-neoliberal world is, at present, difficult to imagine. It is in line with the diagnosis of wounding attachments in earlier chapters that resistance worthy of the name is a difficult struggle against the inertias of one's psyche and the system: How are we supposed to resist internalized structures hammered into us by an increasingly punitive economic order? How is it possible for us to contain one another, when paranoid thinking has wound itself deeply in our institutions and social interactions? The Siren songs that promise emancipatory beauty whimper in the face of manic remixes of survivalist ideology on the sinking ship of the neoliberal Odysseus.

¹⁰²⁸ Bollas, "Civilization and the Discontented."; Altman, "Manic Society."; Peltz, "The Manic Society."

¹⁰²⁹ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*; Streeck, *Buying Time*.

Yet, if there is still a basis for hope that is not downright irresponsible, it may be that by holding up spaces for mourning and mutual containing that a more concrete, more open-minded image of emancipation may open up.

By way of Conclusion: Mourning, the Impossible

“Now fading at the end of the line
So if there's any future where we survive
Ah, then would we meet again?”

The children came from outer space
A different kind, a different age
And found the paradise we made”

– *per se*, “the ENDchild”

Why *mourn* neoliberalism? Why not just organize and revolt? Why give neoliberalism so much weight and not play or think about something else?

Throughout this Dissertation, I have given an extended answer to these questions: Our allegiance to the neoliberal system is sustained through wounding attachments. For many of us, we reproduce the cannibalising system out of our addiction to the rewards, promises, ritualised flow, transient feelings of omnipotence, and security the system grants and cheats us of. We are also attached to the order through internalised threats functioning as a punitive superegotic gaze that forbids system-incongruent motives and thoughts, including those that oppose the nonsense of the system and those that might free us from the cannibalizing hand that feeds us.

Psychodynamically speaking, mourning is the process necessary for our detachment from any object of attachment. Any significant (developmental) change in our mode of relating to the objects we love or depend on requires painful *mourning for the phantasies* we hold about them and ourselves. If we are to be liberated from the order that suffocatingly commands our attachment, mourning is required. Mourning, individually and collectively, potentially opens us up to a world of imaginative possibilities beyond neoliberalism.

There is a more direct reason for using ‘mourning’ over other concepts to name our task. Under the concept of ‘mourning,’ psychoanalytic theory has generalized the course of bereavement after significant losses as an exemplary model for the painful path we have to tread for us to

maturely respond to the challenges of *Ananke* of human life. In this Dissertation, I have tried to show that this mournful course to maturity is as much psychosocial as it is developmental – that psychosocial maturity requires us to transform our social world’s omnipotent and abjecting fantasies into ones that properly honour everyone’s right to live with dignity and recognition.¹⁰³⁰

If we delve a bit into the comparison of psychosocial maturation with bereavement, interesting parallels light up. When we have lost something important, we are also at a loss. The psychoanalytic comparison of psychic development with bereavement highlights how *disorientation can emerge at any moment where change is required*. As Freud observed, in bereavement, we may know that we have lost something, but do not always know ‘what it is that we have lost’ in losing the object.¹⁰³¹ We may know that getting through loss, cutting our attachment, and moving forward without the object is the only realistic way forward, but it is as if our mind condemns us to meander and perform the detachment in some of the most ‘uneconomic,’ energy-costly way.¹⁰³² Indeed, what bereavement teaches us is that an ever-present challenge of mourning is the threat of despair – the feeling that we may *not survive without the objects we need to forgo, and that we do not know how to mournfully prepare for a future without the object of attachment*.¹⁰³³

Zooming out to our neoliberal world, we can see how mourning is paradoxically almost forced upon us as it is made excessively difficult. On the one hand, it escalates our fantasies to impossible levels as it exhorts us with false promises of perfect solutions, demands for the impossible, and threats of shame into taking up omnipotent pretences. On the other hand, our world, by manically and paranoically disavowing the costs of its actions, is drowning masses

¹⁰³⁰ A mournful mode of social coexistence has been raised by a number of Klein-inspired social critics. See, McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*; Balbus, *Mourning and Modernity: Essays in the Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Society*. My earlier attempt is outlined in Yeung, "Psychoanalyzing Democracies."

¹⁰³¹ Freud, SE 14: 245.

¹⁰³² As Freud put it, it is a puzzle for his economic theory of libido “why [mourning’s] compromise by which the command of reality is carried out piecemeal should be so extraordinarily painful” Freud, SE 14: 245.

¹⁰³³ “The situation [of loss] often presents as a kind of paradox because the mourner has somehow to allow his object to go even though he is convinced that he himself will not survive the loss. The work of mourning involves facing this paradox and the despair associated with it.” Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, 35.

in precarity, forcing the growing pool of abjects to bear its costs, eventually inundating its creations in the world catastrophe it produces. Yet, our neoliberal world, by using our wounding attachments and our natural resistance to mourning, defends TINA ('there is no alternative'), and heightens our sense of depression, doom and hopelessness to support its manic profit-extracting operations.

In this world where loss is painful, ubiquitous and seemingly unavoidable, mourning confronts what Lear calls the 'difficulty of reality.'¹⁰³⁴ Any imagination of a different world must confront the task of mourning the (almost) impossible. In this world, mourning can offer no guaranteed solutions or promises of a comforting return to normalcy. The only promise it can truly hold is that of resisting a world that manically reproduces hopelessness, while clutching at straws for a future beyond despair. Mourning, now, *names* the hope that it is still possible to wrest room to create living possibilities in an impossible world.

Perhaps this time of seemingly necessary but impossible mourning bars us from making firm conclusions. Amid the disorienting flip-flops between manic hopefulness and depressive despair, we do not conclusively know what we should do.

Returning to the epigraph with which I opened the Introduction, I retained the sense of doom. But whether we are *hopelessly* doomed or not, there is still some time for some good mourning – or at least that is the name for what the better part of us imagines we can still do.

¹⁰³⁴ Lear's characterization of the "difficulty of reality" refers to instances where the mind's ability to use concepts – such as those of 'mourning' and 'death' – to encompass reality is radically challenged. Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, ch. 6.

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