

CAPITALISM AND DESIRE

The Psychic Cost of Free Markets

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex
cup.columbia.edu
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McGowan, Todd, author.

Title: Capitalism and desire: the psychic cost of free markets / Todd McGowan.
Description: New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016005309 | ISBN 9780231178723 (cloth: alk. paper) | ISBN
9780231542210 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Capitalism—Psychological aspects. | Capitalism—Social aspects. |
Psychoanalysis—Philosophy.

Classification: LCC HB501 .M55347 2016 | DDC 330.12/2019—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016005309>



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Printed in the United States of America
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

COVER DESIGN: Mary Ann Smith

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The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism

MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

The difficulties that capitalism engenders begin with its definition. The problem stems from the incredible historical and spatial breadth of the capitalism system. This system ranges from the burgeoning markets of early European modernity to the unbridled laissez-faire societies of nineteenth-century Britain and the United States to the authoritarian society of the formerly communist China of the early twenty-first century. As both proponents and critics acknowledge, capitalism has a remarkable elasticity that appears to defy any strict pronouncements concerning its essence. It is almost impossible to identify the points at which capitalism begins and where it ends.

For most defenders of the capitalist economy, its capacity for the inclusion of difference is its crowning virtue. In fact, capitalism is such a variable system that we cannot speak of a single system. There is not one capitalist system, but many capitalist systems.¹ According to capitalism's critics, this variability distinguishes capitalism from all other economic systems and highlights its nefariousness. As Guy Debord sees it, the commodity form developed within capitalism colonizes every other social form, and this process reaches its endpoint in what he calls the society of spectacle. He claims that "the spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the

world that we see is the world of the commodity.”² The spectacle is not qualitatively different than earlier forms of capitalism: capitalism doesn’t just accommodate differences, but violently integrates them into a logic that eliminates them. But the key lies in understanding what this logic is.

Both adherents and opponents of the capitalist system agree that it places the law of the market—buying and selling what people themselves choose to buy and sell—at the center of the social organization. Even if the state intervenes in the market by injecting money, stabilizing prices, or supporting certain industries, the system remains capitalist, according to most theorists, as long as the free market plays the determinative role. In a capitalist economy, the state can play a supportive role and can even act as a brake on untrammelled capitalist development, but the market must ultimately have the last word. This definition is compelling and accurate as far as it goes, but it fails to capture capitalism’s specific relationship to the psyche of those invested in it. It is on the psychic level that one discovers how capitalism functions.

To understand the psychic benefits that capitalism metes out, it is important to distinguish it from culture. Though capitalism includes within itself vast cultural differences, it is not itself a culture, and thus one should never speak of the culture of capitalism. From the perspective of capitalism itself, it is a matter of indifference which culture germinated it and which culture nourishes it. If Europe receives the credit or the blame for capitalism’s emergence, this is a matter of pure historical contingency when one considers how capitalism works. It is not a Eurocentric phenomenon, but a universal one that remains fundamentally the same even when it transforms itself to include cultural differences.

Capitalism transcends culture and offers its subjects psychic rewards that are radically different from those that cultures provide. As a member of a culture, I gain a stable symbolic identity associated with a structure that extends beyond my own subjectivity. This stability is the primary weapon with which culture lures its adherents, and it contrasts entirely with the weapons that capitalism employs. Culture gives the subject a sense of belonging that capitalism does not.

The capitalist subject constantly experiences its failure to belong, which is why the recurring fantasy within capitalism is that of attaining some degree of authentic belonging (in a romantic relationship, in a group of friends, in the nation, and so on). Though capitalism spawns this

type of fantasy, it constantly militates against the fantasy's realization. Capitalism offers the promise of belonging with every commodity and with the commodity as such, but the subject can never buy the perfect commodity, or enough of them, to unlock the secret of belonging. Unlike the subject of a particular culture, the capitalist subject does not have a place that offers a sense of identity. There is only a lack of place that spawns the search for place through the process of constant enrichment, a process that serves only to augment the subject's lack of place and identity. The only identity the capitalist subject has lies in its absence of any identity.

The essence of capitalism is accumulation. The capitalist subject is a subject who never has enough and continually seeks more and more. But this project of endless accumulation is built, ironically, on the idea of its end. Capitalist accumulation envisions obtaining the object that would provide the ultimate satisfaction for the desiring subject, the object that would quench the subject's desire and allow it to put an end to the relentless yearning to accumulate. In this sense, an image of the end of capitalism is implicit in its structure, and the key to capitalism's staying power lies in the fact that this ultimately satisfying object doesn't exist. Capitalism commands accumulation as an end that the subject can never reach, and this command holds in all aspects of the capitalist system—production, distribution, and consumption. The producer must produce more in order to earn more money, the distributor must distribute more in order to maximize profit, and the consumer must consume more in order to find the truly satisfying object. In each case, the failure to accumulate enough is inscribed in the system and is the source of the satisfaction that the system offers.

There is thus a radical difference between the image capitalism presents to its subjects and the real satisfaction they find in it. The capitalist system requires that subjects invest themselves in the idea of accumulation and the promise of an ultimate satisfaction that accompanies the idea. There is no capitalist subject—and thus no capitalist system—without this idea. With all the variety that we find in the capitalist universe, the one constant is a commandment to accumulate that operates in the psyche of every capitalist subject. Any struggle against the capitalist system must begin with the psychic investment in the promise of accumulation that it necessitates. This investment is much more difficult

to avoid than any financial investment because it infects even those who believe that they have opted out of the system and live off the grid. The psychic reach of capitalism far outstrips its socioeconomic reach.

Capitalism commands accumulation and promises a satisfaction that it cannot deliver. This failure has its origins in the structure of the subject's psyche and the way that the subject finds satisfaction. The psyche satisfies itself through the failure to realize its desire, and capitalism allows the subject to perpetuate this failure, all the while believing in the idea that it pursues success. The link between capitalism and the psyche provides the key to understanding the appeal of capitalism. It is a system that enables us to envision the possibility of a satisfaction that is structurally unattainable for us while, at the same time, it allows the real traumatic source of our satisfaction to remain unconscious. This double deception creates a system with an inordinate staying power, a system that appears to be written into our genetic makeup.

THE DIVISION OF THE OBJECT

Despite appearances, capitalism is not the result of human nature. The system's apologists who insist on this point do so in order to sustain an aura of inevitability around it. But nonetheless, beyond the bare socioeconomic agenda of its proponents, we can understand why this association arises. Associating capitalism with human nature is an ideological gesture, but the feeling that capitalism fits our mode of desiring is not wholly ideological. Capitalism's emergence and its psychic appeal are related to the nature of human subjectivity, though this subjectivity is itself unnatural, a function not of natural processes but of a disjunction from the natural world. Capitalism succeeds as it does by playing into the alienation from nature that occurs through signification. Though the development of capitalism was not necessary—one can imagine a world in which it didn't emerge—one can nonetheless understand its rise and staying power in terms of the structure of the psyche.³ We are, one might say, psychically disposed to invest ourselves in the capitalist system. Capitalism succeeds because it capitalizes on our status as unnatural beings.

If humans were simply instinctual animals, capitalism would neither develop nor take a psychic hold on us. It is not just by accident that there is no capitalist system flourishing in the animal world. In this sense, the

claim of a link between capitalism and human nature should be rejected out of hand. Capitalism's appeal is inextricable from the emergence of the signifier and the transformation that this emergence effects on speaking beings. The passion that subjects exhibit for capitalism derives from the break from nature that occurs when subjects begin to speak. Through this break, natural human needs undergo a complete transformation and become susceptible to the allure of accumulation and of the commodity that capitalism will bring to the fore. We aren't capitalists because we are animalistic but because we are fundamentally removed from our animality. The commodity does not fulfill a natural need but a desire distorted by the signifier, a desire that emerges through the signifier's distortion of animality. There are thus no prototypical capitalist structures in the animal world. It is language that gives birth to the possibility of this economic form. The exploration of capitalism must first and foremost be an exploration of what occurs with the introduction of the signifier.

Signification makes capitalism possible because it alienates the individual from its environment by introducing a layer of mediation into all of the individual's interactions.⁴ Rather than simply feeling hunger and eating the nearest apple in the manner of a human animal, the subject will seek a satisfaction that transcends the apple through the apple. For the subject of the signifier, unlike for the human animal, an apple is never enough. Once the world of signification exists, the apple's noncoincidence with itself becomes apparent, and the empirical apple ceases to prove satisfying. As an object of need, the apple is just an apple and can satisfy the need. But after the introduction of the signifier, the apple's self-division enables it to signify something beyond itself. A supplement attaches itself to the apple in the form of the signifier, and this excess remains irreducible to the object. The subject in the world of signification can never just eat an apple but eats instead what "keeps the doctor away," what is juicy and delicious, or what connotes original sin. The apple will embody something more as a result of the division introduced by signification, and this excess attached to the apple produces a satisfaction for the subject that an apple by itself—an apple that isn't an "apple"—can never provide for an animal that eats it.⁵

We tend to miss the apple's self-division not just because apples, before they are eaten, appear to be whole but primarily because the

signifier carries with it the illusion of transparency. In fact, signifiers hide their opacity through the guise of transparency. The signifier seems simply to provide an identity for an object that already exists without changing that object: there are objects hanging on trees, and someone decides to assign the name “apples” to them. Signifiers don’t appear to alter what they signify, and, as a result, we don’t recognize the mediation that shapes our world. The world appears as an immediate set of elements laid out for us to perceive as we will. But the signifier is nonetheless opaque. This means that it distorts what we perceive and changes the elements with which it interacts.

The signifier causes us to see “apples” rather than apples. Every object takes on the hue given to it by the system of signification and loses its image of self-identity. The object of need becomes an object of desire.⁶ The distorting power of the signifier does not occur in addition to our perception—like a pair of colored glasses that we might wear—but rather is our perception. We perceive through and as a result of the distortion. Grasping the effects of this distortion looms as a key problem in modern thought, and it also offers an initial key to understanding capitalism’s appeal to us as subjects of the signifier.

Because the subject confronts divided objects, it can never obtain an object that would enable it to realize its desire. No object is whole or fulfilling for the subject. Though it can’t make objects whole, capitalism transforms the image of objects. As commodities, objects appear whole and present opportunities for the subject to achieve fulfillment. Capitalism doesn’t eliminate the division in the world reflected in signification, but it does present this division as a contingent rather than as a necessary obstacle. It maps itself onto signification in order to hide signification’s inherently traumatic structure.

The signifier produces a divided world. Ferdinand de Saussure famously describes the divide as one between the signifier and the signified, though other linguists have used different terminology. What is instructive is that the signifier introduces the conception of a split, so that the world of appearance becomes simply apparent and not all that there is.⁷ This split creates the possibility of sense. If we relate to an undivided reality, nothing can have any signification whatsoever. Objects do not constitute a significant whole that awaits us to discover its sense. As Saussure notes, we don’t begin with significations that await signifiers to pin them down.

He claims instead, “Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.”⁸ Language creates a significant world to which we can relate, but it also makes evident the division of this world from itself. The signifier is not identical with the signified. Isolated instances that suggest an equivalence, such as onomatopoeia, are not primary but rather secondary attempts to bridge a fundamental chasm.⁹

The division between the signifier and signified indicates the presence of absence within the world. There is a gap between the word and what it signifies, between the name and the idea of the object or action, and no amount of precision can ever fill this lacuna. Capitalism, in contrast to signification, relies on the belief that the proper commodity will eliminate this absence and produce an enduring presence. But this presence never actually comes about within the capitalist economy. Capitalism presents itself as structured differently than signification, but it leads to the same failures that arrive with the signifier.

We produce or consume additional commodities in order to realize our desire definitively, but we never achieve this realization. In the same way, we use other signifiers to define a signifier, but they can never do so authoritatively. There is always more to say because the search for the signified is unending, just like the process of production and consumption is unending. One meaning always leads to another, and one commodity always leads to another. This is evident in the case of signification but hidden in that of capitalism.

The signifier indicates a signified that is not present and that will never become present. Every attempt to discover the signified—through, say, looking a word up in the dictionary—will only lead to other signifiers that will attempt to approximate it. No dictionary in existence could provide direct access to the signified because the signified is nothing but the absence of the subsequent signifier that would define the first. Sense, which seems to reside on the side of the signified, actually remains on the side of the signifier insofar as we must use signifiers to define signifiers and explain what we mean. There is thus no end to the search for sense and a blank space where we expect an answer. The perfect commodity, in contrast, promises an end to the search.

When the subject encounters the world of signification, it encounters an intractable absence. It always seeks something and yet finds nothing.

The initial signifier points to another that would complete it but never does. The world of signification promises an answer it never delivers, and this is how it installs an absence at the heart of the desiring subject. There is no ultimate resolution for the subject's desire, just as there is no ultimate resolution to signification itself. Once the signifier emerges, absence inhabits every moment of subjectivity and establishes the structure of desire.¹⁰

This constant confrontation with absence orients the subject around loss. As a human animal, the instinctual being can discover objects that will fulfill its needs. The satisfaction that comes from obtaining an object is always a possibility, though never a certainty, for this being. A lion can feel hungry and find satisfaction in eating a gazelle. But for the subject of the signifier, no such object exists. There are no satisfying gazelles on the subject's table, even for meat eaters. No object is identical to itself, and the subject cannot find the object that would provide satisfaction because this object transcends the subject's field of possible experience. The distance that separates the signifier from the signified also separates the subject from the satisfying object.

With the onset of capitalism, the speaking being enters a system that promises relief from the absence that inheres within the basic structure of signification. Other systems have integrated loss into social life in various ways—through ritual sacrifice, through ceremonies that consume great resources, and so on. But capitalism represents an epochal change. Loss becomes contingent rather than necessary, and the commodity provides an answer to this traumatic contingency.

LOSING WHAT WAS ALREADY GONE

The status of the object within capitalism changes along with the subject's relationship to loss. Just as loss comes to seem contingent in the capitalist epoch, the lost object that haunts all speaking beings ceases to be constitutively lost. Jacques Lacan identifies the lost object (which he calls the *objet a*) as what orients the subject's desire even though the subject has never had it. But in capitalism the lost object acquires a substantial status it doesn't actually have. It appears as something substantial that the subject has lost through a traumatic event insofar as it appears accessible in the form of the commodity.

Though absence must inhere within being itself, signification redoubles this absence and installs it at the center of the signifying system. Thus, to exist within signification is to accept loss as constitutive, a situation that psychoanalysis calls lack. Signification retroactively creates a lost object that was lost with the entrance into signification and that would have provided complete satisfaction if it had actually existed. Even though this object has no substantial status and can never acquire any concrete form, it shapes the contours of subjectivity. All of the subject's multifarious activity within the world of signification centers around the attempt to rediscover this object that it never possessed.

One of the fundamental errors of psychoanalysis consists in granting the lost object a substantial status.¹¹ This is often visible in object relations psychoanalysis, which understands the subject as first and foremost relational rather than traversed by loss. This form of psychoanalysis makes the same error that capitalism does concerning the object. At first glance, a relational understanding of subjectivity makes tremendous sense: it seems impossible to understand subjects in isolation from each other or the development of sexuality apart from other subjects. And yet, this form of psychoanalysis ironically represents a flight from Freud's own understanding of the power of mediation over subjectivity. That is to say, it constructs a myth of an original relation to the object unaffected by the travails of mediation. Even if the subject suffers from encounters with bad objects, these objects remain fully present for the subject in object relations theory and thus lack the constitutive absence that all objects have for the subject of the signifier.

This error becomes evident in the theorizing of even the most sophisticated object relations psychoanalysts such as W. R. D. Fairbairn. Fairbairn imagines a direct experience of the object from the period of infancy. In "Object Relationships and Dynamic Structure," he describes the infant's relation to objects as one in which the object itself might provide satisfaction without loss or mediation. He writes, "The real libidinal aim is the establishment of satisfactory relationships with objects; and it is, accordingly, the object that constitutes the true libidinal goal. At the same time, the form assumed by the libidinal approach is determined by the nature of the object. Thus it is owing to the nature of the breast that the infant's inherent incorporative tendency assumes the form of sucking with the mouth."¹² Here the infant aims at an attainable satisfaction

embodied in the object, and nothing bars access to this object. Though the adult might lose this original relationship with the object, it does exist, for Fairbairn, prior to its loss.

Object relations psychoanalysis and its many derivations do attempt to account for the power that loss has over the subject. But they do not conceive of loss as constitutive, which is why their conception of the object parallels that of capitalism. Loss, for someone like Fairbairn, is an empirical rather than an ontological fact. There is an immediacy of presence prior to the mediation of absence. Loss may very well occur in every case, but it is always the loss of something. The breast is a paradise lost, whereas for Freud paradise exists—to the extent that it does—only in the act of losing. Paradise lost is the speculative equivalent to paradise regained. That is to say, loss doesn't represent a disruption of the subject's initial satisfaction but the emergence of the possibility for satisfaction. To regard loss as the loss of something is to fail to recognize loss as constitutive of subjectivity. But this is a conception of loss that escapes object relations psychoanalysis in the same way that it escapes the capitalist subject.¹³

When he writes *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920, Freud begins to define the subject through its constitutive loss. From this point on in his thinking, he conceives of the subject as completely determined by loss, as driven toward its own destruction—a process that he misleadingly labels “death drive.” Though there are hints of this breakthrough in earlier works, the radicality of the 1920 revolution should not be understated. In fact, even Freud himself did not fully grasp its radicality, as evidenced by his failed attempt to reduce the subject's repetition of failure and loss to a tendency to return to an inorganic state. Death drive connotes a desire to die, which is why it leads readers of Freud (and even Freud himself) astray. What he is really onto with this concept is that the subject finds satisfaction in repeating loss, that the subject's satisfaction is inextricable from failure.

No one sets out consciously to fail, and, even if one did, the act of making failure a goal would immediately transform it into a different form of success. Within consciousness the subject cannot give failure primacy. Consciousness is oriented around projects in which the subject aims at succeeding, and the failures of these projects, from the perspective of consciousness, are only contingent failures the subject can

attempt to remedy by trying again or trying harder. Unconsciously, however, the subject depends on failure to satisfy itself. Failure and loss produce the object as absent, and it is only the absence of the object that renders it satisfying. Absence animates the subject, driving it to act, in a way that presence cannot. If we think about who marches in the street, it is those who lack, not those who have, and when those who have do march, it is because the threat of loss manifests itself. Even though they march for the elimination of this lack, it is absence that motivates them to march in the first place. It is also absence or the threat of it that enables us to get out of bed in the morning and go to work. The subject that had no absence in its existence would be unable to act and would lack the impetus even to kill itself. After seeing numerous patients display their attachment to absence and loss, Freud concludes that it holds the key to the subject's form of satisfaction.

We can see this play out in sports fandom. Though we consciously root for our favorite team to win, we find more unconscious satisfaction in the persistent struggles of the sports team that we root for than in its unqualified successes. The close game is infinitely more interesting than the blowout because it enables the fan to experience loss while not having loss enter into consciousness. No one wants to root for a team that wins all its games, and if fans flock to the games of teams that win all the time, they go to see the loss (or potential loss) that will disrupt the winning, just like auto racing fans go to see cars crashing (or potentially crashing), though this desire remains unconscious. Even when our favorite team wins a championship, we begin almost immediately to consider how they might fare the next year. This is a way of leaving the terrain of success for that of potential failure. When we achieve the pinnacle of success, we seek out a way to return loss into our existence by imagining a new challenge or embarking on a new project.

Loss injects value into the subject's existence and gives it an object that provides satisfaction. Freud's conception of the priority of loss and its repetition troubles other psychoanalysts (like Fairbairn, for instance) because it highlights the impossibility of any satisfaction associated with obtaining the object. After this point, for Freud, one simply cannot have the satisfying object. Any notion of success becomes unthinkable, and one must reconceive satisfaction in terms of how one fails. Failure becomes the only option.

On the basis of privileging failure, Freud reimagines the object in a way that challenges both much of the history of philosophy and the psychic demands of capitalism. The object is not an object that the subject hopes to obtain but a limit that the subject encounters. The subject cannot overcome the limit but constitutes itself and its satisfaction through the limit. That is to say, the object that thwarts the subject's efforts at obtaining it retroactively creates the subject around the recalcitrance. The subject seeks out what it cannot obtain and latches itself onto these objects. Its failure with regard to them provides a satisfaction that completely defies the capitalist image of reality.

Freud's conception of the object enables us to rethink the famous slogan from May 1968 in France. The mantra of this movement—*jouir sans entraves* (enjoy without hindrances)—expresses the critique of capitalism's repressiveness, the critique that dominated much of the twentieth century. The problem with this slogan is that eliminating the barriers to enjoyment would eliminate the source of enjoyment. By slightly changing it to *jouir les entraves* (enjoy the hindrances), we capture the constitutive importance of the obstacle. Satisfaction exists in the obstacle that the object erects in the face of the subject's efforts to obtain it rather than in the eradication of all obstacles. But this is what the capitalist imperative to accumulate enables us to avoid confronting.

The speaking subject satisfies itself through its process of failing to obtain its object, even if this goes unrecognized by the subject itself. The relationship between subjectivity and loss leads the subject to flee this recognition and find asylum in the framework of capitalist accumulation. The subject repeats a constitutive loss because loss is the only way that the speaking subject has to relate to objects, even though capitalism provides the image of an alternative. The signifier confronts the subject with an absence that forms subjectivity and that the subject can never overcome. But the loss that haunts the subject also constitutes the subject, which is why it seeks to repeat this loss.

The signifier creates the subject through the act of removing what is most essential for the subject, even though this essential object doesn't exist prior to its removal. From this point on, the subject will remain unable to divorce satisfaction from loss. One might say that through the signifier the subject loses the object into existence. Loss generates the

object at the same time that it marks its disappearance, which has a determinative effect on how the subject satisfies itself. The subject may find fleeting pleasure in success and achievement, but its only satisfaction will take the form of the repetition of loss. Subjects undermine themselves and self-sabotage not because they are stubborn or stupid but because this is their path to satisfaction. For the speaking subject, winning is only a detour on the way to losing.¹⁴ Even the winners in the world of the signifier are ultimately on the side of defeat, but just take a longer time to get there than others.

When we understand the difference between instinctual beings and speaking subjects, the appeal of thinking about ourselves in terms of instinct rather than subjectivity becomes self-evident. Instinctual beings have the capacity to overcome loss and obtain satisfaction through the object they seek. Instinctual beings can become winners that suffer only contingent failures rather than remaining ensconced in perpetual failure. Instinct holds within it the promise of a satisfaction untainted by loss, a full satiation that, even if it soon disappears, can often be replicated. The being envisions a goal that would provide satisfaction and then either attains the goal or not. Success may be difficult and may not endure, but it's not impossible.

But the subject attains satisfaction through the repetition of its inability to obtain its object. Failure is the subject's mode of success. Lacan describes this in one of his most lucid explanations of the structure of subjectivity. In *Seminar XI*, he separates the subject's goal from its aim and uses a metaphor to explain the aim. He claims, "When you entrust someone with a mission, the *aim* is not what he brings back, but the itinerary he must take. The *aim* is the way taken."¹⁵ The satisfaction of the subject derives from the path that it takes. But what Lacan fails to add here is that this path necessarily involves an encounter with loss: rather than seeking out its object, the subject finds ways to miss it and to ensure that it remains lost. The lost object is constitutively lost, and the satisfaction that it offers depends on it remaining so. The subject has no hope that it might attain its lost object, which is why psychoanalysis must refrain from describing the infant's satisfying relationship with the mother's breast prohibited by the father. It is only in retrospect (or from the perspective of an observer) that this relationship appears perfectly satisfying.

Freud first conceives of the appeal of loss in response to his observation of self-destructive actions that appear to violate the pleasure principle. It is the penchant for self-sabotage and self-destruction that leads Freud to speculate about the existence of a death drive that aims at a return to an inorganic state. But we don't have to indulge in this type of hypothesis if we recognize the constitutive role that loss plays in the subject's satisfaction. Without the lost object, the subject would lose what animates it and the source of its enjoyment. The act of self-sabotage, even though it detracts from the subject's pleasure, enables the subject to continue to satisfy itself. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud theorizes that the negative therapeutic reaction that subverts the psychoanalytic cure is not just the product of resistances. The subject does not want to be cured because it associates healing with the loss of its foundational loss, a prospect much more horrifying than the pain of the neurosis. With the recognition of the constitutive role of loss in the psychic economy, psychoanalysis must alter its conception of the cure. Rather than simply ending repression or even overcoming loss, the cure has to involve changing the subject's relation to its lost object, experiencing the intimate connection between loss and satisfaction.

THE ALLURE OF BUYING A BUNCH OF THINGS

Every subject of the signifier endures loss. This is the primary fact of subjectivity. But the tragic nature of subjectivity leads the subject to misrecognize how it obtains satisfaction. The subject's devotion to loss remains necessarily unconscious as it consciously strives to win. Though the subject attains its satisfaction from the absence of the object, it nonetheless consciously associates satisfaction with the object's presence. For this reason, the subject fails to recognize its own satisfaction and believes itself dissatisfied, but this dissatisfaction feeds on hope for a future success. Though the disappointments pile up, the subject who fantasizes about ultimately obtaining its object continues to look toward the next object as potentially being the one. The subject can keep up its hopefulness only by forgetting the series of disappointments that its previous acquisitions of the object have produced.

The subject moves from object to object in order to avoid confronting the fact that it misses the same lost object again and again. The perpet-

ual movement of desire obscures its rootedness in missing the object rather than obtaining it. The subject fails to see that the object is satisfying as an object and not as a possible possession. When the subject invests itself in the fantasy of obtaining the object, it avoids the monotony of the subject's form of satisfaction. One has dissatisfaction, but one also has a variety of objects that one desires with the promise of a future satisfaction. This future satisfaction never comes, and obtaining objects brings with it an inevitable disappointment. One thought that one was obtaining the impossible lost object, but one ends up with just an ordinary empirical object that pales in comparison. I believed that the piece of chocolate cake that I just ate embodied the lost object itself before I ate it, but after having done so I realize its underwhelming ordinariness.

Perhaps it is because cinema enthusiasts recognize how the film almost perfectly lays out the relationship between the lost object and its inadequate replacements that most acknowledge Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) as the greatest film of all time.¹⁶ After an exterior traveling shot of the gate to his mansion, the film begins with Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) uttering his dying word, "Rosebud." This word occasions an investigation by newspaper reporter Jerry Thompson (William Alland) in which the story of Kane's life, related by those who knew him, is told through a series of flashbacks. Thompson begins with the idea that the object signified by *Rosebud* will reveal the truth of Kane's desire, though after failing to find this object he concludes that no such object could possibly exist. The final shot of the film, however, belies his concluding remarks by showing Kane's childhood sled with the name *Rosebud* adorning it.

The point is not, as one might expect, that Kane would find fulfillment if he obtained the lost sled representing his abbreviated childhood and the attachment to his mother, but that the sled embodies loss itself. As such, it animates Kane's entire existence. He is a subject insofar as he has endured a constitutive loss. But he consciously seeks out, as the film shows in the interval between the utterance of "Rosebud" and the revelation of the object, a series of expensive objects that cease to provide satisfaction the moment Kane obtains them. The sled metaphorizes loss: it substitutes for what is not there, representing loss as such. In contrast, the objects that Kane collects—statues, paintings, exotic animals, and so

on—reveal the metonymy of Kane's desire. He moves from object to object in search of one that might satisfy him, but none does.¹⁷

While Kane is caught up in the logic of success, he actually follows the path of the failure—and this is true of all seeming winners in the world. His continual failure to find a satisfying object through striving for success produces the unconscious satisfaction of failure. Kane satisfies himself unconsciously through the serial quest for a missing satisfaction. Though he seeks success, he perpetuates failure, and the repetition of failure is the logic of subjectivity. While Kane enacts this process, the spectator undergoes the same dynamic. The film presents a series of flashbacks that promise to reveal the ultimate truth of Kane, but each time the film comes to the end of a flashback, the mystery remains. The spectator's satisfaction in viewing the film doesn't derive from the final revelation but from the repetition of the failed revelations that the final revelation of the lost object punctuates. As a result, the spectator can recognize where to locate her or his satisfaction in a way that Kane cannot.¹⁸

The final revelation of the truth of the signifier *Rosebud* does not represent a realization of desire for the spectator but a confrontation with the fundamental nothingness of the lost object. This is why the disappointed reaction, "It's just a sled," is entirely appropriate. The sled reveals that, even when there really is an object to be rediscovered, the object embodies nothing and thus cannot offer the ultimate satisfaction. Desire avoids this encounter with the nothingness of the lost object by turning to accumulation, and *Citizen Kane* makes the failure of this path evident. The relative failure at the box office of the film on its highly anticipated release suggests that audiences wanted to cling to the logic of accumulation rather than confront its inevitable failure.

The fact that *Citizen Kane* associates the turn away from the failure of subjectivity with Kane's acquisition of wealth is not coincidental. Capitalist accumulation and consumption, which proceed through the refusal of constitutive loss, operate with the hope of ultimately obtaining the object. One continues to accumulate more capital and more objects, but no amount of accumulation can bring satisfaction. Kane reveals this through the complete indifference that he displays toward the objects he has purchased. Welles also demands that we as spectators share in this

indifference. At the end of the film, we see workers simply throwing many of these objects into a fire. The failure of accumulation—and the fantasy that motivates it—becomes fully explicit. But, paradoxically, it is this failure, not future success, that provides the only possible satisfaction. No matter what tack the subject takes, it cannot help but feed the repetitive failure it endeavors to escape.

Nonetheless, failing to grasp the necessity of failure distorts the subject's relation to the Other (the figure or figures of social authority). The subject that fails to grasp the necessity of loss looks for the secret key to the object in the Other. The Other appears to know something that the subject itself does not. For the subject caught up in the logic of success, the Other is captivating because it appears to escape the loss that damages the subject itself. The subject invested in success remains dissatisfied because it fails to register the constitutive nature of loss and seeks satisfaction in an object that the Other desires.

The capitalist subject constantly wonders which object is the most desirable or the most desired by other subjects. For instance, a subject buys a car hoping to find just the right model and color to speak to what other subjects desire. The subject will search for—and never find—the car that perfectly embodies what Jacques Lacan calls the desire of the Other. This is the desire that the subject associates with the other or others that the subject itself desires (and supposes to know the secret of desire). We desire what we assume the Other desires because the Other desires it and because we want to attract the desire of the Other. It is in these two senses that our desire is always the desire of the Other.

The mystery of the desire of the Other lures the subject through its irreducibility to signification. The desire of the Other escapes the signifier—it is what can't be said—but it appears to be attainable through a hermeneutic effort. If we study what the Other wants, it seems as if we could divine the desire that the signifier obscures. But this is a loser's game: there is no substantial Other whose desire we might interpret. Like the subject itself, the Other is divided from its own desire and looks elsewhere to find out what it wants. The desire of the Other appears as a puzzle that one might solve, but this is its great lure. The fantasy of obtaining the object that the Other desires works to convince the subject that it can find satisfying objects. But the crucial insight of psychoanalysis

is that the subject's satisfaction is located in how it desires and not what it obtains. With this insight, it provides an important clue for understanding how capitalism works.

BARRIERS WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

The genius of capitalism consists in the way that it manipulates the relationship between the subject and its own satisfaction. Capitalism enables subjects to avoid the trauma of their self-destructive satisfaction and to immerse themselves in the promise of the future. It blinds us to the necessity of loss and immerses us in the logic of success, even though success is nothing but a path on the way to loss. The structures of capitalist production and consumption demand that the subjects involved in them think in terms of success rather than failure, or else these structures would cease to function. The fantasy of successfully obtaining the lost object is essential to the perpetuation of capitalism.

Capitalists must believe that they can acquire the lost object through their investment in the capitalist system. This is most evident in the case of the consumption of the commodity: consumers purchase each new commodity with the hope that this object will be the object that will provide the ultimate satisfaction. But they inevitably find, after some initial pleasure, only more dissatisfaction, which inspires them to purchase another new commodity holding the same illusory promise. Many people buy new cars not so much because the old one no longer works but because they hope to find a satisfaction in the new one that the old one failed to provide. If the old commodity did provide this satisfaction, capitalism would not function, and consumers would not feel obliged to seek out new commodities that they didn't need. What Marx calls capitalism's production of needs treats consumers as subjects that believe in the possibility of the truly satisfying object.¹⁹ Capitalism leads the consumer from one commodity to the next according to the metonymy of desire.

The problem is that the closer the subject comes to the object, the more the object loses what makes it desirable and becomes just an image that cannot provide the promised satisfaction. There is a strict opposition between the image of the object and some other dimension of the object—the object as a remainder that doesn't fit within the world of

representation and that renders it desirable. Proximity has a deleterious effect on both the subject's desire and the object's desirability.

The same problem infects capitalist production as well. Capitalists want to increase the productivity of the production process in order to realize greater and greater profits, but increased productivity has the effect of lowering the rate of profit. In short, the very effort to maximize profit becomes a barrier to profit. Marx notices this irony in his perspicacious analysis of capitalism's contradictory processes. He says, "The profit rate does not fall because labour becomes less productive but rather because it becomes more productive. The rise in the rate of surplus-value and the fall in the rate of profit are similarly particular forms that express the growing productivity of labour in capitalist terms."²⁰ Marx's point here holds whether one accepts the theory of surplus value or not. Capitalists constantly work to increase the productivity of labor in a particular industry, but this increased productivity leads to a lesser rate of profit. More efficient labor enables capitalists to sell for less, and this damages the amount of profit that the capitalist produces. The effort to generate a greater rate of profit within the capitalist system paradoxically lowers the rate of profit.

Capitalists demand increasing productivity in search of the object of their desire—ever growing profit—and they end losing up what they sought. Similarly, crises develop within capitalism not, as one would expect, from a lack of production, but from a surplus. The capitalist crisis is a crisis of too much production or of too many objects. When the production increases and the capitalist economy booms, the economy eventually reaches a point at which consumers no longer have enough money to buy the products, and a crisis results. It is a crisis of too much, not a crisis of not enough, which parallels the crisis that perpetually haunts desire. Like capitalism in crisis, desire has an infinite quantity of objects, but none provide the satisfaction that it seeks. In the arenas of both consumption and production, capitalism remains within the logic and limitations of the fantasy that the satisfying object exists. It adheres to this fantasy and attempts to distance itself at all times from the trauma of subjectivity's inherent failure.

The engine for capitalist production is the accumulation of capital. The capitalist invests in order to accumulate more, and more capital functions as a constantly reappearing object of desire. When I have

successfully accumulated a quantity of capital that I anticipate will be satisfying, I experience the dissatisfaction that always accompanies obtaining the object of desire and seek out an additional quantity that I associate with the satisfaction that I have just missed. For the capitalist producer, this process of desire and fulfillment has no temporal or spatial barrier. It can go on infinitely, and the series of disappointments involved has the effect of increasing the subject's investment in the capitalist system. Today's failure energizes the promise of tomorrow.

This holds not just for the capitalist as a subject but also for capital itself. It reproduces itself and augments itself as capital through the attempt to transcend its own quantity. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx provides a precise description of this process that captures the psychic resonance of capitalist production. He says, "as representative of the general form of wealth—money—capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary [*Grenze*] is and has to be a barrier [*Schranke*] for it. Else it would cease to be capital—money as self-reproductive."²¹ The transformation of a *Grenze* into a *Schranke*, a boundary into a barrier, is a necessary condition for the self-reproduction of capitalism. If capital acted as if the boundary were a genuine boundary and not a barrier to transcend, it would not be capital—and we would be within a different system, one based on the structure of subjectivity rather than its obfuscation.²²

The situation is almost exactly the same for the capitalist consumer. Instead of seeking the accumulation of capital, the consumer searches for the commodity that will provide the ultimate satisfaction associated with the lost object. Each new commodity arrives on the market bearing the promise of this satisfaction. I purchase the newest phone, video game, dress, or car with the hope that this commodity will offer the satisfaction that the last one failed to provide, and each time I will be necessarily disappointed. I may feel a few moments of pleasure when I acquire the new commodity, but soon its distance from the impossible lost object will become apparent. I will sink back into the desire for another commodity that hasn't yet failed to deliver.

One can witness the dynamic of the appearance and almost instantaneous disappearance of the lost object manifest itself clearly in the case of children in contemporary capitalism. The child will beg for an object as if this object embodied all possible enjoyment, but even seconds after

obtaining the object, the child will cast it aside as completely devoid of the satisfaction that it promised only a very short time earlier. It is difficult to believe that anyone witnessing this commonplace experience would resist the psychoanalytic explanation of the lost object and its role in the subject's desire. Just like the capitalist producer, the consumer's repeated failures do not dampen the investment in the process of consumption but rather enhance it. This is because, while operating wholly according to logic of success, capitalism manages to satisfy the subject's unconscious drive to fail.

Though capitalist subjects experience continuing dissatisfaction when they attain each new and disappointing object, they find satisfaction through the repetition triggered by the perpetual search for the next commodity. This dynamic is crucial to capitalism's staying power. If it just offered dissatisfaction with the promise of future satisfaction, subjects would not tolerate the capitalist system for as long as they have. But capitalism does provide authentic satisfaction—the satisfaction of loss—in the guise of dissatisfaction. What appears as a dissatisfying movement forward from commodity to commodity is actually a satisfying repetition of the loss of the object. The fantasy of acquisition offers the promise of escaping from the trauma of subjectivity while leaving the subject wholly ensconced within it. By offering satisfaction in the form of dissatisfaction, capitalism gives us respite from the trauma of subjectivity without obviating the satisfaction it delivers. This is the genius of the system.

In order to see how dissatisfaction and satisfaction interrelate in the functioning of capitalism, one must refuse the temptation to dissociate them from each other. It is as if each concept represents a different way of looking at the same structure but doesn't itself indicate a distinct structure. Constant dissatisfaction and hope for the future are just a form of appearance that the subject's satisfaction adopts, a form of appearance that renders it amenable to consciousness and to the capitalist system. But this appearance itself doesn't detract from the subject's self-satisfaction, a satisfaction that persists under capitalism's regime of success. The subject under capitalism is satisfied but cannot avow this satisfaction while remaining invested in the capitalist system.

Capitalism's adherence to the fantasy of success at the expense of the necessity of failure is essential to its functioning. Subjects who do not

accept this fantasy are not continually seeking new objects of desire and thus are not good consumers or producers, and they inevitably put a wrench in the functioning of the capitalist system. They content themselves with outmoded objects and recognize the satisfaction embodied in the object's failure to realize their desire. Such subjects don't simply settle for less than satisfying objects (as if they were proponents of the reality principle) but instead see their satisfaction in the object's inadequacy. For this type of subject, the fact that the car has a dent in the fender and hesitates going up hills becomes the source of the satisfaction that it provides.

This is a step that the great heroes of American literature—Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, Lily Bart, Jay Gatsby, and the narrator of *Invisible Man*—never make. At the end of each novel in which these characters appear, they continue to seek an adequate object, even if they take up an oppositional position relative to the social order. Huck Finn decides to leave civilization, but he does so in order to find an object that would realize his desire. In this sense, he remains, along with the others, entrapped within the logic of success that capitalism proffers. Even though these heroes expose the vacuity of the American fantasy, they do so from the perspective of the existence of a truly satisfying object and, in this sense, they remain exemplars of capitalist subjectivity.

When one recognizes that no object will provide the ultimate satisfaction, one can divest psychically from the capitalist system. One can reject a role in the incessant reproduction of the capitalist system, a rejection that coincides with a rejection of the logic of success as well. This rejection alone does not topple capitalism, but it is the necessary condition for revolutionary politics. Capitalism induces subjects into investing themselves in the system's reproduction by capturing them at the level of their desires, but this is precisely the level at which the subject can abandon the capitalist system. The logic of subjectivity is itself ultimately incompatible with capitalism and therefore provides the path to an alternative that envisions production and consumption in other ways.

The subject's self-satisfaction derails capitalism's need for perpetually dissatisfied subjects. The difficulty within the capitalist system lies with recognizing this self-satisfaction, since capitalist ideology constantly works to create a sense of dissatisfaction in subjects. The creation of dissatisfaction is almost the sole aim of the advertisement, which shows

images of apparently delicious pizza in order to convince viewers that whatever they already have will not provide the same enjoyment as the pizza or which plays the sounds of a new song that promises to outstrip the enjoyment delivered by any older ones. The self-satisfied consumer is no longer a consumer, which is why the very term *customer satisfaction* is inherently misleading. Companies may want some degree of customer satisfaction, but their goal is ultimately enough dissatisfaction to keep customers returning for a new commodity. Such dissatisfaction is what the subject that recognizes its constitutive loss avoids. The production strategy of planned obsolescence, which is integral to the constant expansion of capitalism, depends on the existence of subjects who believe in the promise of the new commodity and thereby miss the satisfaction that exists in the failed commodity—the satisfaction in failure that capitalist subjects experience and yet don't recognize.

THE END OF THE OTHER

Psychoanalysis emerges in response to this unavowed satisfaction and attempts to assist subjects in coming to terms with it. It attempts, in other words, to move subjects from illusory dissatisfaction to a new way of relating to their satisfaction. The path of psychoanalysis, at least after Freud's theoretical revolution in 1920, is not one leading from dissatisfaction to satisfaction but from one form of satisfaction to another. The space in which psychoanalysis can act here is very limited. The cure could only involve allowing the subject to recognize where its satisfaction lies and how it already has what it's looking for. This type of intervention begins with the subject's relation to the Other.

The capitalist subject mistakes satisfaction for dissatisfaction because it fails to recognize the status of the Other. Social existence involves the encounter with others, but beyond these others the subject sees the Other, a figure of social authority that represents the social order as a whole and makes demands on the subject.²³ The subject's subjection to this authority stems from the belief in it, but the Other does not exist. There are figures of social authority (parents, athletes, film stars, presidents), but there is no social authority as such. No one, in other words, knows the secret of social order or how one might fully belong to it.²⁴ The in-crowd of whatever sort is populated by people who are

themselves actually outsiders acting as if they belong. Through an illusion of perspective, the subject doesn't see this. It fantasizes an Other into existence in order to believe that someone knows the impossible secret of true belonging. But this illusion is necessary. The image of the desiring Other kick-starts the desire of the subject. The subject emerges out of the defiles of the desire of the Other that doesn't exist.

The problem of the desire of the Other exists wherever there is signification. But capitalism creates a singular focus on the desire of the Other in a way that no prior socioeconomic system has. This focus on the desire of the Other creates subjects who dedicate themselves to the interpretation of this desire. They spend their time reading fashion magazines, learning about the lives of Hollywood stars, or following the movements of famous sports figures. All of these activities that capitalist society fosters have as the goal interpreting the desire of the Other so that the subjects engaged in this interpretative process can solve the problem of desire. Capitalism brings possible solutions to the desire of the Other to the fore, and it insists that this desire actually exists.

But capitalism does not invent the desire of the Other. The system of signification depends on the gaps in its structure where desire can emerge, but subjects do not immediately desire on their own. Rather than forming organically out of physiological need, desire requires a stimulus, and this is what the desire of the Other provides. In this sense, the desire of the Other is a necessary illusion. The subject confronts the Other in the form of either a group of others or a single individual imbued with authority. From the Other, the subject seeks guidance as to what it should desire and—which is to say the same thing—as to how it might capture the desire of the Other.

There are no desires belonging to the subject itself that it gives up for the sake of the Other. The subject does not simply settle for the desire of the Other or betray its own desire by adopting that of the Other. To the contrary, the subject's own desire derives from its interpretation of the desire of the Other. I begin unconsciously to desire something when I interpret the Other as initially desiring it. This desire becomes my desire—and I believe it is fully genuine—but its origin lies outside my subjectivity. This initial alienation of the subject in the Other is not, however, the final barrier. The true problem is the existential status of

the Other. Though the subject believes in the Other, the Other qua figure of authority that has a desire does not exist.

To say that the Other does not exist is not to accept the solipsistic verdict that the subject can know only itself. Instead, it means that there is no authority to guide the subject in its search for what it should desire. While the subject interprets the desire of the Other in order to discover its own desire, the Other itself simultaneously interprets some other desire in order to discover its desire. Desire arises out of this chain of interpretation that has no endpoint. There is no desire that is not the interpretation of a missing desire. If the desire were present and obvious, it would no longer be a desire. We would question what real desire was hidden beneath the manifest one and thus engage again in the act of interpretation.

The absence of a starting point for desire manifests itself in popular fashions. No one person initially decided, for instance, that not taking the tags off new clothes was a cool thing to do. This strange fashion trend began not with one subject's desire but with the interpretation of the desire of the Other.²⁵ That is to say, subjects adopt this style because they believe that it's already cool. The misinterpretation of the Other's desire retroactively creates an Other who originated the fashion. The subject who believes in an originator of fashion relies on a dangerous and paranoid misinterpretation. A correct interpretation would reveal that there is nothing existing to be interpreted.

FANTASIZING THE END

Since the desire of the Other can provide no concrete guidance for the subject in its search for what to desire, it must have recourse to fantasy. Here capitalism again comes to the subject's aid by providing innumerable fantasies that direct the subject's desire both toward the proper work and toward the proper commodity. Fantasy provides the subject guidance about what the Other desires and thus constitutes this desire as knowable. Without this guidance, there would be no way of approaching this desire or beginning to make sense of it. In some sense, the subject fantasizes this desire into existence: the fantasy gives coherence to the Other's desire by creating an imaginary scenario surrounding the Other. Lacan

offers an enigmatic definition of fantasy in his seminar on *The Logic of Fantasy*. He says, “in the final accounting the fantasy is a sentence with a grammatical structure.”²⁶ That is to say, fantasy gives the desire of the Other a concrete form that it otherwise lacks. Even if fantasy imagines a traumatic desire—the Other wants to destroy us—it nonetheless provides the security of an existing Other that can guide our desire.

We can see this dynamic in the way that the fantasy of the terrorist functions for American society. Of course, there are actual terrorists who want to kill Americans, but the power of the terrorist fantasy far outstrips the danger that these actual terrorists represent. Very few people fear driving in a car, and yet one is exponentially more likely to die in this mode of transportation than from a terrorist blowing up an airplane. The latter event occasions dread because it touches on our fantasy space, whereas death in a car—except as envisioned in David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (1996), an exploration of auto-eroticism—remains largely fantasy-free. The fantasy of horrible death from terrorism is hardly a comforting one, but it does give American society a concrete image of the Islamic believer. The fantasy brings this believer into existence and renders his—almost always his in the fantasy—desire knowable. The threat to American society constitutes American identity as besieged and, at the same time, envied, which is why, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush proclaimed that American freedom itself was an overriding motive for the attacks. Even the most traumatic fantasy offers assurance.

The subject’s subjection to the social order becomes complete through the acceptance of the fundamental fantasy underlying that order. Confronted with the impossibility of the Other’s desire, the subject faces its failure to belong. The respite of fantasy is an image of belonging to an order that seems to bar the subject’s entry. It is the password to a secret society. Even the subject who doesn’t belong to Skull and Bones at Yale effectively does belong to a larger version insofar as it accepts the society’s fundamental fantasy.²⁷ But the subject can never exist wholly in the world that fantasy constructs. The status of the fantasy must always be tenuous in order for it to work as a source of social cohesion. Capitalism utilizes fantasy to a remarkable extent, but it also sustains fantasy’s tenuousness.

Under capitalism, the desire of the Other both remains fundamentally unknowable and appears accessible through fantasy. The subject never

knows exactly what commodity to produce or consume, and yet the commodity itself provides a fantasmatic answer to this mystery. The commodity presents itself at once as the unknown desire of the Other and the fantasized solution to that desire. The fact that it maintains these two contradictory positions gives capitalism great power in the psyche. It rouses us by showing the Other as mysterious while comforting us with the idea that we might solve this purported enigma of the Other. If capitalism just offered the mystery of the Other or the fantasized solution of this mystery, it would fail to gain a psychic foothold. The two positions must constantly play off each other, or else the subject's disappointment—either in the irresolvable mystery or the ultimately inadequate solution—will break the commitment to the capitalist system. The fantasy constantly presents the possibility of full belonging to the subject, but, at the same time, the fantasy must remain an unrealized fantasy. The capitalist subject can never experience a sense of belonging while remaining a capitalist subject.

Of all previously existing economic systems, capitalism offers the most evident fantasmatic solution to the problem of the desire of the Other. That is to say, it offers the clearest path to social acceptance and belonging. When we imagine societies with clear marriage rules or entrance rituals, this claim seems clearly wrong. Their solution to the problem of desire appears superior to that of capitalism.²⁸ Traditional societies don't have the desire of the Other hidden in fashion trends or the production of electronics, but clearly spell it out in social regulations. But the psychic power of the commodity outstrips the most rigid societal structure in its capacity for illuminating the subject's path. The commodity form has the effect of clarifying the desire of the Other by making it manifest in a concrete object. If I doubt what the Other wants me to do, I need only follow the money. It will provide a clear fantasized solution to the desire of the Other. Traditional society, in contrast, offers regulations whose explicit status prevents a complete psychic investment. Capitalism forces the subject to interpret its way into the social order and in this way attaches itself firmly to the subject's desire. At the same time, it guides this interpretation through the commodity form and gives the subject a sense of security in the path of its desire.

When I feel as if I must have a new product, at that moment I fully immerse myself in the fantasy of what the Other desires. Often new

products fail—many times more products enter the market each year than find a niche—because they do not manage to locate themselves within consumers’ fantasy space. The inventors of failed commodities such as Pepsi Clear did not adequately carve out an appealing fantasmatic position. The success of any product is inextricable from its capacity to lodge itself within this space and to appear as if it completely solves the question of the Other’s desire. Even products that endure, like Coke or Apple electronics, must constantly renew themselves in order to remain within the prevailing fantasy. Once they become old, once they are associated with an object that the consumer has already acquired and has discovered to be lacking, they will lose their fantasmatic power. This is why even successful brands have to continue to develop new selling points and to advertise this newness. Apple must produce a new version of the iPhone or the iPad or else consumers will abandon Apple entirely. The company will find itself in the situation of Zenith, a former leader in technological appliances and now a nonentity. We know that the old object does not respond to the desire of the Other, but the new object allows us to keep this fantasy alive.

The value of money depends on the fantasy of the Other that subtends it. I accept money from someone in exchange for a commodity because I have faith that the Other believes in the value of this money.²⁹ Faith in money is faith in a fantasy about the desire of the Other and its constancy. This is the basis for sociologist Georg Simmel’s famous account of money in *The Philosophy of Money*. As Simmel puts it, “money transactions would collapse without trust.”³⁰ If everyone suddenly lost faith in gold as a source of value, the metal would become valueless. This is even more apparent with paper money: we see its loss of value during periods of rampant inflation when people must use wheelbarrows to bring money just to buy groceries. The faith in the Other that informs every financial transaction is a fantasy that the Other actually exists and that everyone else will continue to believe in the existence of this figure.

The capitalist economy makes the fantasy of money its basis and then extends this fantasy into all aspects of economic and social life. The economy functions through speculation about fantasy. Traders on the stock market do not trade based on how they anticipate a company will perform (which might be informed prediction rather than fantasy). Such traders would quickly bankrupt themselves. Instead, they speculate

based on their fantasy of fantasies about the Other's desire. They imagine how others who don't really know will envision what companies will produce products that people will want. The stock market is a vast world of fantasy taken to the nth power. But it succeeds because money serves as the royal road to the Other's desire.

FREED FROM THE OTHER'S DESIRE

The principal argument proffered by defenders of capitalism is that the economic freedom inherent in this system is the prerequisite for political freedom.³¹ As someone like Milton Friedman has it, any abridgement of economic freedom leads to an abridgement of political freedom, which is why a socialist or communist planned economy must necessarily be totalitarian. The defining characteristic of government, for capitalist theorists, is not its structure or aims but the amount of control it exerts over citizens. From this starting point, there is no difference between a socialist government and a fascist one, since both involve controlling the economic sector and thus limiting (or eliminating) freedom. But this conception of freedom is not as absolute as it claims to be. They do not want freedom in the face of the Other's desire, and this is, not coincidentally, the type of freedom from which capitalism rescues us.

True freedom is freedom in the face of the Other's desire—or, more properly, freedom from the Other's desire. Freedom is an indifference toward the desire of the Other that the subject has when it finds itself fully immersed in its own satisfaction. The free subject ceases to concern itself with the question of the desire of the Other and pursues its own satisfaction regardless of its relationship to the Other. It neither tries to follow the desire of the Other nor deviate from this desire. But capitalism has a profound allergy to this type of freedom and does all it can to ensure a preoccupation with the desire of the Other.

Capitalist society encourages subjects not to decide freely on their work but to flock to where the jobs are. Demand for employment in a certain sector enables subjects to fantasize that this is what the Other wants from them, and they can undergo training to prepare themselves to live out this fantasy. The job market itself is a vast fantasy space where subjects can find the fantasmatic guidelines for how they should desire. A need for welders tells me that I should undergo training as a welder,

and a glut of philosophy professors enables me to realize that the Other is telling me not to philosophize. But these various fantasies have nothing to do with the subject's own satisfaction and work actively to deprive the capitalist subject of its freedom.

The capitalist fantasy works not just with finding a job but also—and even more—with deciding what to purchase. With every purchase of a commodity (even an banana or a pastry), one also buys into a fantasy. I purchase what I fantasize that the Other wants from me, and the capitalist structure provides numerous forms of this fantasy from which I can choose. Advertising campaigns are vast explanations of what the Other wants and, by extension, dictates to the subject about what it should want. Advertisers proffer fantasies that the subject can accept in order to escape the burden of the Other's desire. The commodity itself, without any accompanying advertisement, also functions as a fantasy. Its very availability on the market tells me that this might be what the Other wants. Success on the market is the great capitalist fantasy. I must have the new commodity that everyone else must have simply because it is what everyone else must have: this commodity promises a successful answer to the Other's desire. It embodies the promise of fantasy itself.

Capitalism has a parasitic relationship to signification. It mirrors the effects that language has on the speaking being, while cementing the psychic dependence that the speaking being has on the illusory desire of the Other that emerges through signification. Capitalism remolds the subject in its own image and protects the subject from confronting its own traumatic satisfaction. It is, of course, possible to break this hold, to which the bare fact of recognizing it attests. But doing so requires discovering the extent and power of its reach.

Many critics of capitalism have failed to see that desire itself—specifically, the belief that we might realize our desire—is the problem rather than the solution. In an oft-cited statement from *Anti-Oedipus* (their treatise attacking both psychoanalysis and capitalism as they function together), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim, “Desire can never be deceived. Interests can be deceived, unrecognized, or betrayed, but not desire.”³² Though Deleuze and Guattari recognize how capitalism appropriates desire—for them, in a manner of speaking, it is nothing but the

appropriation of desire—they do not see how desire, though it might not be deceived, can itself be a deception. *Anti-Oedipus* is a panegyric to desire. Capitalism may function through desire, but in the end, it puts the brakes on desire and doesn't take desire far enough. What we need, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is more desire, more refusals of restrictions on desire.

Given the identification that I see at work between capitalism and the fantasy of unrestricted desire, what I am proposing here is an anti-*Anti-Oedipus*. Deleuze and Guattari attack capitalism and psychoanalysis for the obstacles they erect toward the expansion of desire. But the problem isn't the obstacles capitalism creates; it is that capitalism's contingent obstacles obscure the necessity of the obstacle. Capitalism's deception consists in convincing us, as it convinces Deleuze and Guattari, that desire can transcend its failures and overcome all barriers. We don't need more desire, but rather the recognition that the barrier is what we desire. It is this recognition that provides the key for divesting ourselves from the appeal of capitalism.

Even though capitalism's incessant self-reproduction seems to mimic the structure of subjectivity—constant repetition for its own sake—this movement, as manifested in the capitalist system, always has a goal to realize. The capitalism system must promise a better and wealthier future. Neither individual capitalists nor the system as a whole can function without the goal of future enrichment, whereas the subject always operates without the possibility of a more satisfying future. What separates the apparently repetitive circulation of capital from the subject's repetition is accumulation. The subject seeks loss, not successful accumulation, which means that any attempt to link capitalism to subjectivity involves a category error. The subject's satisfaction does not require, and in fact disdains, the illusion of gain that sustains the capitalist system.

The capitalist subject oscillates between dissatisfaction and pleasure, between absence and presence, and it cannot recognize the satisfaction that underlies this oscillation. This subject remains, however, a subject animated by a lost object. As such, it derives its satisfaction from the series of failures to arrive at the pleasure it seeks. Late in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud suggests what was for him at the time a disturbing hypothesis. He says tentatively, "The pleasure principle seems

actually to serve the death instincts.”³³ If we understand “death instincts” here as the subject’s attachment to loss, this brief sentence at the conclusion of Freud’s brief book provides the most thoroughgoing critique of capitalism that anyone has ever written. The recognition that we are not really pursuing pleasure frees us from the chains of capitalism more completely than any other revolutionary gesture.

1. THE SUBJECT OF DESIRE AND THE SUBJECT OF CAPITALISM

1. This is the position of Allan Meltzer, who claims, “Capitalist systems are not rigid, nor are they all the same. Capitalism is unique in permitting change and adaptation, so difference societies tend to develop different rules and processes, often reflecting cultural requirements.” Allan H. Meltzer, *Why Capitalism?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3. Meltzer, like other defenders of capitalism, applauds its adaptability to cultural difference, and in this way he makes clear the compatibility of capitalism with the insistence on a multicultural perspective. There is nothing about cultural difference that threatens the logic of capitalism because capitalism thrives on the introduction of differences.
2. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), 29.
3. The rise of capitalism appears necessary rather than contingent simply because we observe it retroactively from the perspective of its historical victory. A key lesson of Hegel’s philosophy of history is that this perspective—and thus the impression of necessity—is inescapable. The retroactive perspective erects a barrier to distinguishing between the necessity and contingency of past events.
4. The great philosopher of mediation is Hegel, who wrote, improbably enough, before the rise of modern linguistics. Hegel contends that it is not even possible for us to identify the most basic element before us—to say “here” or “now”—without implying layers of a complex system of mediation that the philosopher must take the pain and time to work through. He nonetheless sees how easily we fall into the trap of failing to see these layers of mediation and thereby believing in our immediate access to what we perceive. The privileging of immediacy that occurs in philosophy after Hegel (with, for example, Kierkegaard) represents a case of thinkers succumbing to precisely the illusion that a prior thinker (namely, Hegel himself) warned against throughout his work.
5. The company Apple understands that this particular object doesn’t coincide with itself and that this noncoincidence creates an excess that subjects desire. The simplicity of the object hides its excess and enables subjects to enjoy this excess without recognizing the relationship between their enjoyment and the divided status of the object. Apple suggests to its clients that its brand name connotes wholeness while making possible an enjoyment of the excess attached to the name.
6. Jacques Lacan explains the distinction between need and desire in terms of the effect of the signifier. See Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,”

in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 575–84.

7. Kant's distinction between thing as it appears and the thing in itself is a way of articulating the difference that Saussure identifies. On the basis of the division introduced by the signifier, we can posit a thing in itself existing beyond the world of appearances. Though the division is not an illusion, the existence of the thing in itself is, which is why the subsequent German idealists (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) work to expel this concept from Kant's philosophy.
8. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 112.
9. Onomatopoeia seems to eliminate the gap between signifier and signified, but a comparison of the onomatopoeic words from different languages reveals that even these words emerge through a socially motivated estimation of the signified rather than an actual identity. Saussure points out that "they are only approximate and more or less conventional imitations of certain sounds." Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 69. It is as if onomatopoeia exists only to enable us to disavow the gap between signifier and signified.
10. It would be incorrect to align the emergence of absence with the introduction of the signifier. Though the signifier makes our confrontation with absence evident, absence or negativity makes signification possible. That is to say, without some absence or negativity within being itself, we could never begin to speak and thereby render absence present to us. This is what leads Hegel in the famous opening of *The Science of Logic* to assert that being and nothing are identical. He claims, "Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 59. Without positing nothing within pure being, Hegel argues, we could not account for our capacity to speak, since speech requires the interruption of pure being with negativity. In other words, we can formulate an ontological claim about the relation between being and nothing or presence and absence on the basis of the foundational role that nothing plays within signification. If nothing did not inhere in pure being, we couldn't have casual conversations about the weather. The role that nothing plays in signification attests to the role that it has in being itself. But signification effectively brings absence to the fore and confronts us with its ubiquity.
11. Psychoanalysts often make the error of addressing themselves to frustration (the loss of a real object due to the exigencies of the social order) rather than castration (the constitutive loss of an imaginary object). Frustration is loss produced by injustice, but castration is the loss of nothing or of the object that embodies nothing, a loss that is not unjust but necessary for subjectivity itself. Psychoanalysis can do nothing about frustration. Instead, it must

focus on the subject's relation to its castration and to the subject's efforts to retrieve what it never had in the first place. For more on this important distinction, see Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XII: Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse, 1964–1965*, unpublished seminar, especially the sessions of March 3, 1965, and March 10, 1965.

12. W. R. D. Fairbairn, "Object-Relationships and Dynamic Structure," in *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 138.
13. In the case of Melanie Klein (to whom Jacques Lacan owes an enormous debt), a similar sense of dealing with actual objects that are lost occurs. The child is not dealing with a constitutively lost object but with empirically good and bad objects. As Klein notes, "The development of the infant is governed by the mechanisms of introjection and projection. From the beginning the ego introjects objects 'good' and 'bad,' for both of which its mother's breast is the prototype—for good objects when the child obtains it and for bad when it fails him." Melanie Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986), 116.
14. The recognition of foundational status of loss for the subject can lead either to a severe depression or a sense of genuine freedom. The necessity of unending loss might prompt one to end one's life or view each empirical loss with complete equanimity.
15. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 179.
16. Recently, several voices championing Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) as cinema's greatest achievement, even surpassing *Citizen Kane*, have arisen. For instance, in the *Sight and Sound* poll of 2012, *Vertigo* took over the top spot as the greatest film from *Kane*. Like *Kane*, *Vertigo* also explores the contrast between the lost object and its replacement. Scottie (James Stewart) begins the film desiring Madeleine (Kim Novak), and her death only increases his desire as she becomes an inaccessible object. When she reappears as Judy (Kim Novak), he lives out the fantasy of obtaining the lost object. The discovery that Madeleine never existed, that she was just Judy playing the part of Madeleine, deprives both Scottie and the spectator of the fantasy of obtaining the lost object by making clear that the lost object exists only as lost. The superiority of *Kane*, however, consists in its formal rendering of the distinction between the satisfying lost object and the dissatisfying replacements, while Hitchcock plays out the difference primarily in the film's content.
17. The conflict between psychoanalysis and deconstruction takes place precisely over the terms of the relationship between metaphor and metonymy. For psychoanalysis, metaphor has primacy over metonymy. The metonymic movement from object to object obscures the loss that transpires during metaphoric substitution. Deconstruction, in contrast, views the

movement within signification as primary and the marking of a foundational loss as a secondary attempt to arrest this movement.

18. Though *Citizen Kane* relies on a final twist—"Rosebud" is the sled—it is not what Hugh Manon (Clark University) calls a spoilerfilm, that is, a film that one can destroy for a first-time viewer simply by revealing the twist. Many of M. Night Shyamalan's films fit into this category, but what saves *Citizen Kane* from it is that the object presented in the final twist is just the embodiment of nothing, an absence that has been present throughout the film. One can freely give away the ending and inform the neophyte viewer of *Citizen Kane* that Rosebud is the sled without ruining the film.
19. In the early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx first advances the idea that capitalism works through the production of new needs, which he links to the ruin of the subject who acquires these new needs. He notes, "every person speculates on creating a new *need* in another, so as to drive him to a fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of *gratification* and therefore economic ruin." Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International, 1964), 147.
20. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1981), 347.
21. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), 334.
22. The fact that *Grenze* is not just a term for boundary but also the word for the border between nations lends even more importance to Marx's claim. The national border is never a border for capital. As Marx himself points out, capitalism was global capitalism from the beginning.
23. Martin Heidegger's name for the Other is *das Man* or "the they." *Das Man* manipulates us into an inauthentic relation to Being and to death by stripping away the uniqueness or individuality of that relation. The problem with Heidegger's formulation is that the escape from *das Man* and its demand for conformity enables one to access a successful being toward death, while for psychoanalysis proper the escape from the Other leads only to the confrontation with the necessity of failure.
24. The idea that the Other does not exist is precisely what Hegel is aiming at when he says in the opening of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). 10. We believe in substance and take it as foundational, while subject is at odds with itself and completely uncertain. Hegel's contention here is that even what seems most foundational, even the surest form of the Other, must assume the status of subject

for the philosopher and thus must prove to be ultimately unreliable. The point of this statement is not some type of subjectivism but rather an assertion of the groundlessness of our existence. No existentialist could push the idea of groundlessness any further than Hegel does at this moment.

25. Of course, all fashion trends seem strange and even idiotic in retrospect. Henry David Thoreau offers the definitive account of our relation to past fashions when he notes that we mock those of the past while slavishly following those of the present.
26. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La logique du fantasme, 1966–1967*, unpublished manuscript, session of June 14, 1967.
27. The existence of secret societies like Skull and Bones functions as a site for societal disavowal. When we encounter a secret society, we implicitly fail to see that society as such operates according to the logic of the secret society. Secret societies thus permit us to disavow the fantasmatic entrance requirement for the social order itself.
28. The description that Claude Lévi-Strauss provides of marriage rules in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* shows how these rules regulate social activity, but it is less clear how these strict rules affect the desire of the subject. Desire can gain a measure of freedom amid strict social rules, a freedom not available under the regime of capitalism. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon, 1969).
29. In *Debt*, David Graeber offers a representative statement of the role that faith plays in sustaining the value of money. He notes, “a gold coin is not actually useful in itself. One only accepts it because one assumes that other people will.” David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 47.
30. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 2d ed., trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.
31. Milton Friedman states this directly. He notes, “I know of no example in time or place of a society that has been marked by a large measure of political freedom, and that has not also used something comparable to the free market to organize the bulk of economic activity.” Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9.
32. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 257.
33. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1955), 18:63.