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Capitalism and the Psyche:
Social Relations, Subjectivity and the Structure of the Unconscious

Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*, Columbia University Press, 2020, 280 pages, Paperback, $28.00/£22.00, ISBN: 9780231198615.

Amy Allen and Brian O'Connor (eds.), *Transitional Subjects: Critical Theory and Object Relations*, Columbia University Press, 2019, 269 pages, Paperback, $30.00, ISBN 9780231183192.

Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*, Verso, 2015, 248 pages, Paperback, £19.99, ISBN: 9781784781088.

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Introduction

The steady rise of far-right populist parties and movements since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008 has led to widespread fears of a return of fascism. In response historians, political scientists, philosophers and sociologists have all weighed in on these developments, debating whether former US President Donald Trump is a fascist (or merely displays fascistic tendencies), whether the new "illiberal democracies" in Central Europe are the forebears of a new form of totalitarianism, and what should be done about the global resurgence of old slogans and symbols from the 1920s and 1930s. While it has been clear for some time that Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama 1989) was wrong to see liberal democracy's victory during the Cold War as the 'end of history,' the resurgence of fascist approaches to politics has also undermined the optimism of the years following 1945, much less 1989.

While the new cottage industry on the parallels between Weimar and the present has many different tropes and tendencies, it has clearly led to a renaissance of 'therapy speak' in the public sphere. This is particularly visible in the desire to frame the current situation as a 'return of the repressed' (Streeck 2017). The idea that the collective insecurity generated by economic hard times leads to feelings of persecutory anxiety that result in polarization and communal disintegration, just as they did during the interwar years, is particularly prevalent.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the desire to apply psychoanalysis to broader social and political issues has also led to a renewed interest in the critical Freudo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School. The timeliness of early critical theory's engagement with the social implications of individual psychological predispositions is visible in growing interest in the 1950 study of the *Authoritarian Personality* – which was re-released in a new edition edited by Peter Gordon in 2019 – and its attempt to identify the latent psychological characteristics of 'the potentially fascistic individual'

(Adorno et al. 2019, 1). The three books reviewed in this essay are all part of this attempt to theorize the present by drawing on psychoanalysis.

Despite their internal disagreements – a small subset of which I address in the coming pages – these volumes all show that Freud and his followers provide us with 'a rich and resonant vocabulary for talking about certain logics that continually reemerge in and shape politics' (Allen 2020, 193, hereafter CC). In particular, in light of 'the continuing adherence of oppressed and exploited subjects to institutions that necessarily impaired their freedom' (Allen and O'Connor 2019, 3, hereafter TS), the time indeed seems right to revisit the link between socio-economic forms of external oppression and its intrapsychic effects on the development of the individual, a topic that was initially explored by the early Frankfurt School as part of their attempt to 'flesh out materialism's notion of man's essential nature' (Jay 1973, 92). In this sense, these monographs all share the same general thesis, namely that 'psychoanalysis remains a symptomatic point, both epistemologically and politically speaking, that offers a particular critical insight into the production of capitalist subjectivity' (Tomšič 2015, 3, hereafter CU).

A Brief Overview

The edited collection on *Transitional Subjects* (Allen and O'Connor 2019) serves as a good starting point for my reflections on the role that psychoanalysis plays in social criticism. Although Sigmund Freud offers a 'proto-intersubjective account' (7) of the psyche and its social effects in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) and some of his other late essays, by and large his work focuses on the internal struggles of the individual at the intrapsychic level. By contrast, this volume focuses on object relations, which Amy Allen and Brian O'Connor describe as a movement within psychoanalysis that focuses on 'accounts of environmental conditions, and the consequences of their failures' (TS 11) in order to offer 'distinctive and, in our view, relatively underexplored resources for critical social theory' (TS 10).

In her contribution to this collection, Allen seeks to move beyond 'the ambivalent philosophical anthropology found in the late Freud' (TS 109) in order to explore how 'a Kleinian understanding of the death drive can be reconciled with some conception of progress' (TS 111). In *Critique on the Couch* she continues the project of melding Melanie Klein's metapsychology – which is based on a distinctive understanding of the drives that is based not on developmental stages, but on relational 'positions' through which the psyche relates to others either destructively or lovingly – with the Frankfurt School in order to develop what she calls a 'realistic philosophical anthropology [that] puts constraints on how much and what sort of social and political progress we can hope to achieve' (CC 149). This argument should be read alongside Allen's previous book, *The End of Progress* (Allen 2016), as part of a unified attempt to 'rethink [critical theory's] understandings of emancipation and progress beyond abstract utopianism and transformative praxis beyond narrow rationalism' (CC 17).

In contrast to the Frankfurt School, whose Freudo-Marxist appropriation of psychoanalysis is compatible with object relations and social theory more generally, Jacques Lacan's approach is usually interpreted as focusing 'primarily if not exclusively on intrapsychic dimensions of experience' (Allen & O'Connor in TS 10). As a result of this and of his conservative inclination towards Gaullism and his rejection of the student uprisings of the late 1960s, 'among Lacanian psychoanalysts one often encounters a restraint in discussing political matters' (CU 2). As a

representative of the Lacanian Ljubljana School of critical theory – other prominent members include Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič (see Day 2004) – Samo Tomšič contests this interpretation. He instead argues that by reading the late Lacan's 'second return to Freud' alongside Marx's critique of political economy we discover a connection between psychoanalysis and the individual subject within capitalism. The result is a distinctive, Lacanian critical theory of society that can be encapsulated in the statement: 'The unconscious is politics' (CU 20).

As is already clear from this brief overview of their key arguments, these three books are ambitious, timely and thought-provoking. Despite their differences, they all seek to demonstrate what psychoanalysis has to offer social criticism today. However, they go about making the case for the need to develop a 'broader critical methodology that takes the analogy with psychoanalysis seriously' (CC 181) in different ways. In doing so, they raise far more interesting and important issues that I can adequately address in the space given to me here. Instead of trying to give a broad but necessarily superficial overview of all of these debates, I will instead use this opportunity to discuss some of the big picture issues associated with the relationship between capitalism and psychoanalysis that are raised when reading these volumes alongside each other.

As a political philosopher – not a practicing analyst or a theorist of psychoanalysis *per se* – I am particularly interested in how insights from thinkers like Freud, Lacan and Klein can be integrated into social criticism more generally (see Verovšek 2019c). Despite their similarities, these books offer strikingly different answers to this question. In particular, it is unclear whether critical theory should engage with psychoanalysis primarily for its methodological insights as 'the science of self-reflection' (Habermas 1971) or whether this approach also has substantive insights to offer.

By providing different accounts of the structure of the psyche and the role of drives within the unconscious, Allen and Tomšič also raise important questions about the permanence of these features and their relation to the broader social system (a number of the contributions to Allen and O'Connor's edited volume also weigh in on this debate). This disagreement raises the further issue of the relation between the pathologies diagnosed by psychoanalysis and the broader capitalist system within which they occur. Are these problems deeply and ineliminably rooted in the psyche, or are they merely symptoms brought about by the alienated way that capitalism forces us to relate to the world around us?

In the rest of this essay I provide an overview of these debates and the differing answers to these questions provided by the volumes under review. I focus mainly on the book-length treatments of these issues provided by Allen and Tomšič, drawing on contributions from the edited collection *Transitional Subjects* where appropriate. After discussing the epistemological problems posed by drive theory and the structure of the psyche, I then turn to the contested relationship between psychoanalysis and social theory.

While it is clear that 'any neat dichotomy between the individual and society fails' (Noëlle McAfee in TS 222), this problematic brings up two more important issues. The first regards whether the structure of the psyche itself is part of a fixed human nature or whether it itself is

shaped – and possibly deformed – by its early interactions with its broader environment. The answer to this first problem then shapes the second, which concerns the extent to which changed social relations could heal or reshape the psyche might 'ope[n] the door to the radical transformation of the instincts' (CC 128). I then conclude by reflecting on the lessons of the preceding discussion for critical social and political theory.

The Relationship of the Individual to Society

In his contribution to *Transitional Subjects*, Alessandro Ferrara notes, 'Psychoanalytic theory is traversed by a deep rift' (TS 76), according to which human beings are either 'destined to play out their inborn social nature' or 'derive abilities and motivation from interaction with significant others' (TS 77). In this sense, explaining what Axel Honneth refers to as 'the fact of certain elements of unsociability between human beings' (TS 36) is at the core of psychoanalysis as well as social and political philosophy. Unfortunately, while theorists from all of these disciplines seek to build on as accurate an understanding of the human being as possible, this is easier said than done.

At root, the search for firm foundations to explain the structure of the psyche is plagued by epistemological problems. While the amount of clinical evidence and other external psychological data has increased exponentially over the years, this is of little use in determining the structure of the unconscious. As André Green points out 'observation cannot tell us anything about intrapsychic processes that truly characterize the subject's experience,' since trying to understand the psyche from the outside is like trying to reconstruct 'the contents of a book by observing the expressions of someone reading it' (quoted by McAfee in TS 211-2). Or, as Tomšič puts it, the problem is that much like the psyche itself, any individual drive is also invisible: 'one can never confront it directly, only observe its consequences' (CU 135).

As a result of these considerations, providing a firm, epistemologically grounded account of the structure of the psyche and the place of the drives within it is difficult, if not impossible. In the words of Joel Whitebook, 'to a significant degree these debates are more about *Weltanschauung* than about scientifically debatable questions' (TS 26). Instead, what one thinks about such fundamental questions seems to depend on whether one privileges what Max Horkheimer and Samuel Flowerman, in their Preface to the *Authoritarian Personality*, refer to as 'the personal and the psychological rather than the social aspect of prejudice' (Adorno et al. 1950, lxix), or vice versa.

In *Critique on the Couch*, Allen builds on Theodor Adorno to argue against conceptions of the individual that jettison drive theory. More specifically, she rejects so-called 'revisionist psychoanalysis,' which in Adorno's words seeks to 'sociologize' the psyche by emphasizing external factors 'at the expense of hidden mechanisms of the unconscious' (quoted CC 69). Allen contends that this turn to society and intersubjectivity is a mistake because it inscribes a 'sympathy for adaptation' (Adorno once again, CC 70) deep within the psychoanalytic method. While she does not want to abandon intersubjectivity completely, Allen thinks that critical theory still needs a philosophical anthropology based on drive theory to properly conceptualize what she sees as the 'fundamental antagonism between individual and society' (CC 69).

Although Allen rejects Freud's rather crude biological conception of drives, she argues that Klein's metapsychology succeeds in providing a flexible but stable account of the unconscious due to 'her distinctive psychological and relational conception…according to which drives are modes of relating to others either destructively or lovingly' (CC 72). Allen is aware of the dangers involved in tying herself to an account of the psyche based on 'a timeless and immutable human nature' (CC 8). However, she still wants to argue that the psyche displays certain stable internal and non-sociological characteristics. Allen threads this needle by arguing that her Kleinian account provides an accurate description our 'human condition,' where our 'helpless dependence on our caregivers' during the initial stages of our development invariably and inescapably 'gives rise not only to drives for love and connection with others, but also to drives for aggression, destructiveness, and domination' (CC 9).

I have real concerns about Allen's appropriation of Hannah Arendt's language of the human condition, which the latter initially used to create a political theory based on plurality and intersubjective 'action in concert,' to defend an account of social relations based on primary aggression as an permanent, universal characteristic of human beings. The whole point of Arendt's substitution of human *condition* for human *nature*, as I read her at least, is to distance herself from the anthropological assumptions the supposedly immutable drives of man (it is always man for Arendt) as a social, political or rational animal, which have dominated much of the canon of Western philosophy. As a result, I fear that Allen is sneaking precisely the kinds of assumptions about humanity that Arendt was opposing in through the back door.

I am also skeptical of Allen's claim that she is following Adorno in using Klein to develop an account that takes 'the demanding, not readily civilized nature of the drives' (Fred Alford quoted CC 72) seriously. In particular, her emphasis on the permanent features of the psyche overlooks Adorno's own emphasis on the dialectical relation between the 'subjective' features of the psyche and the 'objective' social order, within which 'subjectively oriented analyses have their value only within the objective theory' (Adorno 1969, 357). Given Adorno's focus on 'the conditioning of the subjective by the objective social system' (ibid.), I find it difficult to see her privileging of the structure of the psyche over social theory as reflective of his thought and critical methodology.

By contrast, Tomšič takes the opposite approach. Building on his comparison of the paralell structures – what he refers to as the 'homology' (CU 47) – of the arugments of Marx and Lacan, Tomšič argues that 'Neither class struggle nor the unconscious stands for some invariable transhistorical essences'; instead, both result from 'the distortion of appearances that accompany the reproduction of the given [social] order' (CU 7).[1] In contrast to the Frankfurt School's Freudo-Marxism and Allen's Klein-inspired critical theory, both of which try to build substantive visions of psychic drives into their social theories, Tomšič instead follows Lacan in 'reject[ing] direct translations of psychoanalytic contents into Marxist contents' (CU 8) arguing instead that 'the revolutionary character of critique is not in the promise of a worldview but in its method' (CU 9).

Tomšič's emphasis on the epistemological ground of psycholanalysis thus emphasizes the way that the forms of alienation characteristic of capitalism are reproduced in the internal sturcture of the psyche. More specifically, his account builds on the realization that within the capitalist

system the individual is not a subject (i.e. an agent with an independent will and the ability to act). Instead, Tomšič argues that the subject of capitalism is the capitalist system itself, which imposes 'a perverse position on the subject, demanding from the subject to assume the position of the object' (CU 103). Going even further, he argues that capitalism reduces the subject to a position in language that is signified only as a symptom of the process of production itself, which takes on the role of signifier. Although Tomšič occasionally loses himself in a maze of Lacanian jargon that is difficult for outsiders and non-adepts to penetrate, his basic argument is nevertheless clear.

Capitalism and the Psyche

With this background in place I now turn to the question of the role that capitalism plays in the formation of the psyche. As is probably already clear, Allen and Tomšič take very different positions on this issue. Although Allen recognizes 'the real antagonism between the individual and society in contemporary capitalism' (CC 68), she argues that this antipathy is rooted in social relations as such and is not just a product of capitalism *per se*.

In making this point Allen explicitly rejects Herbert Marcuse's (1966) suggestion that the conflict between civilization and the psyche could be overcome by the liberation of Eros and the elimination of scarcity, upon which the surplus repression of capitalism depends, because 'there is no basis for his hope that the death drive would, in fact, melt away' (CC 130). As a result, her account 'does not depend on an illusory fantasy of complete reconciliation that rests on the elimination of the death drive but instead is predicated on the mature acceptance of the ubiquity and ineliminability of destructiveness and of loss' (CC 132). The upshot of this is that Allen's account has relatively little to say about capitalism, since the destructive tendencies of the psyche are rooted in social relations and the presence of others as such, not in any particular form of socio-economic relations.

In contrast to Allen's positing of the drives as 'quasi-transcendental' features of humanity, if I may use Habermas's language to describe Allen's very un-Habermasian conclusions, Tomšič argues that structural components of the psyche discovered by Freud (and by psychoanalysis more generally) does not have a permanent, transhistorical internal structure because what we observe 'is nothing other than the capitalist unconscious, the intertwining of unconscious satisfaction with the structure and the logic of the capitalist mode of production' (108). On his account, therefore, 'capitalism elucidates the unconscious' (ibid), not vice versa.

Instead of building his theory on drives that derive from inescapable features of the human condition in early childhood, Tomšič roots them in social existence and historical development. In this sense, 'Neither class struggle nor the unconscious stands for some invariable transhistorical essences' (CU 7). For him, the human destructiveness and psychological pathologies we observe in individuals today, but instead are a 'particular symptom [that] cannot be detached from the social structure' (CU 130). Far from being permanent, he argues that the drives Allen rests her substantive argument on actually only serve a diagnostic function in the process of 'the unveiling of the truth of the actually existing social relations' (ibid).

These two positions have very different implications for critical social philosophy. Although large sections of his book focus on psychoanalysis, Tomšič repeatedly highlights the

foundational role that capitalist socio-economic relations play in distorting the psyche by alienating itself from itself, from others and from the objects around it. As a result, the notion of the drive must be detached 'from its biological or physiological connotation' and should instead be linked to salient features of social existence: 'The capitalist drive is therefore not the only possible drive' (CU 124). Tomšič therefore concludes: 'Capitalism is *not* perversion, but it *demands* perversion from its subjects. In other words, capitalism demands that the subjects *enjoy* exploitation and thereby abandon their position as subjects' (CU 151, emphasis in original).

The logical consequence of this view is that the respective tasks of psychanalysis and critical social theory merge in the sense that both must be focused on recapturing the 'subjectivity of the subject,' so to speak. Given their mutual positioning within the phenomena that they observe and study, Marxist critique and Lacanian analysis include 'the observer in the observed' in such a way that they 'do not speak from a metaposition but assume the double role of critics and subjects' (CU 159). In this sense, Tomšič argues psychoanalysis should not seek to provide a worldview, but to create 'the conditions under which the subject will be able to produce a transformative act' (CU 83). Just as Marxism ultimately seeks to bring about the end of capitalism, he concludes by asking his readers to '[r]ecall Lacan's declaration that the aim of psychoanalysis is the "exit from the capitalist discourse . . . for everyone"' (CU 233).

In contrast to Tomšič's admittedly utopian conclusions, Allen uses her account of the drives as permanent features of the human condition to 'problematiz[e] our own tendency' as social and political philosophers – which she argues is prevalent in much of the Frankfurt School – 'toward complacent and self-congratulatory conceptions of progress' (TS 126). More specifically, she argues that 'a renewed engagement with a certain strand of psychoanalysis can help to address problems that have arisen within critical theory as an intellectual project: normative idealism, developmentalism, utopianism, and rationalism' (CC 187).

I have already expressed my skepticism regarding Allen's readings of contemporary critical theory as defined by utopian philosophies of history elsewhere (see Verovšek 2019b). That said, I agree that her embrace of Lacan's conclusion that 'the cure is that there is no cure' (CC ch. 4), does not, however, mean that social and political theory should abandon all hope. On the contrary, Allen notes that her position 'make[s] progress possible precisely through th[e] ruthless critique of its alleged instances' (CC 150).

As a result, Allen encourages critical theory to embrace a localized, issue-specific notion of progress as a 'forward-looking imperative' while abandoning philosophies of history that rely on it as a 'backward-looking fact.' More specifically, she argues that the drive to aggression has a distinctive role to play in social and political life that is 'of particular importance for creative pursuits: it clears space for something new by destroying existing structures, modes of thought, and patterns of relationship' (CC 143). While she denies the possibility of changing the social system in a way that would overcome the aggressive instincts that define the individual's relation to others and to society at large, psychoanalysis 'can, by diminishing the anxiety which accentuates those instincts, break up the mutual reinforcement that is going on all the time between his hatred and his fear' (Klein quoted by Allen TS 126).

On this account, the task of critique is also more modest. Instead of setting out grand, utopian projects based on the power of the rational ego or the mastery of our inner drives, Allen ties Klein to Adorno by arguing for a critical theory based on a 'negativistic conception of progress as the avoidance of catastrophe' (TS 129). In this sense she agrees with McAfee, who argues that the Frankfurt School should abandon its search for rational criteria for critique in favor of an approach focused on 'thinking about how communities can actually get past, that is, work through, their fears of breakdown' (TS 229).

Concluding Reflections

As I hope that my review makes clear, these three volumes offer the reader a lot of food for thought regarding the utility of psychoanalysis for critical social theory. In particular, both Allen and Tomšič present powerful arguments for their fundamentally different and occasionally even opposing positions. While I cannot do justice to this debates, I cannot help but wonder whether Allen's position is really as compatible with the methodology and approach of the Frankfurt School as she seems to think it is.

In his inaugural lecture upon assuming the directorship of the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) in Frankfurt, Horkheimer (1993, 11) described critical theory as an interdisciplinary research program devoted to exploring 'the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture.' Practitioners within the Frankfurt School tradition have usually interpreted this to mean that human beings – both individually and collectively – are defined and historically constituted by their specific social, cultural and economic contexts. Allen is well aware of this and of the worry that 'a drive-theoretical interpretation of psychoanalysis presupposes an asocial or antisocial core of the human personality that is incompatible with the basic methodological assumptions of critical social theory' (CC 3). However, she argues that because in her Kleinian account 'aggression and destructiveness are relational passions' they do 'not commit us to a problematic assumption of a biologically determined antisociality' (CC 53).

This is an elegant solution, if not a fully convincing one, as Allen is still forced to commit herself to the idea that human 'modes of sociality' are *a priori* limited by permanent 'constitutive tendencies to relate to others in certain ways' (CC 53). In line with her anti-utopianism, she produces an account of the person that highlights 'the fundamental role that power plays in human psychic and social life,' i.e. that is 'realistic' 'in a specifically Geussian sense' (CC 7). However, I worry that adopting Raymond Geuss's (2010, 3) emphasis on 'the concrete constellation of power within which [political action] is located' without further evidence for the greater accuracy or 'realism' of this position merely serves as ideological cover for certain pessimistic assumptions not only about the present, but also about the past and the possibilities for the future (see Verovšek 2019a).

From an epistemological point of view, the basic problem is that all of our psychoanalytic research draws on clinical experience and observational data from the past hundred or so years, i.e. from individuals whose unconscious lift has been fundamentally shaped by capitalist social relations. While we can speculate about how our individual and collective psychologies would change if we were exposed to a different, more just and less alienated socio-economic system, this question is impossible to answer definitively, despite Tomšič's certainty on the matter.

However, it would seem safer to make as few assumptions as possible in light of this fundamental problem. As a result, in order to ensure that critique is not limited by a reified, capitalistic understanding of the psyche, it seems to me that social and political theorists would do better to draw on psychoanalysis for its methodological insights, rather than for substantive conclusions about the structure of the psyche or the nature of the human unconscious.

Although Tomšič explicitly rejects the Freudo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School, in light of these considerations it appears that his Slovenian Lacano-Marxism is ultimately more in line with the methodological commitments of the Frankfurt School than those proposed by Allen. Be that as it may, it is clear that despite the reticence of many psychoanalysts in relation to political issues – most notably Freud's 'self-proclaimed indifference in political matters' (CU 79) – the books under review in this essay clearly make the case for the importance and insight that a psychoanalytic approach to politics can offer by highlighting the link between the social and the subjective, as well as how our unconscious can end up 'leading us to think one thing of ourselves when something entirely otherwise is the case' (McAffee TS 222). Regardless of their internal disagreements, all of these reflections on the role of psychoanalysis in social critique should help us to keep this in mind.

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Notes

[1] While I cannot go into this debate in the space available to me in this review essay, a comparison of Tomšič's psychoanalytic reading of Marx with that offered by Owen Hulatt (TS chapter 5) would certainly be worthwhile.