

Consumer Society, Modern Business, and Pseudo-Knowledge

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Abstract

This article examines the psychological and existential significance of the work of Baudrillard (1994) and Maltsev (2021) by situating these in relation to psychoanalytic theories of sociohistorical changes in the structuring of social desire, particularly in those types taken as good subjects. It suggests that a systematic worsening has occurred from the 1980s onwards, focused on the denial and suppression of embodied phenomena of the type captured by the Freudian concept of the id. Both morality and money are historically based in reactions against the id, but these have now gained unprecedented primacy in social life, at least in the global North. A new regime of *simulated* control, management, and public relations/marketing has generated a general trance-state conditioned on the exclusion of the id, a trance-state the crisis tendencies of which render the situation permanently unstable. This repeats a historical tendency in capitalist ideology towards a Puritan, masochistic disavowal or condemnation of the body, and a corresponding attempt to convert irrational passions into rational interests. The crisis includes a general corrosion of cathexes of the social and material worlds, to which the only viable solution is a revalorisation of the id.

Keywords

Baudrillard, pre-modern, alienation, behavioral management, cognitive-behavioral psychology, consumer society

Introduction

This contribution explores other analyses which overlap usefully with these approaches, analyzing the psychological structure of consumer society in terms of its impacts on psychodynamic forces within individuals. It focuses on the contributions of five scholars: A.O. Hirschman's work on the taming of "passions" as "interests", Elias's overlapping work on the "civilizing process", Erich Fromm's analysis of the Reformation, Nietzsche's account of

the origins of punishment, and Hakim Bey/Peter Lamborn Wilson's wide-ranging analyses of "cyber-gnostic" capitalism (Bey, 1995, 1996, 2002, n.d.a, n.d.b; Elias, 1937, 1939; Fromm, 1942, 1973; Hirschman, 1977; Nietzsche, 1887/1996). It shows that simulation is closely linked to a propensity to purge the id from social life, or at least to deny its presence. Modern society and knowledge were formed as an alliance of ego and superego to exclude the unruly id. This unleashed a process of disenchantment, decathexis and loss of meaning which has now reached crisis performances. It ultimately generates a *simulated*, false reality, because it is unable to connect with the true sources of meaning, knowledge and life in vital forces.

Maltsev's work has shown how late-medieval society was far more knowledgeable than moderns give it credit for, and had capabilities lost sometime between 1700 and today (Maltsev, 2021). This coincides with a move from qualitative, vitalist and pragmatic views of science/knowledge, similar to indigenous/local knowledge systems, to science-as-simulation, in which knowledge is produced abstractly from models and formulae (what Baudrillard terms simulation). This has corrupted science, which no longer engages with actual processes of life—either in terms of social practices or energetic flows—and tends to degenerate into tautology and ego-boosting. This is borne-out in studies of local knowledge. Local, premodern and indigenous knowledge-systems are very diverse, but they are generally more open to the flow-state level of reality, which is associated with the "lower" body and desire, than is modern reason (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Foucault, 1980; Usher, 2000; Berkes, 1999; Stevenson, 1996; Smith, 2007).

This paper argues that the degeneration into a *simulated* reality is broadly captured by the Situationist/immediatist idea that people are induced to live through images and information systems, and to either ignore or recuperate/sublimate their bodily/affective, social and imaginal experience and creativity. More fundamentally, it argues that simulation lacks meaning and intensity because it is in large part an *idless world*. Consumer society is *simulated* because it is *idless*. This is not exactly what Baudrillard (1994) says, but it is implicit in his critique of the loss of symbolic exchange. In Freud's and Reich's theory of the (modern) psyche, there are three main operative forces: the id, ego and superego (Freud, 1999; Reich, 1972). The id is the most basic, appearing even in infants and animals. It operates as a flux and flow-state which, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), forms assemblages of desiring- and social-production with elements of its environment. It is driven by bodily experiences of pleasure, and drives such as hunger, defensive aggression and sexual enjoyment. The ego is carved out later from the aspect of the id which is concerned with self-preservation (and arguably also with deferred gratification). It pursues reality-testing and distinguishes real from illusory satisfactions, and it is also concerned with instrumental calculation and knowledge.

The superego is later carved-out from the ego, usually as an introjection of parental commands and morals. Initially obedience is also an ego-function, used to avoid punishment, but it mutates into a separate internal moral force which is largely independent of reality-checking and self-interest. Crucially, this psychological topography means that the elements are not equal: the superego necessarily draws on the energy of the ego as it is an overdeveloped sub-component of it, and in the same way, the ego gets all its energy from the id. It is not known to what extent all three functions exist in all social systems or if they are specific to modernity. It is widely observed (eg. in decolonial theory) that modern European thought (Descartes, 2015; Kant, 2015) involves an overblown ego, comparatively speaking. However, these scholars do not use a psychoanalytic model and all too often attempt to cure excessive ego with injections of superego, bashed by humility/humiliation and ego-bashing. This necessarily fails, as the superego draws all of its energy from the ego: if the ego collapses, then so does the superego.

Method

In this article, the research methodology is centered on an extensive literature review and thorough analysis situated at the intersection of postmodern studies, historical inquiry, psychology, and the evolution of European thought from the late 19th century to the contemporary era. The study is founded on a meticulous examination of scholarly works, theoretical frameworks, and historical narratives, drawing upon a diverse range of sources to construct a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. Through the lens of postmodern studies, engagement with the complexities and nuances of cultural, social, and intellectual shifts explores the ways in which postmodern thought has influenced and reshaped perceptions of reality.

Concurrently, the historical analysis delves into the late 19th-century European intellectual landscape, establishing connections and disjunctions between the philosophical underpinnings of that era and the multifaceted realities of the present day. The hypothesis posited here suggests that the original basis of life was the id (or passions), and these have been alienated twice over.

They were first alienated in the medieval period and other premodern systems by means of religion as a superego assemblage functioning through reactive force, as theorised by Nietzsche. However, the decline of religious power in the late medieval period (accompanied by the Thirty Years' War, the Reformation, the legalisation of usury, and the military primacy of expensive weapons) led to a period of ego-driven absolutism. Following this period, the superego function was re-established as liberalism, which closely enmeshes ego and superego functions to the disadvantage of the id. I shall trace this process through readings of a series of historical investigations, mostly focused on the late-medieval/early-modern periods.

In many ways, it is bizarre that Freud had to “discover” the id and the unconscious, which premodern people already knew about. It is also bizarre that so much of today's academia and theory ignores this discovery: Rawls's “persons”, for example, are strangely *idless*, as are the signal-responsive nodes of cybernetics, the positionalities of identity politics, rational-choice theory and behavioral economics, the risk-groups of criminology, cognitive-behavioral psychology (where thoughts are assumed to cause feelings), cultural studies and ideology-critique, poststructuralist theories of language, posthumanist theories of interconnected assemblages, etc. If id appears at all, it either gets misread as ego or superego (for instance, tamed into “preferences” or “interests”), demonized as a monstrous deviation from the ego/superego-derived cosmic order (as in the “bad thoughts” or thoughtcrimes deemed to produce “radicalisation”, “criminal thinking styles”, “male fragility”, etc.), or idealized into a truth-like role with a superego function (for instance, the cult of the “experience of victims” or of the oppressed).

For consumer society, only the “higher”—money, reason, interest, spirit—exists. Of course, people may manage to libidinally cathect either objects available in consumer society or the entirety of the current system; the point is that, if this happens, it is in a sense unintended, or intended only at the level of effects. Indeed, the system quietly depends on people finding their own ways to cathect what it offers (duly summarised in Rawls's “responsibility for ends”); however, it is not organized around this, and disavows it at every opportunity.

Money and Alienation

The idea of money as alienation (commodity fetishism) is best-known from (early) Marx (1975), although money is much older than the starting-point Marxists set for capitalism. Money was likely itself originally a form of symbolic exchange expressing vital force, but one which has been sapped of vitality over time. Sublimation/phantasy allows different things to be identified, so that an image or representation can be taken as the thing itself. Aboriginal Australians traditionally believed that pictures are the things they represent. Some Polynesian societies circulated items believed to contain concentrations of the *mana*, or creative vital force, of the creator, thus bonding different groups to one another. Some Native Americans used *wampum*, or beads tied together in culturally meaningful ways, as currency. In the Sahel and Sahara, cows, which were not originally "owned" but merely herded away from farmlands, were sources of status similar to money. This would initially have marked a skill in luring and herding the animals, thus a sign of *mana*. Hence money starts as a way of symbolising creative force or aspects of the self which have already been mixed with objects, to facilitate giving, exchanging or circulating these fragments of creative force.

Money in the modern sense seems to have started as visual representations of cows held in a temple, which could be given to others and then exchanged for actual cows (Wilson, 1998): in a sense, they were part of the "substance" of the cow, tied to it imaginally in fantasy. Early money is also intensely symbolic, often referring to the divine sun and moon (the origins of gold and silver coinage) as well as the then mythically-endowed ruler. In short, money was a *fragment of vital force*, of the power of production and creativity. This is what Marx (1975) intuited with the idea that money is congealed labour-power. However, money becomes more and more abstract. While it initially *expresses* vital force, actual wealth, attributes of gods, etc., once established as a system it can be *simulated*: someone can possess the symbols without the underlying realities. Money becomes increasingly abstract and can be accumulated without reference to what it represents. It is modelled libidinally on a "sexuality of the dead" (Bey, 1996), chaos without the vital life-force, operating as inorganic reproduction via constant splitting. Money begets more money (M-C-M'). This mode of reproduction eliminates sexuality, the id, and difference from reproduction, providing the basis for an *idless* human reality in which the id-functions are alienated to money/virtuality.

Bey believes this approach stems from gnostic mind/body dualism and later, from Puritanism, both of which maintained that the body, flesh, passions and desires are products of the devil, but that (some) humans contain fragments of a higher, divine principle which should subordinate or destroy the lower nature. The resultant renunciation of bodily pleasures leads to a pursuit of the purely mental or spiritual. (All too often, critics of dominant systems also adopt this same valorisation of the "higher" against the "lower", whether in the *idless* "liberation" of orthodox Marxism, the language-fixated positionality-politics and Buddhist-like ascension of identity-oriented poststructuralism, the purely *moral* critique offered by fundamentalists and decolonialists, the illusion that education or therapy or spirituality can redeem modernity, the image of the nation as providing what is lacking in mercantile instrumentalism, etc). Although modern capitalism aspires to be *idless*, it also captures fragments of id if they are subordinated to ego or superego. This is the source of the dynamic of recuperation. Capitalism tends to corrupt hermetic practices designed initially for immediacy and liberation, instead using them for control. The effect is that people are alienated, put in a bad trance, rather than enchanted (Wilson, 1998).

Money takes vital force—which is necessarily local, part of the id-flow—and makes it transferrable and exchangeable. Today it has instead become the only register of value. Hence, capital operates on the same magical/symbolic/interpretative level as resistance to it, and as the vital force which has been lost (Bey, 1996). The process of abstraction saps some of

the vital force it captures. Things which are commodified often lose their meanings, their emotional intensity, their ability to provide peak experiences. This “disenchantment”, or decathexis, is termed “cool” by Baudrillard and has become especially widespread in modernity. Another of the dangers is that people can simulate vital force by simply “printing more money”. When someone prints more money, they appear to possess—to summon magically—a fragment of the cosmic life-force. Wampum disappeared as currency when European settlers learned to mass-produce beads. States can simply print banknotes, saving state finances but causing inflation. Today the main method of “printing money” is credit. (This may be why usury was seen as so dangerous and sinful in the Middle Ages). All these methods also have regressive distributive effects: powerful actors can capture a larger share of money by “printing” it, even if it is devalued. This process could have progressive effects if the people “printing money” were the poor, but most often, it is either the existing elite or an emerging elite. Either way, they perform a kind of parlour trick to transfer real wealth to themselves by transferring its signifier.

This also explains the difference between good and bad art, science, or theory. Immediate practices are often *expressive*: they draw on the id directly, sublimating it only minimally so as to render it communicable. The best creative productions are minimally sublimated products of the id (Heshusius, 1994). However, expressive creations can be *simulated* by people who know how the life-force works *from the outside*, for instance by observing human “behavior”, or who copy and duplicate the models used by genuinely expressive creators. For example, a person (or an algorithm) can observe that people enjoy stories about wizards, tear-jerkers, romances, and mass-produce these to a formula (leading to clichéd genre fiction); scientists can mechanically reapply methods which were intuited previously. As a result, a powerful system can create entire realms of images which *seem to come from the life-force but do not* (or which mix things which partially come from, but capture, this force with others which do not). This is Baudrillard’s world of simulation, or consumer society. This tends to falsify the leftist dogma that excludes the idea of genius in favour of collective and participatory creativity. It is true that everyone has an id, that this comes out in collective processes, and that these collective effervescences are wrongly attributed to individuals. However, it is also true that a person in touch with their id (generally a pre-Oedipal type) can create expressively, and their work differs qualitatively from that of people producing similar “creations” at the levels of ego and superego only (or with only marginal quantities of id). Today’s academia, culture industry, etc. are structured so as to filter out the id-driven, who typically cannot cope with the endless performance demands, hoop-jumping, virtue-signalling, requirements to submit and obey so as to be validated, etc. This is why creativity is drying up: there is no “peak libido”, only blocked libido. The rare exceptions (eg. in tech industries) prove the rule.

Morality and Superego

The rise of the superego is distinct from the rise of money but also similar. It happens earlier, and produces an initial form of superego already present in the Middle Ages, but it gains its malevolent power only recently, with the fusion of superego and ego in alliance against the id. The origin of superego is subordination, powerlessness. For Nietzsche (1887/1996), every animal, including humans, strives for optimal conditions to release its power and feel its strength. Deleuze reads Nietzsche as primarily meaning *power-to*, in which case Nietzsche’s view posits a striving for peak experience and flow-states (though Nietzsche sometimes seems to confuse power-to and power-over). This striving can be turned against itself—turned reactive—in ways which block its functioning (Deleuze, 1983). In Freudian terms, the id and ego aspire to power-to but the superego comes to value powerlessness, to act against the will-to-power of the other parts (Freud, 1999).

Moral language, such as "good" and "right", was for Nietzsche self-definition by the "noble" or powerful, in the sense of those with peak experience. I would add that classical ethical theory associates moral language strongly with an image of cosmic order and the idea that a well-lived life will bring a certain kind of ultimate satisfaction because it accords with one's cosmic nature, or optimally arranges the vital forces. Nietzsche (1887/1996) theorises punishment as a capture of the sadistic type of id-energy. The later ideas of guilt and deterrence are overwritten on a practice which was initially fatalistic (people experienced the threat of punishment much like occupational hazards, natural disasters, etc). Punishment arises from a relationship of debt—which I would add, was probably rooted in early views of cosmic order in which balance could be restored by an equal and opposite reaction in the reverse direction to an initial imbalancing (the process operating energetically and impersonally). The archetypal binary is the creditor and debtor, and punishment consists in the creditor (the so-called victim or survivor) extracting 'a sort of pleasure' from the debtor (the so-called criminal). It gives the feeling of having defeated an enemy and treating them as one wishes, a joy which has its original root in power-to (in the fact of victory), but which in punishment is simulated through *vicarious* enjoyment of the victories of the powerful.

Punishment has a central role in the emergence of modern humans, because, while it rarely deters or instils guilt, it "hardens" people and makes them more cautious (put simply: they try not to get caught). It thus strengthens the ego as self-preservation force. Punishment inscribes memories more strongly, "contracts" experience onto particular dangers, and thus strengthens identities (as opposed to the identity-loosening effects of relaxation; one can here compare Bergson). People's identities as separate, distinct persons are stronger in fight-or-flight, survival situations where self-preservation is paramount, than in situations of relaxation or enjoyment. (The present, widespread dogma that discomfort and anxiety encourage existential openness to the other is not empirically valid, a practice validating what are functionally violent technologies of hardening by pretending they are technologies of opening).

Superego is a secondary phenomenon which Nietzsche (1887/1996), suggests is derived from the need of disempowered people for meaning, ie. an attempt to restore the lost id. Slaves need strong egos to survive. The social straitjacket of fear makes people more calculable, and thus allows them to be treated as objects. (Today, via techniques of "nudging", this can even be done in systems which are not explicitly coercive: these systems rely on the predictable "individual" having already been moulded). Emotional lability decreases. Stronger "walls of affects" are built—what Reich calls character-armour—serving as strong interpersonal boundaries splitting each person from the others. Slaves cannot vent their aggression outwardly, because of fear. (We see in Fanon, Solomon, and others how empowering it is when this inhibition is overcome). Aggression therefore turns reactive and turns inwards.

People seek meaning in life. Yet the masters' world seems to slaves as hard, cold, cruel, unfeeling, amoral, and bloody (indications in Kleinian interpretation of the bad-mother archetype). Denied the pursuit of meaning through pleasure or self-empowerment, subordinates instead find it in asceticism, *ressentiment* and slave morality—the will-to-power turned against itself (Nietzsche, 1887/1996). This will to self-torture leads people into *sin-hunting*, the practice of hunting for sin inside themselves, and usually in others too. This can be very fulfilling, as every misery of the world can be taken to be a product of sin. The powerless do not thereby regain their power and their id; everywhere except a few millenarian and esoteric heresies, sin is identified with the id (as well as or instead of the ego). The weak remain weak—they obtain neither id-satisfactions nor ego-power—but they seek counter-power at the level of the superego. They conceal weakness behind goodness, attaching positive moral values to weakness and positing their own superiority to the masters, whose less-constrained ids and egos make them "evil".

This leads to a bizarre situation where a sovereign bar—the bar separating morally-valued from “bare” life, which necessarily relies on the strength of the sovereign—is directed *against* noble traits and for those of slaves. In the end there are no nobles, the id is everywhere repressed or besieged. A system of slave-morality may check the extremes of absolutism which warlords left to their own devices engage in. However, it also generates threats of death, or of social death, against anyone who is unable or unwilling to perform the required degree of self-control—a degree which constantly becomes more rigid and more exacting. The system operates, in effect, as a system of privilege accruing to the most self-controlled, those with the least id (and of course, this also means nobody enjoys life or gets much meaning from it).

During the Middle Ages, the process was incomplete. It seems the European peasants in the early medieval period were beset by bandits and warrior-bands arising from the collapse of Rome. They made peace with individual bandits/warlords, gaining access to the powerful defensive technology of castles in return for paying part of their crop. This suited both sides, as bandits preferred a regular but recurring income to the unpredictability of raiding. The balance between peasant and lord differed across time and place, with lords trying to reduce peasants to a slave-like status and peasants trying to make the relationship more reciprocal. The warlords/landlords were still prone to violence (glory-seeking, war, cruel punishment), and religious organisations emerged nearly everywhere to check this tendency (the Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Europe, the *ulema* of scholars in the Muslim world, the Buddhist approach—for instance in the *Ratnavali*—in India, etc). At an elite level, this led to a power-balance between priest and warrior castes (respectively, superego and ego castes) within medieval society; merchants were a third, and rather low-ranking, group.

These elites hovered over a subsistence/artisanal society in which the life-force persisted strongly. In the ancient and medieval worlds, everyone had a fairly active id, and superegos had less force. All but the most poor owned or had stable access to a house and either land or a trade providing a stable income (guilds restricted entry to ensure work always guaranteed a given standard of living). The usual peasant morality was that, so long as one lived a good/normal/decent life and refrained from certain outrageous (but easily avoided) transgressions, one was destined for salvation. Trade took place within a “moral economy” (Scott, 1979; Thompson, 1971) oriented to maintaining a subsistence minimum and meaningful lives. Peasants’ superegos were thus not especially demanding or persecutory. They would use infrapolitics to resist most of the demands for subordination made by the two elites (see Scott, 1990).

The Rise of Modernity

The situation worsens with the rise of modernity: the new merchant elite seeks to drive the id from public life. This is shown for instance in Elias’s research on the “civilising process”. Feudal lords controlled populations as landlords, and held land based on conquest. It was not expected that lords would inhibit themselves: they could be violent, cruel, sexually insatiable, gluttonous, proud, etc. In early modernity, the mercantile bourgeoisie began to displace the warlord elite. Elias (1939) studies books on manners/etiquette, and finds a strong tendency over time towards increasingly rigid self-control. For instance, eating with fingers is first limited to separate plates, then replaced by knives and forks, then the “polite” handling of knives and forks became increasingly precise. This seems to be associated with the merchants’ attempts to distinguish themselves from the warlords. In particular, this process involved intensified self-control of ‘short-term affects’ (Elias, 1937) such as hunger, aggression and sexual desire, and the exclusion of certain bodily flows and activities (including killing and punishing, as well as shitting, pissing and fucking) from public space and polite discourse.

Animal slaughter moves from streets to abattoirs; punishment moves from town squares to prisons; the "mad" are confined; sex and nudity are restricted to "private" spaces; shitting and pissing are restricted to the bathroom/toilet. In effect, the id is excluded from public life; "society" from now on is limited to egos and superegos. However, this is achieved not by overcoming the id, but by repressing it both socially and (later) in the individual psyche. Civilisation does not remove violence; it hides it. It still depends on constant threats, punishment, compulsion, and pressure.

In Elias's account, the power of the superego increases greatly during the "civilising process". States identified with superego functions begin to predominate over lords and religious bodies. If a society is state-dominated, inner selves tend to be ruled by superegos identified with the will of the state. The system also becomes capable of using "cold" violence more and more wantonly, since it completely disregards human needs and desires. Berardi's statement that the current neoliberal system reserves no sympathy whatsoever for suffering human bodies is completely to the point, but it is not a *moral* failing; it is an incapacity to see the id, because of cyber-gnosis (Berardi, 2016). A person who cannot feel pain, may not intuit why they should not do something painful to someone else; the psychological equivalent of this situation is today widespread, and often intensified by trance-like "hallucinations" of what an actual situation is (from police imagining guns in the hands of black men, to rapists believing sex is consensual). Incapacity to feel one's own id leads to insensitivity to others' ids; no amount of "emotional literacy/intelligence" or "social skills" (abstract knowledge of *idless* beings and/or learned scripts) will substitute for the id. In addition, conditions of fear and insecurity combined with (often justified) distrust of the state tend to generate a decivilising process which puts the general trend in reverse. Elias uses this concept mainly in relation to fascism, but it also characterizes moral panics and authoritarian populism more broadly. The gains of the "civilising process" are thus not very great: violence is not reduced, but hidden, and even this hiding is precarious and often reversed. This also explains why modern, "civilised" humans would lose connection with vital forces and geometries in the natural/physical world, since there is now a barrier between their own vital forces and those of the world. One might even say that lockdowns are the "civilising process" taken to its natural conclusion: the attempted elimination of all human-to-human contact, from handshakes to raves.

Foucault (1977) suggests that resentment has increased in the transition from sovereign to disciplinary power—a transition also situated in early modernity. In particular, disciplinary power aims to control and disempower others—a theme also found in Virilio's work (eg. Virilio, 2012). Confinement brings with it control. Not only must people learn self-control to confine given activities to invisible spaces; the spaces of confinement provide opportunities to surveil, psychologically manipulate, and (in phantasy at least) to remould the confined people. "Criminals", "madmen", hospital patients, schoolchildren, military conscripts, are held in total austere institutions so as to mould them into people useful for the powerful or suited to a desired type of society. Where the process partially succeeds, it installs a persona oriented entirely to the gaze of the imagined observer. The underlying person is not remolded, but a secondary, fake self is placed over the top of their previous self as an interface between self and world. While specific forms of torturous punishment have been partly eliminated, sadists within the state machine keep finding new ways to break the wills and personalities of those under their control. Ultimately, the entire process is necessarily abusive: it is not possible to force a person to imagine they are just a persona, or a node in a cybernetic network, without traumatizing them so much as to shatter their sense of self.

In the Absolutist period, the cult of control fused with the older warlord orientation to produce a new wave of tyrannies. In his study of theatrical norms through time, Boal (2008) argues that the early bourgeoisie promoted an ethic of Machiavellian *virtù*, in which shrewd

manipulation of others, self-control and doing what is necessary are the ultimate goods. This ethos has disguised itself, moving outside ethical theory and into the realm of business and self-improvement literature (“How to Win Friends and Influence People,” Carnegie, 1935). While hardly anyone professes the ethos, it is still often what is looked for in “strong” leaders, and is often dramatized in movies, novels and the like: Jack Bauer, Christian Gray, Donald Trump. (Historically westerns were a major site for such phantasies; today it is more common for the hero to be a grizzled special forces veteran or—most often—a cop). This layer of ruthless ego-performance persists as an implicit norm, contrasted with the passions of villains. The political right is particularly good at exploiting this quasi-moralised ego-level without seeming to be outright amoral, or hostile to the “public good”.

In a different vein, Fromm (1973) suggests that malignant aggression only appears in modernity. Malignant aggression is a particular mixture of necrophilia—a preference for dead, object-like matter over living matter—with the exterminatory (rather than controlling) subtype of sadism. Theweleit (1987) shows, at least for a subset of fascistic soldier-males, that life is associated with unpredictability and with being “flooded” with unwanted affect/id; in today’s jargon, killing “eliminates a threat”. Necrophilia becomes common as social systems focus on making people machine-like or subordinating them to machines (an issue also raised by Mumford, Illich, Perlman, etc). Theweleit also shows that this orientation arises from a subset of contexts in which the future fascists are exposed to extreme violence or abuse, such that the body is experienced mainly as a site of pain, not pleasure. Such a pain-body can become a source of meaning only indirectly, through the flood/dam complex: repression of bodily flows as potentially painful and anxiety-inducing, and valuing of the dams or rocks which contain the floods.

Liberal ideology arises in the same period, and is clearly associated with superego functions. Reich (1972) specifically analyzes liberalism as an attempt to tame ego-level impulses with superego, and believes it fails against fascism for this very reason: fascism returns to the more basic, ego level, though not all the way down to the id. This is probably what happens in all the “decivilising processes”: the underlying ego re-emerges with a vengeance, loaded with reactive affects. Modern politics thus takes place between parties of the ego (rightist) and the superego (liberal/leftist), in which the former has an unfair advantage. The id remains unrepresented; politically, it is the domain of countercultures, direct action, etc.

Passions and Interests

Hirschman’s *The Passions and the Interests* provides a particularly insightful account of the modern transformation of values, which throws much light on the psychodynamic forces involved (Hirschman, 1977). In the Middle Ages, aristocratic and heroic ideals of chivalry were prominent, and religious discourse juxtaposed the passions/vices to the virtues, with faith in the strength of the latter. Glory, not money, was the goal of elite life. Money-making activities were at best tolerated. In Augustine for instance, there are three major lusts: for sex, for money/possessions and for power. All are roughly equal in their virulence; if any is a “lesser evil”, it is the lust for power.

In the Renaissance and Absolutist period, the church receded and the pursuit of glory took central place in social life. However, both the heroic ideal and the constraint of passions by religious virtues became unpopular ideas, since they did not constrain the princes of the era. Theorists instead started articulating statecraft based on ostensibly realist views of “men as they are”. They relied either on reason as restraint on passions, or on behavioral manipulation. With Hobbesian repression proving ineffective (partly because rulers remained unconstrained), theorists looked to harness or sublimate passions, with a vision of the state as

civiliser, molding good from evil through intelligent lawmaking—the same project expressed today in cybernetic nudging, good governance discourses, analytical liberalism, etc.

Hirschman (1977) shows that the idea of interest evolved over time. In the earliest works, writers like Spinoza, Bacon, Hume and Mandeville talk openly about harnessing some passions to constrain others. Later, in writers like Adam Smith and Helvetius, the “passions” are toned-down into a distinct concept of “interest” or “advantage”. The term “interest” is initially assigned to the passion which happens to be given the countervailing function. Later, it involved a passion plus ‘an element of reflection and calculation’ (Hirschman, 1977): in other words, ‘interest’ meant a mixture of id and ego. It gradually came to refer only to the desire for money/wealth. The result was an idea of reasonable self-love which was a hybrid of id and ego. This was later further refined, with the “calm” desire for wealth (interest) contrasted with outright greed (passion).

This interacted closely with the “civilising process”. It was believed that pursuit of money was an innocent, nonviolent, calm, harmless passion, associated with the gentle, polite or polished (*douceur*), as opposed to the rude and barbarous passions of the warlord class (a binary which Hirschman (1977) sees as the root of the later developed/underdeveloped). At the time, the *doux*, peaceful, inoffensive trader could easily be contrasted with looting armies and murderous pirates. For many writers such as Montesquieu, the passions of the powerful for glory/power are the most dangerous. Interest is meant to force states and rulers to be more restrained and less arbitrary. Interest is meant to create a web of interdependence which restrains everyone from conflict and from other passions. (This argument, most often mobilized *against* capitalism by communitarians, ecologists, relationalists, Levinasians and so on—“we need to realize that we are all interconnected and constituted by our relations!”—is actually part of the intent behind capitalism from the start).

There were always countervailing views, either that such a powerful passion as “greed” would destroy everything else (prefiguring Marx), or that it is not strong enough to restrain the other passions. It was also gradually realized that self-interest can also cause authoritarianism through a fear of loss or a desire to keep the economy running at any cost and the depoliticisation of society. In the twentieth century, a heavily mercantile world proved not to be immunized against war or despotism. The “greed restrains glory” theory was already largely abandoned after the Napoleonic Wars. Later theorists such as Smith substitute the previously implausible idea that interests themselves are natural and identical to passions, which later expands into rational-choice/neoclassical economics. Interest has to be molded violently from passions, but the more this process of molding is naturalized, the more interest can be assumed to be basic.

Also, the interests have not proven strong enough to restrain “dangerous” passions, especially fear (consider the economic disruption caused by COVID-19 lockdowns: this is one evil which self-interest certainly *would* have prevented). Later critiques have also increasingly seen the harms of alienation, boredom, emptiness, inhibition/repression, one-dimensionality and so on—although these paradoxically refer to things self-interest was *meant* to cause. With the id marginalized in social life, the formation of meaning became increasingly difficult. People came to interact as artificial personas, to produce a social “consensus” which is simply an aggregation of trace-states, and to become increasingly alienated from their own psychological structures. By extension, people also became less sensitive to the vital forces in others, and to the operation of vital forces in nature. It is, however, difficult to reverse or modify these kinds of historical processes: by the time the early justifications for the “civilising process” were falsified, the process was entrenched, and elites had vested interests in its continuation. New rationalizations were found, although the old ones periodically resurface: the 1980s-90s arguments for “globalisation” involved such repetitions as “democratic peace theory”, the taming of states through enmeshment, the Internet as force

for radical democratization, and even the idea that capitalist relations will open people's minds by exposing them (whether they like it or not) to other cultures and ways of seeing. Not surprisingly, these bubbles have also largely burst.

The process of using passions to neutralize one another may well have produced the modern ego and superego, as found in Theweleit, Reich and Lowen. The ego is rooted in self-preservation and in the pursuit of status and riches as substitutes for pleasure. It thus develops more strongly in circumstances of austerity and insecurity, provided its formation is not disrupted too much by traumas. Interest also serves to make people calculable and governable, leading eventually to cybernetic forms of power. Ultimately therefore, the ego and superego ally against the id: the ego tames the id by means of rational calculation of interest, which is then manipulated by the superego by altering the incentive-structure to produce "moral" effects.

Puritanism and Repression

The repression of the id is implicit in Hirschman's history, but becomes explicit in Fromm (1942). Fromm suggests that medieval people were both constrained—tied to their roles—and secure, with sources of meaning and social life. Modern humans are less constrained, but insecure, meaning-deprived and isolated. By early modernity, artisans and businesspeople started falling through the cracks of medieval social security, engaging in a fierce life-and-death struggle to preserve their power and 'squeeze... pleasure out of life.' Traders faced the world alone, depended on effort and luck, and were threatened on all sides by competitors, more powerful elites, and a radical "rabble". Their overwhelming affects were feelings of insecurity, powerlessness, aloneness, doubt, anxiety and being helpless or "nothing".

The Reformation arose because it met their psychological needs. Luther and Calvin offered solutions through masochistic submission (Methuen, 2011). Humans are naturally powerless and wicked; their actions are determined by the will of God or of Satan. In Calvin especially, the main road to salvation is self-humiliation and the destruction of human pride. When dignity, including the source of meaning in pleasure or empowerment, is absent, human goals—even religious salvation—cannot be the goal of life. People then submit to external forces: an uncaring God, capitalism, fascism, etc. The older religious view that humans are (at least potentially) good and have free will—that sin is a forgivable frailty—starts to be challenged by doctrines positing basic evil and powerlessness. People find certainty by obliterating their individuality and submitting to an overwhelmingly strong power. This, for Fromm, is the source of the modern superego.

These doctrines do not in fact eliminate doubt or its sources, but they destroy *awareness* of doubt. As Weber already observed, Calvinists take worldly success as a sign of salvation, even though they are determinists and do not believe in good works: they prove to themselves that they are among the chosen (an approach which is also "strict liability" so to speak, ie. intent is irrelevant). They engage in compulsive activity to escape anxiety, and they express their hostility either inwards, in self-flagellation, or through projection, in the form of the malevolence of a despotic God. Suffering is rendered tolerable by conceiving it as collective atonement for humanity's basic evil; anxiety, insecurity and powerlessness are managed through self-humiliation.

The key virtues here are unceasing effort, sobriety, justice (reciprocity) and piety—not generosity, tolerance or compassion. Fromm (1973) believes this solution to an existential condition is the source of the compulsive work-ethic, the functioning of work as compulsion (or "workaholism"), which he thinks is new in modernity. Medieval people either worked from sheer necessity (thus as little as they could get away with), or to gain fulfilment through

work-activity. In modernity, the superego becomes a slave-driver, acting-out hostility against the self, promoting values which seem to be one's own but are actually introjections of external pressures. Such a superego can act *in place of*, but in an equivalent role to, an external slave-driver, harnessing a greater amount of effort (and life-force) for the work process.

Historians (eg. Oldridge, 2000) have shown that Calvinism/Puritanism leads to an experience of life as a constant struggle against one's own id. The more people dissociate from and try to utterly deny their impulses, the more these tend to take an intrusive, compulsive and hostile form. A Puritan thus comes to feel besieged by "the devil" inside their own body. One can see here the roots of the dam/flood complex theorised by Theweleit (1987): the experience of the id as a threatening flood which brings decomposition and death and is coded as evil, against which one devivifies, erects dams, tenses up like a rock, and so on. There is an entire existential choice against pleasure and desire involved in this orientation.

There are strange similarities in today's supposedly progressive, identitarian ideologies, which repeat the Calvinist mixture of determinism plus responsibility, being possessed either by evil or good, inherent evil (here "evil" is replaced by supposedly determinant structures such as masculinity and whiteness, which implant conditioned habitual behaviours and biased preconscious thoughts *which in practice are identified with the id*), ego-bashing and effacement of ego, a seeking for salvation/justice as something received passively from someone radically other, and a secret security arising from the conviction that, by reacting impulsively on the "right" side, one is actually one of the saved. More subtly, one finds similar phenomena in Third Way and post-Washington Consensus ideology (for example, the publications of the WEF). These works often seek to forecast and adapt to a fate or process of change which they conceive as inevitable and involuntary, with resistance to such changes (for example, "globalisation" or the 4th Industrial Revolution) deemed both futile and harmful. History is thus turned into a series of challenges or tests which one passes or fails, usually through "good leadership". The COVID-19 medical technocrats use a similar approach, with reliable knowledge replaced by abstract computer modelling which is never reality-checked, and then invoked as a fatalistic reality to which others must submit: the death of western democracy is a "medical necessity". It is also no coincidence that this kind of "pawn of history" stance is found both in Stalinism and in Nazism. What these apparently diverse ideologies have in common is renunciation of desire as the source of life and submission to a hostile destiny as source of salvation.

Conclusion

The problems arising from the suppression of the id have been widely documented from Freud onwards. For instance, Lowen (1971, 1984) shows that modern people suffer a loss of meaning due to disidentification with pleasure and systematic blockages of vital force in the body. Pleasure, with a tendency to flow-state, is the most basic drive; power and wealth are secondary, ego drives. Children are trained by systems of conditional love into suppressing pleasure and authenticity, instead putting up an act in an attempt to "earn" love—an attempt which necessarily fails, since it is earned by the persona and is conditional. In later life, the pursuit of status, fame, money, and other such goals is valued as an imagined means to pleasure, but the pleasure cannot be achieved, as the entire process is linked to renunciation of pleasure. The solution is returning *downwards* to the id and pleasure, rather than *upwards* to the superego. However, much of mainstream psychology remains committed either to the "car mechanic" model of psychological problems as fixable flaws (Miller, 2007), or the flight to superego, numisphere, wishful ("optimistic" or "realistic") thinking and "higher" meaning as the solution.

The media-trance generates a state of inattention to one's own life, one's immediate habitat, one's emotional states and their sources, the repression or frustration of one's id, to the point where one may be completely unaware that they are happening. Fromm (1942) recounts the case of a mass-citizen who believes he is happily attending parties, when his unconscious meanings (revealed in dream-interpretation) show he is actually deeply dissatisfied and anxious, and is attending the parties only for status reasons. His persona—his artificial secondary self—is so dominant in his personality that he is not even able to distinguish it from his actual feelings. Situationism reaches similar conclusions: people attach more reality to passively-observed images of their lives than to their feelings, desires or experiences.

This is how consumer society works. It is not a hedonistic system, it is a system of manufacture and satisfaction of false needs—needs which happen to conform to the products the system offers (Illich, 1971, 1973). Consumer society provides the illusion that people can express themselves—at the id level—either by appearing in representations (eg. posting on social media, being represented in politics or art or sociology, “speaking truth to power”) or by adopting a lifestyle consisting of particular commodities. However, this promise is a lie, because commodification saps things of meaning and substance. The system also tends more and more to ban and interfere with unmediated pleasures—everything from drugs and sex to living in nature. Capitalism itself seeks, not to satisfy desire, but to exacerbate longing, deferring gratification endlessly so as to stimulate product turnover (Bey, 1996).

Like Baudrillard, Bey suggests modern life has been reduced to de-intensified simulation. At its current stage, capitalism has become a ‘trance-like state’, a ‘bad consciousness’, a false consensus based on information and images (Wilson, 1998, p. 132), lacking affective immediacy and tending to vampirise whatever it absorbs. Someone inside this consciousness sees what is represented (and thus emptied), not what is present or existentially meaningful; consensus perception filters out much of what exists. Capital is seeking to transcend the body into a pure spirit of information (Bey, n.d.a). Today, money escapes production as pure symbolisation (1996, p. 91). Capital has escaped into a ‘CyberGnostic heaven or numisphere’ (Wilson, 1998, p. 39) which now contains over 90% of money. This sphere is self-enclosed and self-referential. It cannot really escape production, but puts up a good show of doing so. The 90% Bey refers to here is the same (roughly) 90% which according to Harvey, now takes the form of fictitious capital.

The result is a kind of socio-demographic partition. The world is split between those who can accompany capital into cyber-gnosis, and others who are socially triaged-out or depleted (Bey, n.d.a). Debt prevents most people from ever reaching cybergnostic heaven (Wilson, 1998). The global is not truly global: a company claiming to be a “global brand” will often have no branches in Africa or the Middle East. The signifier “global” is identical with the numisphere. The absurd hopes that globalisation will bring a global ethical conversation or a subversion of western identities fall down utterly on this fact.

Ideologically, cyber-gnosis relies on disembodiment, even when it is full of references to bodies, passions, “real” selves, etc. In the cybernetic fantasy, people are just nodes (Teranova, 2004; McLaverty-Robinson, 2012), *idless* nodes, responding solely to external signals in an endless feedback cycle tending towards homeostasis. This still relies on people being creatures of self-interest, or alternatively, having predictable, nudgable emotional reactions, to be managed by the state and opinion leaders into a superego-valued outcome. Like the people susceptible to Calvinism, people today are not entirely unfree, but are insecure and held responsible for their own success or failure in a harsh world where they are alone and besieged. The result is similar: pleasure, meaning, and empowerment are insufficient sources of fulfilment, so people turn to masochistic submission to cruel masters (whether these are medical technocrats during COVID-19 or strongmen like Trump, or the crowdsourced cruelty of self-policing identity-political movements).

The system is crisis-ridden because it is also out-of-control. Even the elite have now lost control of virtual capital. Many of the calculations are now done by computers. There is no need for a technological singularity when businesses needing investment effectively have to fool computers into thinking they are a good gamble. However, modernity is not going down quietly; the system's decline is marked by death-spasms of control-by-terror (Bey, n.d.b). The more the system loses control, the more it lashes out against anything which escapes its control—the forces of the id, of life. This reaches its culmination in ecstatic media events (Chouliaraki, 2006) in which populations can be intensively drawn into manufactured emotional worlds through emotive, propagandistic media coverage. According to Bey, people were hypnotised by the media for two or three weeks after 9/11. This produced a 'neurotic, obsessive, trance-like consciousness' (Bey, 2002). Propaganda is not new, but such herd-psychoses were previously hard to produce. Today they are endlessly repeated.

The situation has proven hard to fight because there is no clear adversary, and nobody knows what is true and what is "fake news" or "alternative facts". The system works partly by suggestion or placebo effect. The system's weakness is that it is not reflected in everyday life; it does not register in affect or bodies, and experiences are far from the images in the Spectacle. It has to keep people distracted from their life-conditions to survive. The mechanisms used to propel Trump to power, are simply a refined version of the technologies which are used day-to-day to manage perceptions. Most people cannot understand or theorise the current system of rule by virtual capital which is itself largely invisible. This leads to scapegoating, and divide-and-rule strategies (left and right typically both see aspects of the problem, but ignore others) (Globalism, Tribalism). Knowledge today is an empty shell, because certain important advances (notably those of Freud and Marx) are systematically denied or warded-off.

Debt is absolutely central here, along with the new "vectoral" technologies. 90% of capital is now fictitious (Harvey, 2003). Rates of profit in non-financial capitalism have been falling steeply since the 1980s (Wade, 2008). This means banks are lending nine times the amount of money that is present in the sectors from which they expect repayment. Even if the entire value of these sectors was used for repayment, less than 1 in 9 loans would be profitable. 8 of 9 will never be paid back. These loans have spread out across the whole economy, encompassing productive companies, governments (particularly after the US started borrowing in the 1980s), and consumer debts such as mortgages. Bankers/investors (or the algorithms they rely on) would be foolish to invest at such long odds, and are either unrealistically optimistic or just playing the game.

So long as people keep borrowing to pay back their loans, lenders keep up the performance. In practice, debt turns into a behavioral management system: banks keep giving loans to those individuals, companies and governments which seem creditworthy, ie. which put up a performance of conforming to a normative model of creditworthiness (which necessarily bears little resemblance to the minuscule odds of repayment). This in practice gives banks a great deal of control, similar to that exercised by the IMF and World Bank in imposing structural adjustment in the 1980s-90s. Debt as social control has been widely discussed (Gill, 1995; Graeber, 2001; Escalate Collective, 2011). Authors like Harvey (2003) and Konings and Panitch (2008) also show how American elites can use Wall Street, the IMF/World Bank and the US Treasury to make or break poorer countries, leveraging credit for *political* control. For Harvey, this makes the US an unproductive rentier power. This is also tied-in with the emergence of what Wark (2004) calls the vectoralist class, including financiers as well as owners of technological platforms and gig economy sites. Vectoralists do not exploit labour-power or land, but instead, exploit flows of information passing through bottlenecks they control. China is positioned as the next hegemonic challenger by a further innovation. In China, the banks themselves are government-owned, and effectively print

money for government-favoured companies. Exporters have capital costs close to zero, an economic ‘nonsense’ but one which, with government support, can continue indefinitely (The Economist, 2005).

Debt as social control is more indirect than either command or wage-labour. The system’s role in judging and ranking is concealed; individuals are instead perceived as having “failed” relative to an impersonal reality like Calvin’s God or fate, and are either subject to social waste-disposal (such as mass incarceration) or to endless commandist reconditioning (education, therapy, spiritual practice, retraining...). This further conceals coercion relative both to direct command and to wage-labour (which is modelled as a transaction, but a compulsory one). This extends into a general obligation to be communicable, to self-brand, market oneself, network, manage appearances, an entire array of practices which are unproductive in the traditional sense, but necessary to be part of a *simulated* economy. Studies of selfie-takers suggest that people present primarily an ideal self, a persona; for instance, most select and even edit or filter their images (Chua & Chang, 2015; Grogan et al., 2018; Seehafer, 2017; Uski & Lampinen, 2014; Vainikka et al., 2017). However, people perceive this ideal self as their authentic self, even as more real than their bodily or emotional self. Some go as far as to turn up at plastic surgeons, wanting to look like their filtered online persona. This is the depth alienation has now reached.

This further creeps across into wider social practices of risk-management/risk-society, preventionism, and so on: requirements to jump through hoops to appear “safe” to powerful others. A constant duty to prove one’s innocence and avoid arousing suspicion is today replacing any presumption of innocence. Instead, absence of proven innocence indicates guilt. People try to “prove their innocence” with endless supererogatory conformisms, virtue-signalling, joining witch-hunts against anyone caught-out, etc. It is like a globalised re-run of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but with liberal/conservative slogans switched-in for socialist ones. The need for a “reasonable excuse” to go out in 2020—to prove one’s right even to the exceptions allowed by governments—is only the latest in a series of such measures, from suspicion-based no-fly lists to widespread police searches, indirect and risk-based offences, measures of the ASBO type, “danger zone” legislation, etc. There are also now tides of behavioral manipulation initiatives using opportunity structures, incentive/deterrence structures, nudges, signalling, information management and so on, to trick or coerce “free” actors into doing the wishes of the powerful. The next stage is the Chinese idea of “social credit”, which distributes rights/privileges to citizens based on a social/moral performance ranking calculated similarly to credit scores. Petty deviance, dissident views, “bad” friends and so on, lower one’s rating.

We have thus come full-circle. Debt is associated psychoanalytically with guilt, and thus with the superego. People feel themselves to be guilty in response to the introjected demands of parents and other authority-figures, and their resistance to or incapacity for carrying out these demands. This brings us right back to Nietzsche and the origins of punishment. However, the system also relies on the taming of passions as interests. Baudrillardian masses have no interests (hence their black-hole-like subversion of sociometry), and their passions either escape or implode the system. The stability of consumer society has two sources: people’s failure to test the system in relation to their own (or others’) needs, desires, or pleasure, and the prevalence of certain negative emotional states which prevent people from acting (for example, anxiety and fear). The moment the trance-state lifts, people find themselves in a sharp antagonism between tendencies to autonomy and systems of control which are now seen from the outside. It is in this field that counterinsurgency ideology comes into play. The trance and the counterinsurgency state are what separate us from the id, from vital energy forces, and from happiness.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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