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ENJOYING WHAT WE DON'T HAVE

SYMPLOKĒ STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY THEORY

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# Enjoying What We Don't Have

*The* POLITICAL PROJECT  
*of* PSYCHOANALYSIS

TODD MCGOWAN

*University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London*

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*For Sheila Kunkle, who  
manifests for me the paradox  
of a psychoanalytic politics  
and the generosity it requires*



# Contents

Acknowledgments

*ix*

Introduction: Psychoanalytic  
Hostility to Politics

*1*

## PART I: SUBJECTIVITY

1. The Formation of Subjectivity

*25*

2. The Economics of the Drive

*52*

3. Class Status and Enjoyment

*79*

4. Sustaining Anxiety

*99*

5. Changing the World

*121*



PART II: SOCIETY

6. The Appeal of Sacrifice

143

7. Against Knowledge

167

8. The Politics of Fantasy

196

9. Beyond Bare Life

223

10. The Necessity of Belief

243

11. The Case of the Missing Signifier

263

Conclusion:

A Society of the Death Drive

283

Notes

287

Index

339

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ENJOYING WHAT WE DON'T HAVE



# Introduction

PSYCHOANALYTIC HOSTILITY TO POLITICS

## **The Politics of a Nonpolitical Theory**

Psychoanalysis begins with individual subjects and their suffering. By allowing subjects to speak freely in the analytic session and by offering an interpretative intervention in this speech, psychoanalysis aims to reduce the impairment that their psychic disorder creates in their lives. In contrast to Marxism, which also attempts to ameliorate human suffering, psychoanalysis has no explicit political program designed to lessen the misery that Freud and his descendants find in their patients. There is no revolt of the patients that would correspond to the revolt of the proletariat. When Freud makes political pronouncements, they tend to be negative ones, expressing his skepticism about plans for social betterment. But it is my contention that a viable political project does inhere within psychoanalytic theory and that this project provides an avenue for emancipatory politics after the end of Marxism in the twentieth century. There are points at which this psychoanalytic politics remains proximate to Marxism, but it represents a genuine alternative that has the virtue of explaining the latter's failures. The task of this book will be to lay out the contours of this political project, one that has never been fully developed despite numerous attempts at bringing psychoanalytic thinking to bear on politics.

Unlike most previous formulations of a psychoanalytic politics, what follows will take as its point of departure not the early Freud of the sexual drive but the later Freud of the death drive (and its development in the thought of Jacques Lacan and his followers). I will conspicuously ignore all psychoanalytic thinking that deviates from Freud and from his specific

rendering of the death drive. This means that psychoanalytic luminaries such as Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, and even Freud's own daughter Anna Freud will have no role to play in this account of the psychoanalytic political project.

The death drive has historically acted as a stumbling block for psychoanalytic politics because it involves our self-sabotage. It leads us to work unconsciously against social betterment. This is why, after its discovery in 1920, Freud becomes so much more pessimistic as a thinker. But just as the death drive leads to self-sabotage, it also acts as the source of our enjoyment, and by shifting the terrain of emancipatory politics to that of enjoyment, psychoanalysis offers what Marxism's political program could not. The politics of psychoanalysis after Marxism is an emancipatory project based on the self-sacrificing enjoyment located in the death drive. Marxism is able to theorize sacrifice as necessary for future pleasure, but it is unable to conceive sacrifice as an end in itself, as a source of enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> This represents its fundamental limitation.

The efforts to marry psychoanalysis and a political program since Freud's discovery of the unconscious have come from both sides of the aisle. Marxist thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Louis Althusser have turned to psychoanalysis in order to supplement Marxism with a mode of thought that would address the complexities of subjectivity, while psychoanalytic thinkers such as Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich have turned to Marxism as a way of giving a sociohistorical importance to their understanding of the suffering that they discovered in psychoanalytic practice. Today this intersection animates the thought of many of the most compelling voices in contemporary political thought: Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek, to name just a few.

But the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and politics has never freed itself of the fundamental divergence that animates it. Something about psychoanalytic thought inherently resists appropriation by a program aimed at the common good. Rather than helping with such a program, it almost inevitably testifies to the reasons for its failure. The attempt to give political relevance to the insights of psychoanalysis seems a hopeless one, and yet this is precisely the aim of this book. Without minimizing the psychoanalytic critique of progress and the common good, it lays out the

contours of a political theory and practice derived from psychoanalytic thought. In doing so, it challenges the very history of psychoanalysis itself.

While Freud expresses sympathy with the Russian Revolution and contends that it seemed “like the message of a better future,” he continually emphasizes the intractable barriers that any project of emancipatory politics would encounter.<sup>2</sup> About the Soviet Union in particular, he speculatively grasps the incipient horrors of Stalinism at a time when no one in the West had any direct knowledge of them (and the worst had yet to occur). In *Civilization and Its Discontents* he notes, “One only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they’ve wiped out their bourgeois.”<sup>3</sup> This is a psychoanalytic insight into the nature of the emancipatory political project that pursues the good society. For Freud, the Soviet attempt to create a better future not only chases an impossible goal, but it also exacerbates existing human suffering. It is not simply Freud’s personal judgment or prejudice that renders this verdict and installs an incompatibility between psychoanalytic thought and progressive political programs; this incompatibility inheres within the very psychoanalytic approach to the world.

On the face of it, this claim appears counterintuitive: one can imagine, for instance, a psychoanalytic understanding of the nature of desire aiding political theorists in their attempts to free desire from ideology, which is the recurring difficulty of leftist politics. There are even historical examples of this theoretical assistance at work. Louis Althusser develops his theory of ideological interpellation through his acquaintance with Jacques Lacan’s conception of the subject’s entrance into language, and Juliet Mitchell elaborates her critique of the structural effects of patriarchy through her experience with Freudian conceptions of masculinity and femininity. In each case, psychoanalysis allows the theorist to understand how a prevailing social structure operates, and this provides a foundation for imagining a way to challenge this structure. As Mitchell claims, “Psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it.”<sup>4</sup> Precisely because she sees psychoanalysis as a useful tool for political struggle, Mitchell here dismisses feminism’s longstanding quarrel with psychoanalysis for its complicity with patriarchy.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying a position like Mitchell’s (which almost all political theorists who turn to psychoanalysis embrace) is the idea that the political usefulness



of psychoanalysis stems, ironically, from its lack of a political commitment. That is to say, psychoanalysis aims to discover the unconscious truth of the subject and the society in which the subject exists, not to change this truth. It is thus at the most basic level a descriptive rather than a prescriptive art. Even the psychoanalytic cure itself does not portend radical change for the subject who accomplishes it. This subject simply recognizes, in Jacques Lacan's words, "I am that." The cure is more a recognition of who one is rather than a transformation of one's subjectivity. Though psychoanalysis does view this recognition as the most radical kind of revolution, the revolution changes how the subject relates to its activity, not the activity itself. In this sense, psychoanalysis has no political axe to grind, which allows it to devote its energies to the project of interpretation and understanding. The understanding it produces can then form the basis for the different sorts of leftist political contestation that may appropriate it.

The problem with this appropriation is the point at which it arrests the descriptive process of psychoanalytic interpretation. Psychoanalysis does not merely describe the structure of one culture or socioeconomic formation (such as patriarchy or capitalism); it instead insists on a fundamental validity across cultural and socioeconomic boundaries. It also insists on this validity across different historical epochs. It is, in short, a universal theory concerning the relationship between the individual subject and society.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Freud discovered psychoanalysis in a particular historical situation that shaped how he presented his insights and even the ideas he could formulate. But one can separate the particular elements (like the Oedipus complex or the labeling of homosexuality as a perversion) from the universal ones (like the antagonistic nature of society or the fact of castration as the requirement for entrance into society). The challenge for the psychoanalytic theorist is discovering the universality in Freud's discoveries, but it is this universality that presents an obstacle for any political project. If the antagonism between the subject and the social order is irreducible, then the stumbling block is not just capitalism or patriarchy but human society itself.

The insights of psychoanalysis, if valid at all, apply not simply to the past and the present but also to whatever future society we might envision or even realize. Though Freud developed the insights of psychoanalysis in a particular historical situation, this situation enabled him to discover universal structures of subjectivity and of the social order, even if his way

of conceptualizing these structures initially reflected the constraints of his historical situation. The insights apply not only to contemporary patriarchal society but also, pace Juliet Mitchell, to the future society that frees itself from patriarchy. This is not to say that we will always have the same forms of neurosis and psychosis that we have now but that we will not surmount the fundamental antagonism between the social order and the individual subject that produces these specific disorders. As a result, for psychoanalysis the good society becomes an unattainable fiction.

### **You're No Good**

The great challenge that psychoanalysis poses for emancipatory politics — and for politics as such — is its absolute rejection of the good or the good society. In the opening of the *Politics*, Aristotle describes the good as the basic aim of political activity, and this aim has remained constant in the intervening 2,500 years.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle never attempts to prove this constitutive remark in his treatise but simply takes it as an unassailable postulate of political thinking. For subsequent political thinkers, the question does not concern Aristotle's claim about the good but in what the good consists. There is unanimity about the political pursuit of the good not just among political theorists but among almost everyone who thinks about politics at all.

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, however, there is no good at all. The good society is unattainable not just as a result of the competing desires of the individuals within the society. The theory that aligns social conflict with the coexistence of competing individual desires fails to go far enough in envisioning the antagonistic nature of the social order. No matter how divergent individual desires are, one could always imagine reconciling them with each other through some sort of compromise. A thinker such as John Rawls can imagine a just society despite positing a society divided by innumerable competing desires on the level of the individual. Justice here would consist in the idea of fairness — using one's imagination to envision society through what Rawls labels a “veil of ignorance” that allows one to make decisions about justice without taking into account one's individual interests or desires or social position.<sup>8</sup> This would facilitate a good society in which any inequality would be socially justified, and it would thus reconcile competing individual desires with each other.

But the barrier to the good society runs deeper than this. It derives from the very idea of the good, which Freud sees as fundamentally at odds with itself. The good itself, not our failures to achieve it, is the problem. This is the fundamental political insight that psychoanalysis brings to the table. It is at once the challenge that it poses to emancipatory politics and the basis for its implicit project for emancipation. As we get closer to the ideal of a good society, we simultaneously approach the emptiness concealed within the ideal. The notion of the good does not emerge simply from moral reasoning and speculation about the proper arrangement of society. We develop this notion only through the experience of its prohibition. That is to say, the prohibition of the good doesn't form an obstacle to a preexisting ideal but constitutes the ideal as such.

The good has no existence outside of the barriers that we erect around realizing it. As Jacques Lacan points out in one of his most important political statements, "The step taken by Freud at the level of the pleasure principle is to show us that there is no Sovereign Good — that the Sovereign Good, which is *das Ding*, which is the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good, and that there is no other good. Such is the foundation of the moral law as turned on its head by Freud."<sup>9</sup> The foundational link between the good and prohibition renders its pursuit completely contradictory. Every step toward the good occasions a corresponding step away from it. The closer we come, the more we undermine the social stability that we hoped to achieve. This occurs not just among the many utopian socialist projects that have failed but across all types of social structures.

For psychoanalysis, the good is not just an unrealizable ideal but a deception incapable of orienting a coherent and sustainable politics. This critique threatens to undermine the very idea of a political project because political theorists write in order to help bring about change, which means moving society in the direction of the good (even if they admit that the ideal itself is not realizable). Conservative theorists seem immune to this critique, but they envision a return to the good or the creation of a social stability that they associate implicitly with the good.<sup>10</sup> Political theorists of all stripes write to change the world and assist its progression (or its return to a better state), whereas psychoanalysis interprets the world and uncovers the repetition at work where it seems to be progressing.

For this reason, Julia Kristeva theorizes the political project inherent in

psychoanalysis as one of permanent revolt. Rather than forming a positive program, psychoanalysis, like modernist literature, exists simply as a negation of identity and power. In *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, she argues, “psychoanalysis, on the one hand, and a certain literature, on the other, perhaps constitute possible instances of revolt culture.”<sup>11</sup> From Kristeva’s point of view, psychoanalysis is completely political insofar as it demands revolt, but this revolt can never become revolution. Psychoanalytic revolt is destined to remain revolt against some existing power structure toward which it will continue to provide resistance. Kristeva views psychoanalytic thought as a hiccup in the hegemony of scientific rationality and progress. Any attempt to create a positive psychoanalytic politics would obviate its role as a key part of revolt culture.

Kristeva’s dismissal of positive psychoanalytic politics fails to take cognizance of the implicit positive program in every revolt. When one revolts, one relies on and sustains the system against which one revolts. Nowhere is this truer than within the capitalist system, in which revolt forms the lifeblood. If psychoanalysis is nothing but revolt, it is politically vacuous. And yet, Kristeva does correctly recognize the seemingly inherent hostility of psychoanalysis to progressive change. Rather than aid in this process, psychoanalysis highlights the moments of its interruption and suspension.

This position puts psychoanalysis directly at odds with Marxism’s emphasis on the centrality of praxis. Marx theorizes in order to facilitate social change, and every political project by its very nature shares this goal with Marxism. What distinguishes both Marx and Freud as thinkers is their understanding of social antagonism. Where Freud sees antagonism manifesting itself in the excessive suffering of the individual subject, Marx sees it playing out in class struggle. Despite this difference in focus, they share a belief in the fundamental status of antagonism, which separates them from political thinkers (such as John Stuart Mill and John Rawls) who view the social order as whole, as divided by conflicts but not by a fundamental antagonism. We can resolve conflicts through mediation and negotiation, but antagonism implies the impossibility of resolution.

An antagonism doesn’t just involve two opposing positions — like that of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat — but conceives of opposition as internal to each position. This idea of each position being internally opposed to itself is what liberal political thinkers cannot grant (if they wish to remain liberal

political thinkers). Just as they view society as whole, they also view each conflicting position within society as unified and identical with itself. Not so with Marx and Freud. For Marx, the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is at the same time the indication of an internal conflict within the bourgeoisie itself. In fact, the bourgeoisie produces the proletariat out of itself through the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. For Freud, the conflict between the individual and the social order is also an internal conflict within the individual and within the social order.

Even societies that lack the concept of an individual must nonetheless reckon with this universal antagonism. That is, they must attempt to reconcile the continued existence of the social order with the entrance of new subjects into that order. Though the individual may be a Western idea, the social antagonism resulting from the subject's entrance into the social order is not. The elaborate marriage rules that Claude Lévi-Strauss uncovered in various societies attest to the problem of this antagonism surfacing universally.<sup>12</sup> The individual emerges as a distinct being because the social order cannot reproduce itself without producing a remainder, even if this remainder doesn't take the form of the individual that is familiar to the Western world.

The idea of antagonism allows Marx and Freud to author their radical social critiques. It allows them to see how the proletariat or the individual invests itself in its own oppression, or how the bourgeoisie or the social order contributes to its own subversion. Antagonism is both the cause of social stasis and the possibility for revolutionary change. For Marx and Freud, interpretation must take antagonism as its point of departure, though Marx sees, in the last instance, the possibility of overcoming antagonism through the victory of the proletariat and the consequent elimination of class struggle.

Marx envisioned a society in which production would take place for the good of the society rather than for the sake of the accumulation of capital, a change that would allow production to develop without limit. Within the capitalist mode of production, according to Marx,

the *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as the starting and finishing point as the motive and purpose of production; production is production only for

*capital*, and not the reverse, i.e. the means of production are not simply means for a steadily expanding pattern of life for the *society* of the producers. . . . The means — the unrestricted development of the social forces of production — comes into persistent conflict with the restricted end, the valorization of the existing capital. If the capitalist mode of production is therefore a historical means for developing the material powers of production and for creating a corresponding world market, it is at the same time the constant contradiction between this historical task and the social relations of production corresponding to it.<sup>13</sup>

Included in this critique of the capitalist mode of production is the idea of a society in which the means and the end would no longer be in conflict with each other. For Marx, “the unrestricted development of the social forces of production” — a society without antagonism — represents a genuine historical possibility. This is a possibility that Freud rejects because he conceives of antagonism as constitutive of the social structure itself.

### Unprotected Sex

Before writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920, Freud did not yet see antagonism in this way. Though never a utopian believing that society might someday overcome the need for repression altogether, early in the development of psychoanalysis he does argue against the excesses of contemporary moral restrictions on sexual activity. While he prefaces his statement by admitting that “it is certainly not a physician’s business to come forward with proposals for reform,” he nonetheless claims that “it seemed to me that I might support the urgency of such proposals if I were to amplify [Christian] Von Ehrenfel’s description of the injurious effects of our ‘civilized’ sexual morality by pointing to the important bearing of that morality upon the spread of modern nervous illness.”<sup>14</sup> Freud made this claim in 1908, when his focus remained almost wholly on the sexual drives. At this time he saw a conflict between these drives and the interests of the ego because “the ‘ego’ feels threatened by the claims of the sexual instincts and fends them off by repressions.”<sup>15</sup> Though no one can definitively overcome this conflict, Freud saw it as ameliorable, which allowed him to support a program for the reform of restrictions on sexual activity. We can lessen the bite that the

ego takes out of the sexual drives on a societal level and thereby improve the relative satisfaction of subjects living within society.

When Freud discovered the death drive in 1920, this optimism became theoretically untenable and disappeared from Freud's writings. While Freud's discovery of the unconscious disrupted the thought of others, the discovery of the death drive disrupted his own and that of his followers — and this disruption makes itself felt in the halting and backtracking style of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Though he continues to posit sexual drives and thus retains his psychic dualism (albeit in a completely modified form), Freud comes to see the death drive or the compulsion to repeat as the predominant force within the psyche and within society at large. He believes that it is more powerful than the sexual drives, just as before he saw the sexual drives as having more power than the drives associated with the ego. Despite this continued dualism, the discovery of the death drive radically alters Freud's ability to accept the possibility of reform or progressive political change of any sort.

When the sexual drives remained at the basis of Freudian thought, positive change existed as a possibility because dissatisfaction was not inherent within the sexual drives themselves. Psychic illness such as neurosis developed through a conflict between the sexual drives and other forces aligned with the ego (which also embodied the restrictive morality imposed on the subject by society). Even if we could not completely free the sexual drives from the repression associated with the ego, we could nonetheless lighten the burden and establish a degree of freedom. Seen in this way, we can imagine a Freudian politics of sexual liberation. This is the project of leftist psychoanalytic thinkers such as Otto Gross, Wilhelm Reich, and Erich Fromm, each of whom attacks repressive society and focuses on sexual liberation.

For these theorists, the early Freud before the discovery of the death drive is the more politically viable Freud. Gross, Reich, and Fromm develop disparate theoretical perspectives, but Reich and Fromm — Gross died in 1920, though he undoubtedly would have adopted their opposition as well had he lived — see the concept of the death drive as an unfortunate deviation on Freud's part. Each tries to marry psychoanalysis with some form of Marxist or socialist thought, and by doing so, they take up Marx's belief that society can overcome antagonism, that sexual liberation is possible within

the social order. Repression, for these psychoanalytic thinkers, is not the necessary cost of social life but a fact of what Reich calls authoritarian rule.

Even before Freud comes up with the death drive, he insists that the sexual drive does not function smoothly but rather is constantly at odds with itself. His self-proclaimed dualistic conception of the drives — first the sex drive and the self-preservative drive, then the life drive and the death drive — is actually a dialectical conception in which a single drive produces an antagonistic struggle. The psychoanalytic leftists do not see things this way. From their perspective, the sexual drive doesn't run aground on its own but hits an opposing force — social restriction. As a result, the political project of psychoanalysis becomes perfectly clear: lift social restrictions and allow the free play of the sexual drive.

Wilhelm Reich gives this politics its most detailed early formulation. As both a committed Marxist and a psychoanalyst, he aligns the proletarian revolution with sexual liberation. Reich visited the Soviet Union in 1927 and found the realization of this theoretical alignment, though he would later attest to the Soviet retreat from sexual liberation and return to the conservative ideology of the family. By freeing subjects from repressive restrictions on sexuality, the social order can allow the subject's natural libido to flourish. The struggle, as Reich sees it, is entirely straightforward. An authoritarian rule imposes restrictions on natural sexuality, and these restrictions create the neurotic disorders that psychoanalysis treats. Reich contends that Freud fails to take up a critical position relative to social restrictions and thus blames the victims of society for the problems created by an oppressive authoritarian structure.<sup>16</sup>

Erich Fromm takes a position similar to that of Reich, though he never associates himself directly with the Communist revolution. Unlike Reich, Fromm does accept a version of the death drive. He believes that a death drive can form, but he doesn't grant it any independent status. The death drive, which is a drive to destroy oneself and others, emerges with the repression of the life drive. If life successfully expresses itself, the subject will not turn against itself and will instead develop loving relations with others and with the self. Despite this modification of Reich, the psychoanalytic political project is basically the same for both Reich and Fromm. Psychoanalysis takes the side of the natural libido or sexual drive and argues for its liberation. Rather than accepting the psychoanalytic critique of the good,



they see a sexually liberated society as a good society that psychoanalytic thought and therapy can help to produce.

Though Gross, Reich, and Fromm develop the political dimension of psychoanalysis, they do so as practicing psychoanalysts. This investment in psychoanalytic treatment restricts the extent to which they are able to construct a political theory. They are psychoanalysts first and political thinkers second. They also collectively refuse to account for the later Freud's turn to the death drive, even if only to see it as a necessary obstacle with which political struggle must contend.<sup>17</sup> Herbert Marcuse suffers from neither of these limitations. He is a philosopher and cultural theorist who comes to psychoanalysis to assist in thinking through political difficulties, and he recognizes that any political project has to incorporate the death drive. Marcuse announces his own unique marriage of Marx and Freud in *Eros and Civilization*, one of the two great attempts to construct a politics grounded on psychoanalysis. It is a book that bears the subtitle *A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*.<sup>18</sup>

Marcuse envisions a society that would eliminate scarcity to such an extent that it would no longer require the repression of our sexual drives, or eros. In this type of society, the need for labor would disappear, and the predominance of the reality principle (or the delaying of satisfaction) could give way to an unleashing of the pleasure principle (or the direct path to satisfaction). While Marcuse admits that up to this point in history progress has increased the amount of repression, he believes the end of labor — and the socialist revolution necessary to accomplish it — would occasion a dialectical reversal in which progress suddenly liberated eros rather than augmenting its repression. This vision allows us to imagine a world in which even death loses its traumatic dimension because individual subjects would be reconciled with the social whole that would survive them.

In constructing his vision of a better future, Marcuse does not lose sight of the principle that opposes eros — the death drive, or what he calls thanatos. He views thanatos as an aggressive instinct, an instinct toward destruction that, unlike eros, demands repression in order for society to function.<sup>19</sup> But there is a way to mitigate the power of this instinct for destruction: by eliminating the repression of eros, a society lessens the aggression that subjects experience because much of this aggression arises in response to a lack of erotic satisfaction, though this aggression would not disappear altogether.

Marcuse's ideal society appears to figure a way out of the antagonism that Freud sees animating the relation between the individual subject and the social order. He does so, despite borrowing terminology from the later Freud, by focusing on the liberation of the sexual drives in the way that the early Freud and the leftist Freudians advocate.

But such a program is constitutively incapable of admitting the idea of the death drive with all of its theoretical force. Marcuse acknowledges the death drive in order to show how an ideal society might minimize its power, but the existence of the death drive sabotages the political program as such. It leads Freud to say, toward the end of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, "I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation."<sup>20</sup> The death drive eliminates the possibility of offering consolation in the form of a traditional political program because it erects a fundamental barrier to progress to an extent that Marcuse cannot fully recognize due to his Marxist political commitment.

### **Death at the Bottom of Everything**

The death drive is neither (contra Marcuse) aggressiveness nor an impulse to return to an inorganic state (as Freud's metaphor in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* might imply) but an impetus to return to an originary traumatic and constitutive loss. The death drive emerges with subjectivity itself as the subject enters into the social order and becomes a social and speaking being by sacrificing a part of itself. This sacrifice is an act of creation that produces an object that exists only insofar as it is lost. This loss of what the subject doesn't have institutes the death drive, which produces enjoyment through the repetition of the initial loss.

Subjects engage in acts of self-sacrifice and self-sabotage because the loss enacted reproduces the subject's lost object and enables the subject to enjoy this object. Once it is obtained, the object ceases to be *the* object. As a result, the subject must continually repeat the sacrificial acts that produce the object, despite the damage that such acts do to the subject's self-interest. From the perspective of the death drive, we turn to violence not in order to gain power but in order to produce loss, which is our only source of enjoyment. Without the lost object, life becomes bereft of any satisfaction. The

repetition of sacrifice, however, creates a life worth living, a life in which one can enjoy oneself through the lost object.

The repetition involved with the death drive is not simply repetition of any particular experience. The repetition compulsion leads the subject to repeat specifically the experiences that have traumatized it and disturbed its stable functioning. The better things are going for the subject, the more likely that the death drive will derail the subject's activity. According to the theory implied by the death drive, any movement toward the good — any progress — will tend to produce a reaction that will undermine it. This occurs both on the level of the individual and on the level of society. In psychoanalytic treatment, it takes the form of a negative therapeutic reaction, an effort to sustain one's disorder in the face of the imminence of the cure. We can also think of individuals who continue to choose romantic relationships that fail according to a precise pattern. Politically, it means that progress triggers the very forms of oppression that it hopes to combat and thereby incessantly undermines itself. There is a backlash written into every progressive program from the outset.

The death drive creates an essentially masochistic structure within the psyche. It provides the organizing principle for the subject and orients the subject relative to its enjoyment, and this enjoyment remains always linked to trauma. This structure renders difficult all attempts to prompt subjects to act in their own self-interest or for their own good. The death drive leads subjects to act contrary to their own interests, to sabotage the projects that would lead to their good.

Common sense tells us that sadism is easier to understand than masochism, that the sadist's lust for power over the object makes sense in a way that the masochist's self-destruction does not. But for psychoanalysis, masochism functions as the paradigmatic form of subjectivity. Considering the structure of the death drive, masochism becomes easily explained, and sadism becomes a mystery. Masochism provides the subject the enjoyment of loss, while sadism seems to give this enjoyment to the other.

This is exactly the claim of Jacques Lacan's revolutionary interpretation of sadism in his famous article "Kant with Sade." Though most readers focus on the essay's philosophical coupling of Kantian morality with Sadean perversion, the more significant step that Lacan takes here occurs in his explanation of sadism's appeal. Traditionally, most people vilify sadists for

transforming their victims into objects for their own satisfaction, but Lacan contends that they actually turn themselves into objects for the other's enjoyment. He notes: "The sadist discharges the pain of existence into the Other, but without seeing that he himself thereby turns into an 'eternal object.'"<sup>21</sup> Though the other suffers pain, the other also becomes the sole figure of enjoyment. What the sadist enjoys in the sadistic act is the enjoyment attributed to the other, and the sadistic act attempts to bring about this enjoyment. In this sense, sadism is nothing but an inverted form of masochism, which remains the fundamental structure of subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> Self-destruction plays such a prominent role in human activities because the death drive is the drive that animates us as subjects.

Unlike Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, another celebrated proponent of psychoanalytically informed political thought, attempts to construct a psychoanalytic political project that focuses on the death drive. He does not simply see it as the unfortunate result of the repression of eros but as a powerful category on its own. In *Life against Death* Brown conceives of the death drive as a self-annihilating impulse that emerges out of the human incapacity to accept death and loss. As he puts it, "The death instinct is the core of the human neurosis. It begins with the human infant's incapacity to accept separation from the mother, that separation which confers individual life on all living organisms and which in all living organisms at the same time leads to death."<sup>23</sup> For Brown, we pursue death and destruction, paradoxically, because we cannot accept death. If we possessed the ability to accept our own death, according to Brown's view, we would avoid falling into the death drive and would thereby rid ourselves of human violence and destructiveness.

Like Marcuse, Brown's societal ideal involves the unleashing of the sexual drives and the minimizing or elimination of the death drive. He even raises the stakes, contending that unless we manage to realize this ideal, the human species, under the sway of the death drive, will die out like the dinosaurs. Despite making more allowances for the death drive (and for death itself) than Marcuse, Brown nonetheless cannot avoid a similar error: the belief that the death drive is a force that subjects can overcome. For Freud, in contrast, it is the force that revenges itself on every overcoming, the repetition that no utopia can fully leave behind. An authentic recognition of the death drive and its primacy would demand that we rethink the idea of progress altogether.

## Progressing Backward

And yet some idea of progress seems essential to politics. Without progress as a possibility, it seems obvious that one would have no reason to involve oneself in political contestation. All political activity would become futile, which is why few dispense with it altogether. Even a thinker such as Jacques Derrida who struggles incessantly against the ideology of progress nonetheless implicitly retains some notion of authentic progress within his thought. Without it, he would have no position from which to criticize the idea while still endorsing political activity.

The problem with progress as an idea, according to someone like Derrida, lies in the way that it places a teleology on the movement of history and thereby prescribes a certain future that will serve to constrain our political activity. Rather than helping to increase our freedom, the idea of progress diminishes it by closing down the opening that the future represents. Despite his deconstruction of progress, Derrida aligns deconstruction with hope for a better future — with what he calls an “emancipatory promise.” In *Specters of Marx* he elaborates: “Well, what remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism.”<sup>24</sup> Though deconstruction leaves its emancipatory promise always to be fulfilled and refuses to actualize it, Derrida tacitly conceives the movement toward it as progressive.

The political dimension of deconstruction is founded on the belief that a better world is possible: by deconstructing hierarchies, by insisting on a justice to come, and by struggling against illusions of presence, we can lessen human suffering and help to forge a more egalitarian world. There is a good, even if fully realizing this good would transform it into its opposite (which is Derrida’s contention). One must ensure that the good society always remains to come, or *arrivant*, as Derrida puts it, but far from minimizing the status of the good or denigrating the good, giving it a futural status in fact elevates it and ensconces justice to come as the one idea that we cannot deconstruct — the ultimate or sovereign good.<sup>25</sup> Even in deconstruction, some idea of progress as a possibility must exist in order for the theorist to make any normative appeal whatsoever.<sup>26</sup>

But the inescapability of the idea of progress goes still further. It is not just the normative appeal that implies this idea; any system of thought, even one that confines itself to pure descriptions, inevitably points toward the possibility of progress. The act of articulating a system of thought implies the belief that a better world is possible and that the knowledge the system provides will assist in realizing this better world. If I didn't believe in the possibility of improvement, I would never bother to articulate any system at all. The very act of enunciating even the most pessimistic system attests to a fundamental optimism and hope for progress beyond the status quo. This is true for an extreme pessimist like Arthur Schopenhauer as much as it is for an avowed utopian like Charles Fourier. The position from which one enunciates the pessimistic system is the position invested in the idea of progress, even when the enunciated content of the system completely denounces the idea. Though the good may be impossible to realize, it is also impossible to abandon entirely. The production of knowledge itself points, often despite itself, toward a better future.

This link between knowledge and progress is the controlling idea of the Enlightenment. In his essay "What Is Enlightenment?" Kant emphasizes that Enlightenment requires a situation where one is free to gain knowledge, where one has "freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters."<sup>27</sup> In the act of gaining knowledge through reasoning, subjects facilitate progress as they put this knowledge into use by restructuring society. Knowledge, for Kant and for all Enlightenment thinkers, has an inherently progressive leaning. It frees us from the tyranny of the past and from the drudgery of repetition. Progress is only possible because we have the ability to know the past and to learn from it.<sup>28</sup> The Enlightenment's belief in progress derives from its conception of the human subject as a subject of knowledge, a subject who fundamentally wants to know.

For psychoanalysis, the link between knowledge and progress dooms the possibility of progress. Rather than desiring to know, the subject desires not to know and organizes its existence around the avoidance of knowledge. In "Le séminaire XXI" Lacan states this straightforwardly: "There has been no desire for knowledge but . . . a horror of knowing."<sup>29</sup> The knowledge that we avoid is knowledge of the unconscious because this knowledge confronts us with the power of the death drive and the inescapability of repetition. What we don't know — our particular form of stupidity — allows us to move

forward, to view the future with hopefulness. Without this fundamental refusal to know, the subject simply could not continue.<sup>30</sup>

Freud's great revolution in the history of thought stems from his conception of the subject as a subject of desire rather than as a subject of knowledge. Where thinkers from Plato to Kant consider an inherent striving to know as essential to subjectivity, not only does Freud envision a different essential drive, he contends that the subject wants not to know in order to continue to desire. The subject acts not on the basis of what it knows but on the basis of how it desires. We might imagine linking these two ideas of the subject if we could link the act of knowing and the act of desiring.

But knowledge and desire are at odds: the subject doesn't want to know what it desires or how it enjoys. Its knowledge remains necessarily incomplete, and the gap within knowledge is the trigger for the subject's desire and the point at which it enjoys. The unconscious emerges out of the subject's incapacity for knowing its own enjoyment. Conscious knowledge is not simply unable to arrive at the knowledge of enjoyment and its traumatic origin; it actively functions as a barrier to this knowledge. Conscious knowledge thwarts access to the unconscious, and, as a result, the conscious effort to know continually defeats itself.

Psychoanalysis attempts to fill this fundamental lacuna in the project of knowledge by demanding that the subject abandon the project in its traditional manifestation. It constructs a space that brackets conscious knowledge in order that the subject might discover the unconscious. The fundamental rule of psychoanalysis — one must reveal not what one knows but the words that come to mind — aims at bringing to light what the subject doesn't want to know. A gap exists between what the subject knows and what it says. In the act of speaking, the subject says more than it consciously knows, and this excess is the unconscious — a knowledge that the subject has without knowing it. The paradox of this knowledge is that one can access it only when *not* seeking it and that once one has it, one has lost it.

Adherence to the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis insofar as it is possible allows subjects to recognize what they don't know when it surprises them. But it doesn't thereby permit subjects to make progress through the acquisition of knowledge. The recognitions that one makes in psychoanalysis do not have the status of knowledge in the traditional sense of the term; instead, they mark an irreducible gap in the field of knowledge. One

recognizes oneself in an unconscious desire that remains foreign, and one takes responsibility for it despite its foreignness. By doing so, one does not change or progress as a subject but becomes what one already was. One sees the death drive as the truth of one's subjectivity rather than as an obstacle that one might try to progress beyond in order to reach the good.

### **Interminable Repetition**

If we accept the contradictory conclusion that some idea of progress inheres in every system of thought and that the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive shows the impossibility of progress, this leaves psychoanalytic thought — and especially a psychoanalytic political project — on difficult ground. It might explain the seemingly absolute pessimism of the later Freud, Freud after 1920, who appears to have abandoned his belief in the efficaciousness of the psychoanalytic cure. One of his final essays, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” written in 1937 (just two years before his death), lays bare Freud's doubts concerning our ability to break from the power of repetition. Here, Freud conceives of subjects' refusal to abandon castration anxiety and penis envy as emblematic of the intractability of repetition. He notes: “At no other point in one's analytic work does one suffer more from an oppressive feeling that all one's repeated efforts have been in vain, and from a suspicion that one has been ‘preaching to the winds,’ than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis on the ground of its being unrealizable or when one is seeking to convince a man that a passive attitude to men does not always signify castration and that it is indispensable in many relationships in life.”<sup>31</sup> That is, the repetition that centers around traumatic loss acts as a barrier that we cannot progress beyond.

In light of this barrier, the formulation of a psychoanalytically informed political project demands that we dissociate politics from progress as it is usually conceived. We cannot escape progress, and yet the traditional conception of progress always runs aground. This paradox must become the foundation of any authentic psychoanalytic politics. It demands that rather than trying to progress toward overcoming the barrier that separates us from the good society, we begin to view identification with the barrier as the paradoxical aim of progress. The barrier to the good society — the social



symptom — is at once the obstacle over which we continually stumble and the source of our enjoyment.<sup>32</sup>

The typical politics of the good aims at a future not inhibited by a limit that constrains the present. This future can take the form of a truly representative democracy, a socialist utopia, a society with a fair distribution of power and wealth, or even a fascist order that would expel those who embody the limit. But the good remains out of reach despite the various efforts to reach it. The limit separating us from the good society is the very thing that constitutes the good society as such. Overcoming the limit shatters the idea of the good in the act of achieving it. In place of this pursuit, a psychoanalytic politics insists on identification with the limit rather than attempting to move beyond or eliminate it. If there is a conception of progress in this type of politics, it is progress toward the obstacle that bars us from the good rather than toward the good itself.

Identification with the limit involves an embrace of the repetition of the drive because it is the obstacle or limit that is the point to which the drive returns. No one can be the perfect subject of the drive because the drive is what undermines all perfection. But it is nonetheless possible to change one's experience within it. The fundamental wager of psychoanalysis — a wager that renders the idea of a psychoanalytic political project thinkable — is that repetition undergoes a radical transformation when one adopts a different attitude toward it. We may be condemned to repeat, but we aren't condemned to repeat the same position relative to our repetition. By embracing repetition through identification with the obstacle to progress rather than trying to achieve the good by overcoming this obstacle, the subject or the social order changes its very nature. Instead of being the burden that one seeks to escape, repetition becomes the essence of one's being and the mode through which one attains satisfaction.

Conceiving politics in terms of the embrace of repetition rather than the construction of a good society takes the movement that derails traditional political projects and reverses its valence. This idea of politics lacks the hopefulness that Marxism, for instance, can provide for overcoming antagonism and loss. With it, we lose not just a utopian ideal but the idea of an alternative future altogether — the idea of a future no longer beset by intransigent limits — and this idea undoubtedly mobilizes much political energy.<sup>33</sup> What we gain, however, is a political form that addresses the way

that subjects structure their enjoyment. It is by abandoning the terrain of the good and adopting the death drive as its guiding principle that emancipatory politics can pose a genuine alternative to the dominance of global capitalism rather than incidentally creating new avenues for its expansion and development. The death drive is the revolutionary contribution that psychoanalysis makes to political thought. But since it is a concept relatively foreign to political thought, I will turn to various examples from history, literature, and film in order to concretize what Freud means by the death drive and illustrate just what a politics of the death drive might look like.

The chapters that follow trace the implications of the death drive for thinking about the subject as a political entity and for conceiving the political structure of society. Part 1 focuses on the individual subject, beginning with an explanation of how the death drive shapes this subjectivity. The various chapters in part 1 trace the implications of the death drive for understanding how the subject enjoys, how the drive relates to social class, how the drive impacts the subject as an ethical being, and how the subject becomes politicized. The discussion of the impact of the death drive on the individual subject serves as a foundation for articulating its impact on society, which part 2 of the book addresses, beginning with the impact of the death drive on the constitution of society. Part 2 then examines how the conception of the death drive helps in navigating a path through today's major political problems: the inefficacy of consciousness raising, the seductive power of fantasy, the growing danger of biological reductionism and fundamentalism, the lure of religious belief, and the failure of attempts to lift repression. The two parts of the book do not attempt to sketch a political goal to be attained for the subject or for society but instead to recognize the structures that already exist and silently inform both. The wager of what follows is that the revelation of the death drive and its reach into the subject and the social order can be the foundation for reconceiving freedom.

The recognition of the death drive as foundational for subjectivity is what occurs with the psychoanalytic cure. Through this cure, the subject abandons the belief in the possibility of finding a solution to the problem of subjectivity. The loss for which one seeks restitution becomes a constitutive loss — and becomes visible as the key to one's enjoyment rather than a barrier to it. A political project derived from psychoanalytic thought would work to broaden this cure by bringing it outside the clinic and enacting

on society itself. The point is not, of course, that everyone would undergo psychoanalysis but that psychoanalytic theory would function as a political theory. Politically, the importance of psychoanalysis is theoretical rather than practical. Politically, it doesn't matter whether people undergo psychoanalytic therapy or not. This theory would inaugurate political change by insisting not on the possibility of healing and thereby attaining the ultimate pleasure but on the indissoluble link between our enjoyment and loss. We become free to enjoy only when we have recognized the intractable nature of loss.

Though psychoanalytic thought insists on our freedom to enjoy, it understands freedom in a counterintuitive way. It is through the death drive that the subject attains its freedom. The loss that founds this drive frees the subject from its dependence on its social environment, and the repetition of the initial loss sustains this freedom. By embracing the inescapability of traumatic loss, one embraces one's freedom, and any political project genuinely concerned with freedom must orient itself around loss. Rather than looking to the possibility of overcoming loss, our political projects must work to remain faithful to it and enhance our contact with it. Only in this way does politics have the opportunity to carve out a space for the freedom to enjoy rather than restricting it under the banner of the good.