

## Beyond Death's Dream Kingdom: Modernity and the Psychoanalytic Social Imaginary

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### *Abstract*

The appearance on the historical stage of Western modernity is often understood as an “epochal event” that overturned an earlier pre-modern cultural condition that was premised on the dialectic of life and death and the attempt to forge a suitable balance or harmony between them. As such Western modernity is often viewed as the emergence as a new liberal political order based upon individualism, radical immanence and the emergence of a new calculating subjectivities and governmentalities in ways that led to the rejection of the transcendent, the metaphysical and the theological dimensions of human life. In this paper, using Hans Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors* as a point of reference and adopting the *oblique position* in relation to the modern taken up by the artist in this painting, I suggest that in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, largely as a result of an awareness of the metaphysical significance of the catastrophe of the First World War, that modern liberalism was thrown into crisis and the old pre-modern metaphysical problematic returned as new focus of social and political concern. With specific reference to the work of Sigmund Freud and later psychoanalytic thinkers who took Freud's idea of the death drive as their theoretical point of departure, I show how in the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalytically-informed practitioners attempted to resolve the ancient conflict between the forces of life and death through the creation of an enchanted phantasmagoria of mass consumable objects that were often specifically designed and marketed in order to eroticise the nascent thanatic dimensions of modern life, thereby rendering the latter manageable and ultimately liveable. Drawing on the work of social theorists of the imaginary such as Glibert Durand as well as famous propagandisers of Freud such as Edward Bernays and Ernst Dichter (who saw in Freud's work the possibility of developing a political technology) I will suggest that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the consumer object was central to the construction of a *psychoanalytic social imaginary* geared towards the maintenance and management of economic demand in Fordist disciplinary societies. Using the humble cigarette as a case study I show how familiar objects were redesigned via psychoanalytic conceptions in order to harness to the power of death for

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social useful ends. By way of conclusion I will suggest reasons why this social imaginary is currently in the process of being replaced (in contemporary neo-liberalism).



### Introduction

The Renaissance artist Hans Holbein's most celebrated work, *The Ambassadors* – that currently hangs in *The National Gallery* in London – provides us with a prophecy of the post-Reformation trajectory of Western modernity in relation to its dramatic metamorphosis into a “hyper-thanatic culture” (a culture of mass death and cultural self-destructiveness) in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This, as we now know, was a culture that, aided and abetted by the political projects associated with various infamous 20<sup>th</sup> century “death cults” – most notably Stalinism and Nazism

– was to cast a long shadow over 18<sup>th</sup> century aspirations of a rationally transparent liberal modernity geared towards the singular aim of social and political enlightenment. More specifically, the famous depiction of the “anamorphic skull” in the central foreground of this picture suggests that Holbein was attempting to communicate something that even today remains a highly esoteric aspect of (what was at that time only a nascent) modernity: namely that in modernity political power, theoretical knowledge and what was formerly deemed theological discourse would be combined in new ways in the production of a new social formation that was the product of the deep (metaphysical) forces that were associated in the pre-modern world with *death* – that is with classical *hubris* and the tragic dimension of existence, with the violent and chaotic human reaction against order and reason, with the *danse macabre* of natural cycles of birth, predation of death as well as with the terrifying entropic chaos found within the lower reaches of human nature that stood, the ancients believed, as the dialectical counter-point to being and the epistemological powers of the classical *logos*<sup>2</sup>. However, having recognised this in this painting Holbein also clearly understood that this primordial metaphysical force would eventually become almost completely obscured in its modern translation into a blind technicity of a measurable world of mere facts and political strategies and to this extent, in its invisibility to modern philosophical positions, it would eventually emerge as an increasingly dominant force shaping modern the evolutions of social and cultural forms. In this regard, *The Ambassadors* depicts the arrival of Western modernity as a curtain drawn

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<sup>2</sup> As the French historian of classical Greek philosophy Pierre Hadot observed (Hadot 1985), classical philosophy, as an “erotics of knowing” – and as a love of wisdom – was at the same time understood as a *preparation for death*; an idea that was to form the basis of the Christian social imaginary in the Middle Ages. More generally, in the ancient world *eros* allowed for the emergence of an imaginary context within which the terrors of death were transcended in thought. In modernity, this capacity was radically undermined and as result such forms of transcendence became more difficult and as a result the imagination is now deployed (often in technologically enhanced ways) in order to facilitate the forgetting of death; a point that as is well known was central to the Heideggerian philosophical project.



over those earlier pre-modern worlds where a traditional conception of *eros* – understood as a primordial desire for an epistemic/ethical beatitude, for the value of abundant life in relation to the chaotic nature of the phenomenological “thing in itself” – was viewed as a way of confronting and, in the case of Christianity in particular, overcoming the violent and destructive power of death: the highly eroticised cosmic horizon of the ancients being swept away, Holbein believed, in the technological power-posturing of a deathly-cold technics and a detached and calculating individualism that was, unbeknownst to itself, simply the metaphysics of death in another guise (as both Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown were later to recognise). In this way, the traditional ethical *telos* of human existence that aimed to find a path for the maintenance of life within death – in an appropriate balancing out of what psychoanalysis, the subject of this paper, was to later refer to as instinctual drives of *Eros* and *Thanatos* – would now, he believed, become an impossible aim and this could only mean that modernity would in the end lead, in an act of wilful disavowal of death to its triumph over the vitalistic desires for a transcendent life<sup>3</sup>. As such, the older metaphysics of life and death will be disavowed in modern contexts only for them to reappear, Holbein intimates, in more virulent social and political forms – and it is only from *an oblique, anamorphic, philosophical vantage point* that the relationship between the modern social imaginary and its submerged thanatic aspects will be able to be discerned. In other words, as the American novelist Saul Bellow was later to remark some six centuries later, in modernity it would be our ignorance of the power of death that would threaten to destroy us (Bellow, 1984).

However, clearly, this is not how Western modernity has, in general,

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<sup>3</sup> In modernity we might say that there is a general ignorance of the power of death in a way that allows the metaphysics of death to operate with impunity. Psychoanalysis, as I discuss in more detail below, recognised this and offered us a series of therapeutic remedies that attempted to counteract death with the power of the erotic. As I discuss below, in this sense psychoanalysis represents a return to the ancient, pre-modern, metaphysical problematic, only in this case that death is redirected in the service of *Eros*, of life, by means of understanding of death in scientific, specifically biological, terms.

“understood itself”; not at least in terms of any specific understanding of its deepest metaphysical orientations and commitments. As Holbein’s painting immediately suggests and as its creator accurately predicted, modernity would present its philosophical self-understanding as one of a poised, self-confident and technologically accomplished individualism within a progressive social imaginary centred upon the epistemic powers of the rational, autonomous and responsible subject who, in daring to know to know by and for himself, is the bearer of rights and the avowed enemy of traditional forms hierarchy (Taylor, 2007, p. 170). This is a conception of modernity founded upon the individual as “the man from nowhere”, liberated from his position within the older metaphysical conflict of life versus death in a new imaginary of personal and collective control – a conception of the individual who appears “ready-made” and who imposes order on the world by a heroic act of will (Archer, 2000, p. 51). In contradistinction to this “liberal” conception of modernity, in this paper I want to explore the hidden thanatic dimension of Western modernity in a general reconsideration of the extent to which in 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity – the thanatic century *par excellence* in many ways – psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners attempted to bring the traditional conflict between the primordial forces of life and death back into play in the construction of a new style of philosophising and culture-building that laid the foundation for a more metaphysically-oriented modernity shaped by what we might term an *eroto-thanatic social imaginary*. In doing so, I will suggest, psychoanalysis not only facilitated a wholesale re-imagining of the nature of the modern individual – effectively pointing the way towards the dissolution of the modern individual that continues apace today despite the efforts by “neo-liberals” to shore this up by technological means – but also transformed key social processes and political terrains associated with the modern state and its governmentalities. In this way, and in the taking up of Holbein’s “oblique vantage point” in relation to contemporary modernity, I will explore the way in which psychoanalytic thinkers allowed for a startling re-conception of modernity as a social formation constituted by a se-





ries of eroto-thanatised object relations and by a subject now understood as site of metaphysically-oriented drives rather than conscious reasons. 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity was the era where modernity became less concerned with subjectivity but with an objectivity that was often specifically designed and deployed in order to re-eroticise thanatic drives that were now conceived as an instinct to “return and repeat” to an earlier stage of psycho-social development that the subject had been forced to abandon due to pressure from “external forces” (Freud, 1950, p. 47)<sup>4</sup>. In terms their articulation into psychic realities, these same object relations, I suggest, were to facilitate and sustain a modern social imaginary where the rational, responsible and autonomous ideal of early modern subjectivity was supplanted by a new social imaginary of “ego-syntonic” (image-obsessed) individuals whose thanatic desires (typically in the form of hate and aggression) were sublimated into a commodity culture founded upon objectivities that were typically internalised as sadomasochistic representations of self and world (Kernberg, 2009, p. 1018). In this way, in its understanding of modern existence as grounded an imaginary located at the objective interface life and death, psychoanalysis allowed us again to understand the metaphysical significance of the object in a general re-enchantment of modern life and in a conception of the social that returned inquiry to pre-modern metaphysical and theological concerns<sup>5</sup>.

Psychoanalysis was instrumental in achieving this, in the first instance,

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<sup>4</sup> In this way, in the psychoanalytic conception, the thanatic dimension of the human psyche can be usefully understood as the modern 20<sup>th</sup> equivalent of the pre-modern Gnostic urge to return to the tranquillity and perfection of an ethically primordial pre-natal. The desire to return and start again (and year zero) becomes the basis not only for modernity’s revolutionary political imaginaries but also for their reactionary counterparts that desired to return to the simplicities of pre-modern existence.

<sup>5</sup> The human imagination, in many ways, must be understood as a primary neurotic response to the reality to death, to the existential demand to imagine what cannot be imagined and in so doing overcome death – to bring death back into the orbit of life. It is the manner in which these two forces play out in relation to the dynamics of everyday life that the cultural character of the imagination takes its form. The imagination is the force that attempts to overcome death in full acknowledgement that in some sense it cannot do so.



I will claim, in its creation of a new myth that viewed the consumable object as the erotic antidote to the social poison of the forces of death that threatened a return to the pre-modern – what some have referred to as the myth of “psychological man” who in his/her object choices satisfies his/her erotic desires and in so doing chooses life over death (Rieff, 1979). This was a myth of the individual as a knowing consumer driven to satisfy desires in ways that, if left un-administered, would lead to cultural perversity and *in extremis*, to the breakdown of modern Western civilisation itself. It was via such concerns, I want to claim, that psychoanalysis was instrumental in the production of a variation on the earlier modern social imaginary that facilitated the smooth functioning of post-war consumer societies in allowing for the expression of the forces of life and death in ways that were pleasurable, socially productive and in line with more general system imperatives (Bowlby, 1993)<sup>6</sup>. In this regard, psychoanalysis, I want to say, was instrumental in constructing and maintaining 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity in its familiar consumerist form; taking modernity beyond what T. S. Eliot famously referred to in the poem *The Hollow Men* as “death’s dream kingdom” by providing “socially functional” eroticised object-substitutes for death within modern consumer dream worlds in a general re-poeticising of the dynamics of modern life (Ellingsen, 2005, p. 182)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Freudian analyses of object relations immediately suggest that the significances accorded to familiar objects of everyday life are not simply founded upon a conception of objects as “inert things” with use-values but are instead aspects or projections of much deeper dynamics buried within the human psyche. The psychoanalytic theory of “object relations” led to the idea that dreams and fantasies (understood as disguised unconscious wishes) can be used in the design of consumer products that effectively function as externalised wish-fulfilments and politically expedient ways of adapting to functional realities. In such schemes, as these desires demand to be released (as discharges of psychic energy) the releasing of pent up (of repressed) unconscious desire in the consumable object is deemed to be pleasurable “cathartic” – thus explaining the drive associated not only with consuming but also with associated activities such as shopping, saving and the like. Consumer products, if they feed our fantasies, are widely seen as socially useful in much contemporary psychoanalytic discourse precisely because of their ability to perform this cathartic function.

<sup>7</sup> T.S. Eliot’s poems were in many ways a reflection on the world-historical consequences of the First World War; a war whose primary consequence was, in his view, the “undoing of an entire world” due to an awareness that in modernity death had become



Much of the discussion that follows will be based on examples taken from the early decades of the last century – the “heyday” of psychoanalysis in many ways – and it will provide only a schematic cultural history in a general assessment of psychoanalysis’ wider impacts and influences.<sup>8</sup> Psychoanalysis has been referred to as a discipline “without a history” (Young-Buruhel, Schwartz, 2012) – but this is almost certainly due to its overwhelming success as a cultural (if not a scientific) project that has made its impacts so pervasive that it can now be viewed to have been a technocratic visible hand guiding modern existence into forms of adaptive equilibria. In many ways, we stand too close to psychoanalysis today to be able develop a fully appropriate philosophical relationship to it (and its theoretical insights now exist as taken-for-granted common-sense assumptions in both modern politics and social science)<sup>9</sup>. In this regard, this paper can be viewed as an attempt to develop the framework for a much needed philosophically-informed history of psychoanalysis. By way of conclusion, and as a case study, I will briefly explore the psychoanalytic significance of what was perhaps the most psychoanalytically redolent of all 20<sup>th</sup> century objects – the cigarette<sup>10</sup>, and in its recent loss of psycho-

autonomous and was capable of producing destruction on an unimaginable scale.

<sup>8</sup> The analysis offered here will thus be based upon a philosophically informed cultural history, and one that reflexively applies a general critical-theoretical framework that is now itself always and already, given the scope of the influence of psychoanalytic ideas and methods, influenced by the history psychoanalysis itself. The influence of psychoanalysis has been such that all forms of contemporary philosophy and social theory are variations on psychoanalytic approaches to mind and society.

<sup>9</sup> However, in this context, it is important to stress that I am not going to get into the debate about whether Freud’s theories are *true*. This is an epistemological question that cannot readily be discussed in a discussion such as this. My interest here is solely in understanding the wider historical significance of psychoanalytic ideas in relation to the evolution of modernity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (an understanding that itself cannot escape that effects that psychoanalytic ideas have had upon all modes of philosophical and sociological inquiry).

<sup>10</sup> Other familiar objects could just as easily have been chosen as examples here. Consumer products such as razors and shaving cream, initially, were marketed via representations of shaving as the process of the removal of adult potency and a return to the simplistic pre-Oedipal realities of infancy; effectively depicting shaving as a form of symbolic castration – the removal of the beard signifying a process that returns us to a





analytic significance I will also explore that the extent to the currently deregulated neo-liberal represents a return to the thanatic imaginary depicted by Holbein, indicating that the contemporary period, in its advocacy of a return to older enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity and early modern social imaginaries, suggests that we are now in the midst of a dangerous return to the errors of a classical liberalism that psychoanalytic modernism aimed (but failed) to cure.

### **Psychoanalytic Worlds: The Imaginary Constitution of the Social**

Psychoanalysis, that emerged at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reached its cultural apogee mid-century, is one of the intellectual foundations of the “implicate order” of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity<sup>11</sup>. As has been well documented elsewhere, psychoanalysis allowed traditional conceptions of the social to be, as we now say, “deconstructed” into new ontologies of desire and its conscious corollary the imagination. Through this it created the possibility for a post-enlightenment conception of modern freedom with the synthesis imagination *and* reason as its basis (as encapsulated in the psychoanalytic dictum “where id, was there shall ego be” and so on). This much is well-known. However, in recognising the importance of psychoanalysis (in this manner) the contemporary philosopher and social theorist are presented with a conundrum; for not only does psychoanaly-

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more innocent and blissful state prior to our understanding of the antagonistic world of sexual difference. Sugar and coffee too were often marketed as way to return to pure simplicities of pre-oedipal existence. In this way we can see sugar as a commodity substitute for what in the pre-modern world was viewed as the “sweetness of the divine”.

<sup>11</sup> Advertising, in this sense, is an attempt to deflect thanatic impulses in the direction of more “vital” and eroticised aims. The attempt to deflect and sublimate aggression into a socially useful activity, typically via sublimation but also what Freud termed a “reaction formation” of hate into love, was in many ways the primary function of 20<sup>th</sup> century psycho-social regulation. The main aim of 20<sup>th</sup> century politics was to ensure that thanaticism was not unleashed in a self-destructive way against the existing social order. In fact, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the thanatic desire for “blissful stasis” was sublimated not only into the immobilities of technological existence but also into conditions of consumer satiation and intoxication.



sis create the possibility for a more precise theoretical articulation of the psychic/imaginary origins of modern social forms but it also offers us a set of generalisable abstract discourses and practices through which social imaginaries can be constructed and reconstructed in order to realise and accomplish wider political projects. Psychoanalysis is thus no mere science but is a new form of social imagination that resituates the individual within everyday object-relations and redefines the individual as a project that can only be understood as a driven psychological accomplishment rather than a natural given (Illouz, 2008, p. 37-38). As I explore more fully below, the emergence of psychoanalysis as a new form of social imagination is precisely what happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the modern social imaginary was reconceived and re-designed by a number of psychoanalytic practitioners via the redesign of familiar and unfamiliar objects according to a group-psychological model of that gave a new primacy to deep, collective, unconscious drives for both life and death.

Psychoanalysis, in most instances, has presented itself as the philosophy of the imaginary *par excellence* in a unique fusion of Darwinist naturalism and German romanticism that spanned the rationalist/empiricist and positivist/romantic divides. As such, psychoanalysis was *ab initio* a psychometaphysics that demanded that we should always incorporate notions of fantasy and imagination within every ideal of objectivity and epistemology. More specifically, psychoanalysis viewed both individual and social worlds *in themselves* as imaginary products of instinctual wish-fulfilment in a way that created a new understanding of the nature of both subjects and objects<sup>12</sup>. In this way psychoanalysis significantly problematised the relationship between the imaginary and the real, suggesting that our understanding of the real as such is only possible through the analysis of

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<sup>12</sup> The early Freud's conception of desire was entirely mechanistic in this regard and he conceived of human beings as what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari were to term "desiring machines" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1998). According to Freud, our psychic mechanisms are hard-wired towards a basic desire for pleasure/enjoyment (even if he recognised that this is not possible to attain sometimes in our everyday lives, with their many obstacles to satisfaction).



the dreams that simultaneously reveal and conceal it. Psychoanalysis, in discerning the wish (and its associated dream) buried within the social fact that stands as its constitutive ground effectively collapsed the ancient distinction between knowledge and desire in a “psychologisation” of reality that was to set new parameters to the broad trajectories of Western intellectual life, culminating in the notorious post-modern revolt against reason and the contemporary flight from the real as traditionally conceived<sup>13</sup>.

To the degree that this project was successful, we might say that, today, all modern subjects are, everywhere, immersed within a psychoanalytically-informed imaginary *world* – to the extent that “Freudianism” is not only to be found in our bars, in our shops and within the images that flicker across our TV screens but is also ubiquitous within our mundane folk-psychological discourses that shape our everyday modes of social interaction<sup>14</sup>. Initially the Freudian theoretical apparatus found its way into many social and political discourses as a new kind of medicalised cultural authority (Park, 2004). Because of such cultural transformations much of the core lexicon of Freudianism is now a cultural commonplace and highly familiar even to those individuals utterly unfamiliar with the finer nuances of the history of psychology and psychological theory. Moreover,

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<sup>13</sup> In many ways images are the currency of desire. When we desire, we dream – we fantasise. If I really desire a new X, I am likely to dream about it, to imagine enjoying it... and so on.

<sup>14</sup> Today, we all think and speak in “psychoanalyse” to some extent. Psychoanalysis has changed the way that we view ourselves as psychological beings and is thus more akin to a Foucauldian “technology of the self” than a general scientific theory of the mind as such. As a technique of subjectivity, psychoanalysis was also essentially a technique of the imagination. Forms of psychoanalytic world hood were only possible to the extent that psychoanalytic thought reconceived the modern individual in terms of a drive-fantasy nexus, that the individual is simply the site where drives find their satisfaction in imaginary scenarios of various kinds. For Freud, the problem with the earlier version of modernity (forged in the crucible of the Enlightenment) was that it had overlooked the imaginary core of human conscious existence and distorted our understanding of human nature in failing to acknowledge that reason itself is simply an aspect of the imagination, *of the wish* (a point already made to some extent by Hume). Against this, psychoanalysis advocated an alternative modernity that was fully aware of its status as a social product of the imagination in a new heightened social reflexivity of the role of fantasies and dreams in the constitution of social reality.



Freud's central therapeutic claim that we can treat/cure what were once spiritual problems simply by "talking about them" and resituating them within a modern space of psychological techniques has been widely seen as having provided scientific legitimation in relation to the modern preoccupation with the self as a source of "feelings"; something that has manifested itself as a culture of "emotional intelligence" as well as the "the confessional trauma culture" that sustains talk shows, interest in the trivia of celebrity lives and the emergence of popular autobiography<sup>15</sup>. However, it was in the modernist movements in art, in surrealism and dada in particular, and in those aspects of modernism that celebrated Freud's concern with the irrational forces of life and death that exist prior to modern forms of subjectivity that psychoanalytic ideas gained the greatest cultural traction in its intimate association with the libidinal aspects of the readymade object<sup>16</sup>. Through surrealism in particular, Freud's ideas found their way out of the narrow confines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *avant-garde* not only into popular film<sup>17</sup>, the music of the Beatles, the 1960s counter-culture – "1968" and its politics of "modernism in the streets" with its psychoanalytically-informed psycho-political demands to "stop thinking and start dreaming" – but also into the very materialities and quotidian objectivities of everyday life<sup>18</sup>. We might say that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century psy-

<sup>15</sup> Psychoanalysis, it is often claimed, has also facilitated the emergence of mock-Aristocratic child-centred culture in its central concern with the psychological development of children and the psycho-therapeutic importance of childhood experience – a shift that gave philosophical credence to new forms of professional activities such as educational psychology and social work.

<sup>16</sup> In fact with as a consequence of the cultural effects of psychoanalysis it is now very difficult tell where the theoretical claims of psychoanalysis ends and contemporary art begins.

<sup>17</sup> In the films of Alfred Hitchcock especially – *Vertigo* being perhaps the classic Freudian film of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one that explores the relationship between *eros* and *thanatos*, the modern and the pre-modern most explicitly.

<sup>18</sup> In many ways, the avant-gardist adoption of psychoanalytic ideas and techniques represented a celebration of erotic as opposed to the thanatic aspects of the psychoanalytic social imaginary and it was these "cultural intermediaries" that paved the way for a revolutionary psychoanalytic sensibility premised upon the full emancipation of the erotic. This idea found its political expression in the politics of the 1960s.



choanalysis rendered the entire world surreal and it started this process with the “surrealisation” of consumer object.

As a consequence of these psychoanalytically-informed innovations, it has become commonplace today to claim that any objective situation cannot be identified “as fact” in isolation from an inner representation that stands as its human/psychic equivalent and that therefore every form of objective knowledge will always be a function of the powers of the human imagination. Our conceptions of the real, it is now often said, are always internally related to the sense-impression, to the image and through this to the power of the human mind to fantasise, to imagine and to institutionalise its imaginings as *imaginaries* and thus *as real*. The imagination, in this psychoanalytic sense, is the primary source of all senses of objectivity and lies at the basis of all authentically human forms of motivation and action. In this vein, the *social* imaginary is simply the primordial imagination (that emerges as a neurotic compensation for the frustration of instinctual drives) rationalised by institutions into objectivities that are then embedded into the habitual practices and schemes through which the world appears to us as a “world”<sup>19</sup>. Following on in this trajectory, the idea that social is always and already infused with constituted by imaginary significations has been an important innovation in much contemporary sociological theorising (Maffesoli, 1996; Robins, Webster, 1999; Elliot, 2004; Taylor, 2007; Lash, 2012) and a close reading of these sociological texts show us that the social imaginary has significant roots within psychoanalytic traditions of social critique (Durand, 1993)<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Social imaginaries in this regard are what Foucault termed “discourses” – but in a way that recognises the power of the imagination to create meaning and to subvert and innovate with respect to all existing discourses.

<sup>20</sup> In Durand’s work, we can discern the awkward tension that exists between contemporary discourses on the social imaginary and orthodox forms of psychoanalytic theory. Durand’s account of the imaginary is largely hostile to Freudianism – on the grounds that it is both too rationalistic and reductive – but supportive of Jungian psychoanalysis in the latter’s readiness to embrace the archetypal and the mythological. However, Freudianism did not manage to fully eschew the language of myth and can itself be seen as a myth compatible with a modern liberal secular order.



This psychoanalytic conception of the social found perhaps its clearest and most radical expression in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, for whom the construction of social worlds requires the channelling of the omnipotence of the primordial imagination in order to “accept sublimated satisfaction even death for the sake of *social end*” (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 42)<sup>21</sup>. Thus at the most general level, from a psychoanalytic point of view, social words are always in part imaginary projections institutionalised as normatively real and in this way psychoanalysis offers a critique of the social in the same manner as Fichte’s critique of religion; and as a consequence of psychoanalysis many contemporary thinkers have come to accept that all social realities must to some extent be conceived as the result of the interplay between bio-energetics and power to the extent that the image and the dream are always and already part of the social structure.<sup>22</sup> In this sense we might say that the psychoanalysis allowed us to understand the social itself as a fantasy based upon deep instinctual desires for security, pleasure, dominance and the like and that social facticity and objectivity are continuous with the human imagination rather than domains that stand over and against it.

However, it has been well documented that during the last century psychoanalytic ideas were largely put to conservative political uses not only in order to control and shape the feelings and desires of entire popula-

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<sup>21</sup> Castoriadis makes the distinction between what he terms “the radical imagination” and “the social imaginary”. The former, he claims, represents a primordial power of organisation. For him, each internal image is the work of the imagination in that it is always composed of distinct elements organised in a particular way (Castoriadis, 1995, p. 25). In this sense, as products of the imagination, all social imaginaries are necessarily unstable. There can be no historical finality *vis-à-vis* any specific social imaginary precisely because it is always capable of being re-imagined. As is well known, Fichte claimed that the basic conceptualities of organised religion were simply imagined projections of suppressed human longings and needs.

<sup>22</sup> As is well known, Fichte claimed that the basic conceptualities of organised religion were simply imagined projections of suppressed human longings and needs. Psychoanalysis, in many ways, generalised this “insight” in order to view the social world *as such* as an imaginary projection forged out of repressed unconscious material. However, one of the problems with Fichte’s account is that it assumes that “need” can be understood in isolation of the imaginary (and its associated ideas of the transcendent).



tions – largely as part of administrative and reformatory practices involving “knowledges and techniques for the conceptualisation, regulation and amelioration of the problems of personal and social life” (Rose, 1985, p. 1)<sup>23</sup> – but also, at the same time and in a similar way, as a general theoretical framework that provided the basis for the creation of a new mythical phantasmagoria of socialised objects, especially those associated with the forms of mass consumerism that eventually came to characterise the primary social dimension of 20<sup>th</sup> century existence<sup>24</sup>. In this way, the modern social imaginary mutated upon its encounter with a new conception of the subject formed in a “psychic conversation” with the object now enchanted as dream signification – something that seemed to suggest a problematic return to the barbarism of primitive animism and an attack on the imaginary foundations of modernity as such (Zaretsky, 2004, p. 152). In this regard, psychoanalytic ideas were influential in creating a new context for the design and marketing some of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity’s most significant objects in the development of new psychologically-informed object relations and a social imaginary that brought into play the new psychoanalytic significance accorded to objects in order to find a psycho-social balance maintained between a recalibrating and a reconceptualising of the forces of life and death. Although one may argue (with some justification, given the centrality of this idea to the psychoanalytic project) that any adequate conception of a psychoanalytically informed social imaginary should have Freud’s early ideal of liberated sexuality at its core, this dimension was in fact only significant in relation to the utopian imaginings of 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theorists and had very little role to play *vis-à-vis* the way in which psychoanalytic ideas were deployed as part of mainstream

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<sup>23</sup> According to Rose, “[t]he conditions which made possible the formation of the modern psychological enterprise in England were established in all those fields where psychological expertise could be deployed in relation to the abnormal functioning of individuals” (Rose, 1985, p. 3).

<sup>24</sup> In this way, we can see that the psychoanalytic practitioner functioned, to put this somewhat anachronistically, as a “reactionary surrealist” – transforming everyday object worlds in the service of existing social-economic institutions via an imaginary conception of self and life.



political initiatives<sup>25</sup>. For much mainstream psychoanalysis the task was to give the primordial drives a new social form rather than liberate them from the shackles of civilised constraint. In the light of this, 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity's manufactured objectivities were in many cases specifically designed in order to facilitate a sublimation of primordial drives into a new object-centred form of a consumerist life-in-death, that was far from being merely a sexualised symbolisation of the social domain (and to this extent psychoanalysis broke significantly with the Christian idea of the transcendence of death in the construction of a modern social imaginary that attempted to subject the thanatic dimension to new forms of immanent, techno-scientific, regulation)<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> And even here it was recognised that in 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity it was the “forces of death” (in the sense deployed here) that were more generally deployed as administrative instruments: Herbert Marcuse, famously, acknowledging that it was Freud's idea of a super-sublimation the thanatic drives into the realm of modern technics that best explained the nature and dynamics of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity. In this way, radical left-Freudians recognised that these new object worlds – that were increasingly seen as co-terminus with thanatic desires – threatened the autonomy of the modern subject; specifically its dissolution back into an infantilised pre-oedipal world – the “culture narcissism” made famous later by Christopher Lash and his followers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, against “super-sublimated *Thanatos*”, Marcuse posited the power of a fully liberated polymorphously perverse *Eros* that allows a free play of the imagination and negation of the bourgeois reality principle: to the extent that even in critical theory it is recognised that death emerges in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as psychological rather than a physical phenomenon, often taking on its own distinctive psychic form (Bowling, 2012, p. 14). However, Marcuse's account is too focussed on technics in the Heideggerian sense as a global apparatus, as a “death machine”, and it has overlooked the way in which the rechanneling of the thanatic impulses became central to the management of everyday life of modern industrial societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a way that required the deep penetration of psychoanalytic processes into everyday lifeworlds. The object itself now becomes a substitute for death.

<sup>26</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners suggested that in an age of mass-production/consumption that we are now required to view objects through a specifically *mythological* lens. Freud had already suggested this in his linking of that most theologically redolent of all modern objects, money, with mythologies associated with excrement, “anality” and through this with ideas of “the satanic”. Freud pays special attention to the mythological significance of gold in this context – especially the myth of King Midas, whose touch turned everything into gold yet at the same time rendered everything inedible and unusable: “shit-like”.

## **The Psychoanalytic Social Imaginary**

It was in this way that Freud's theory played a central part in the what we now refer to as a further "liberalisation" of Western culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a liberalism conceived not as the freedom think and speak (the traditional conception of autonomy) but as the freedom to dream and consume (what has since become known as simply "the American Dream")<sup>27</sup>. As such, in the psychoanalytic social imaginary the image of the individual was largely that of "the dreamer" who can create meaning for him/herself via the sublimation of his/her desires into the domain of objects, processes and things. In vulgar psychoanalytic discourse these dreams have often been understood as being largely sexual in character and to this extent we might be tempted to conceive of the psychoanalytic social imaginary as simply a crude eroticisation of its enlightenment forebear, a sexualisation of reason in the manner of the *Marquis de Sade*. However, as we will see, this is only the case if we view psychoanalysis in terms of the "erotic optimism" of Freud's early work – an idea that Freud was to largely repudiate and was rejected in most post-Freudian developments in favour a more pessimistic interpretation of modern culture and society.

The vulgar conception of the psychoanalytic social imaginary has its roots in the early Freud's conception of human beings as basically driven by libidinal urges for immediate gratification and as such potentially infantile and dangerous to the modern liberal ideal. In this regard, Freud is often viewed as the first modern thinker (apart from perhaps Nietzsche) to rethink the human within an entirely Darwinian frame and a theorist who legitimated liberal "animality" in relation to human existence. However, it is now clear that this conception of psychoanalysis is a long way from Freud's conception the significance of human life. Freud was much more than crude Darwinist thinker who viewed the human in sexual-in-

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<sup>27</sup> At the turn of the century, this was truly scandalous claim: then children were seen as innocent and vulnerable and to view them as sexual beings was seen as a symptom of a diseased mind. Freud thus attempted to revolutionise the way children and childhood were conceived but for him this showed the extent to which the "child within" needed to be subjected to new forms of techno-scientific regulation.



instinctual terms, not only because of his advocacy of *infantile* sexuality but also because his psycho-metaphysics was not founded upon conceptions of instinct at all but on notions of “the drive” (*Trieb*). In this regard, and contrary to many received interpretations, Freud explicitly acknowledged the importance of a number of counter-enlightenment themes in relation to the inescapability of socially destructive and self-destructive instinctual drives – what was in Christianity understood as “sin”; lust, greed, aggression, violence, despair and self-destructiveness in his view remained in need of political control in 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity as they were in the mediaeval period, even though he believed that this had to be achieved entirely within the techno-scientific discourses of contemporary secularism. These basic anti-social drives, Freud believed, were both amoral and irrational – to the extent that the danger facing liberal modernity was not proletarian revolution (as Marx had predicted) but rather a return to a pre-modern barbarism in the dissolution of the modern individual back into an ancient cosmicism where the terrors of death (and the forms of violence and hatred that it engenders) threatened to overwhelm the life-affirming capacities of the individual.

Freud’s conception of the drive was given a specifically scientific inflection, as it was defined in thermodynamic terms as a form of psychic energy that always moves towards being discharged through motivated action (in a general condition of bio-psychological entropy). The drive, for the early Freud, was fundamentally a motivation for pleasure that emerges developmentally because the human infant increasingly finds the process of satiating its basic instinctual needs *pleasurable in itself*: to the extent that the baby comes to desire the instinctually-desired object *for its own sake* rather than as a means to satisfy innate needs. The drive, we might, is the instinct shaped by the vicissitudes of the external world and hence cannot be separated out from the object which is its origin and meaning. As instinct is always manifested in human form as “drive”, and as the biological energy of the human is amplified as a consequence, Freud believed that through this the human becomes a new creature of affective purpose and

motivated action, a creature of the imagination, rather than one governed by the force of instinct. This, for Freud, is what makes humans different from animals: humans, he believed, have an excess of energy that doesn't simply function in order to satisfy biological needs but allows humanity to transcend its natural givens in being "driven" creatures, and it is this excess energy that creates the possibility for an imaginative relationship to the world. For Freud it is only in the image of the human as a creature *in excess of nature* that we can begin to understand the true significance of the imaginary, because it is this very excess that makes humanity a danger to itself in a way that calls for another solution, one that attempts to rationalise the imagination whilst retaining its affective power. It is this very excess that suggested to Freud that a politics based upon enlightenment naturalism will no longer suffice – Adam Smith's *laissez-faire*, a condition where of an excess of desire/drive without any constraint from an externally sanctioned socially imaginary came to a violent and brutal refutation in the horrors of the trenches of the First World War.

In this way the psychoanalytic social imaginary placed the ideal of drive satisfaction and through this individual enjoyment of objects at its core. Within such drives Freud believed that "the pleasure principle" holds sway (and they are, as now almost everyone knows, generally not conscious but belong in the dimension of the mind that he referred to as "the id" (*das Es*))<sup>28</sup>. However, in Freud's view the content of these drives only becomes conscious under special psychic conditions where *repression* (the mechanism through which the psyche defends itself against its most fundamental drives) is weakened and for him the psychoanalytic social imaginary was a means for weakening the forms of traditional repression that he believed were the source of many debilitating psychopathologies. However, Freud also recognised that the pleasure principle, for it to be able to

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<sup>28</sup> As Bruno Bettelheim observed (Bettelheim, 1985) the literal translation of the *das Es* is "the it" rather than more specialised psychiatric term "the id". The idea of the drive in this sense becomes much less mysterious and even ordinary folk-psychological discourse (in English) makes the connection between the "it" and the "drive" when we say "it is driving me to distraction" and so forth.



function at all in relation to social existence, must be modified practically that is in a “reality-oriented” way: and this the early Freud believed is the concern of the ego (*der Ich*) that emerges ontogenetically out of more basic pleasure-seeking drives somewhat later in the process of psychological development. Importantly, according to the early Freud, the rational ego – that operates only according to what he referred to as “the reality principle” – and the primordial irrational unconscious drives are in fundamental conflict with each other (even though both are largely driven by the desire for pleasure in his view) and this causes many of our deepest drives to be repressed – “forgotten”, but in a way that allows them to remain active and dynamic in relation to later adult psychological functioning; something that contemporary commentators have claimed is Freud’s distinctive contribution to theories of human nature (Frosh, 1989, p. 84) According to the early Freud, it is the repression of basic drives that makes all modern individuals to varying degrees “unhappy”: typically anxious, nervous, and strangely dissatisfied even given modernity’s increased levels of affluence and political participation<sup>29</sup>. In this respect, for the early Freud, the imagination is a compensation for loss of an infantile condition (via the oedipal situation) where drives were typically satisfied much more easily than they are in adult life (where institutional forms of psychic repression hold sway). Although Freud believed that the only happiness available to modern individuals is the “ordinary everyday unhappiness” associated with the trials and under-achievements earned through productive work, this limited form of happiness he believed is only possible by means of a systematic undermining of much of this repression: by either bringing repressed material back to memory in the open of therapeutic forms of discourse and by such means brought with the help and guidance of the analyst under the individual’s own rational self-control; or via a bypassing of the processes of repression in order to displace or sublimate the re-

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<sup>29</sup> But for Freud the internal conflict between the ego and the drive can also give rise to more socially productive neuroses and for him the imagination is one such socially useful symptom of repression that can provide substitute gratifications and alternative pathways for the discharge of repressed drives.



pressed material into safer social and cultural arenas<sup>30</sup>. Here the ability of the individual to imaginatively “free associate” becomes conceived as new model of the enlightened individual – freedom now conceived as freedom to imagine<sup>31</sup>.

Here we can discern in outline the rudiments of Freud’s alternative conception of the modern social imaginary, one where the rational unified subject of an earlier modernity is replaced by an internally conflicted

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<sup>30</sup> These drives, Freud believed, remain active and return to consciousness in the form of dreams, daydreams, parapraxes and regressive behaviour triggered by psychic threats of various kinds – what we might call “everyday neuroses”. For Freud, all humans are neurotic beings to varying degrees because all humans live a condition of psychic contradiction between reality and the unconscious drives.

<sup>31</sup> Here we can see another important aspect of the psychoanalytic social imaginary: that in their confrontation with social reality our basic irrational drives are further re-directed and reformed – displaced/sublimated into other drives, the drive for social forms of enjoyment, the enjoyment of wealth, fame and social status; and it is in this way that reality transforms the irrational into the rational by means of a forced and necessary “adjustment”. In this regard, the early Freud was fundamentally a theorist of imagination in that he claimed that the power of the human imagination has remained repressed in “the unconscious” where it remains inaccessible to consciousness but accessible via assistance from a number of specific psychoanalytic techniques (the unconscious, he believed, was created precisely by the activity of repression). For Freud, then, instinctual desire, memory and culture’s capacity to act *repressively* in relation to these are the psychodynamic foundations of human sociality. We might say that human sociality, for it to exist as such, requires an appropriate balance of repression and memorialisation if it is not to collapse back into animal existence or to become ossified as a mere automatism. Importantly in this context in its focus on the liberating powers of memory Freudianism delved deep into the psychic economies of civility and de-civility and in a way that allowed it to explore the relation between the “imaginist” and “reality-oriented” dimensions of social existence. For Freud, the imagination is a symptom of repression – it is the basic way in which instinctual desires are satisfied, in Freud’s terminology “sublimated”, in ways that are acceptable to cultural norms – and the task for the psychoanalyst is to weaken the power that the imagination exerts over the neurotic by providing “substitute satisfactions” for our repressed desires. It was in this way that psychoanalysis became the central intellectual force in facilitating the shift from a needs to a desires culture in the twentieth century. This had profound consequences and radically transformed the meaning of democracy itself. In consumer societies, we might say, democracy has nothing to do with voting, meetings in assemblies and the public arguing out the issues – as it had been in classical Greece – but with *satisfying the basic instinctual desires of the majority*. Consumer democracy is primarily a “democracy of the drive and its primary symptom the dream” and yet institutionally western democracies still function as though a “democracy of the intellect” were still possible.



individual who must use his/her imagination not only as a sublimation of socially recalcitrant psychic drives (that are themselves modifications of instincts, given the nature of the objects that the subject necessarily encounters) but also to liberate the subject from its entrapment within an unconscious conceived as a remnant of childhood. In the psychoanalytic the imaginary projections, sublimations and displacements directed from the ego become the means through which psychic drives are brought under the aegis of a new kind of social regulation: forms of control that require the liberation of the imagination from its enslavement to infantile drives so that it becomes “free” to become socially *productive*.

The later Freud, however, added a significant degree of complexity to this early model in that he recognised that the basic biological dimension of the human, the domain of the drive, was also divided against itself and was not simply motivated by a desire for pleasure, at least as he had initially conceived of it (a shift that moved psychoanalytic thought towards more general sociological and anthropological concerns and created the possibility of its emergence as a fully-fledged political technology). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1950), Freud recognised that the natural discharge of psychic energy in the drive not only has a sexual aim but also has what might be termed a “deathly aim” that desired to “reduce, keep constant or remove internal tension” (Freud, 1950, p. 76); because all psychic discharge, he believed, is ultimately towards a final dissolution of the organism rather than geared towards its survival and biological adaptation in the Darwinian sense. And so in bio-energetic terms the individual, he believed, was subject to two competing thermodynamic psychic principles: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. The latter, the affective counterpart of sexual desire, one that Freud believed even this most fundamental psychic force was to submit to in the end, was a violent and self-destructive drive, a kind of will to mastery (a mastery of one’s own death) that was in itself both individually and socially destructive, that Freud believed was present in human nature and were in some form partially constitutive of all forms of living matter. Freud drew important “civilizational” consequences from this analysis

of the character of the drives and used them in order to explore the nature of the necessarily antagonistic relation between conflicted processes of human bio-energetics and the civilising process. More specifically, on one level, “bio energy”, he believed, was involved in a drive towards self-preservation and the joining of individuals together into “higher social unities” (*Eros*). However, such tendencies he recognised were offset and counteracted by an equal and opposite negative (hostile/aggressive) drive towards the serene pleasure of inanimate non-existence, a drive that is governed not by the pleasure principle but by what he termed “the nirvana principle”, where pleasure is experienced only in the experience of the extinction of affective content and via a desire to escape from what we might in the language of existentialism refer to as “the pain of being”. This principle, he believed, has as its aim a deep sense of psychic peace and is, somewhat paradoxically, driven to achieve this via an aggressive desire to “return and repeat” in a compulsive cycle that attempts to *preserve what is* in general psychic quietude rather than (erotically) develop future potentials and possibilities (in this regard, we can see 20<sup>th</sup> century rationalists like Freud discovered a much forgotten conservative political pole, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessing the emergence of a conservative modernity through Freud’s ideas)<sup>32</sup>. The idea that social progress can only occur in the teeth of this desire to return (even though this in itself is not possible, hence the compulsion always to repeat the act of returning) gave rise to one of the mature Freud’s central political ideas: that the social bond requires the re-direction of the entropic forces of death (typically manifested psychologically as aggression and destructive cycles where all extant creations are gleefully overthrown and all “booms” turned to “busts”) in a way that must find assistance from the erotic drives, as thanatic aggression represents a force that can override *Eros* in its ability to sustain a counter

<sup>32</sup> Even Marcuse, in his desire to forge a radical politics based upon a Proustian remembrance of things past, must be viewed as a thanatic thinker to this degree. His idea of *Eros* never escaped the thanatic social imaginary that he worked so hard to critique and his desire was one of an escape of modernity into an anxiety free childhood that carried within it significant pre-modern political residues.



“sodomasochistic” version of the pleasure principle (Freud 1950, p. 25)<sup>33</sup>. In this way, Freud linked the death drive to a kind of reactionary social pathology that longs for a return to the primary narcissism of the cosmic immersion of pre-modern existence – a force that expresses itself at the social level as a narcissistic rage against the resistance of modern world in relation to the basic thanatic drive to return to an imaginary infantile and omnipotent mastery over all things (consider, for example, the psychological life of Adolf Hitler in this context; Nazism in this regard is simply thanatic politics *in extremis*).<sup>34</sup> The death drive, in this sense, manifests itself as the attempt to destroy the post-oedipal reality principle that had previously formed the basis of all civilised social imaginaries, especially the modern version that had assumed that the authentically social is premised on a need for separation and individualisation<sup>35</sup>. However, this destructive rage against all external obstructions to the satisfaction of our basic drives can be prevented, Freud believed, if these drives are sublimated into so-

<sup>33</sup> Freud believed in infancy most of us live in a condition of majestic mastery in relation to our *umwelt* – a condition where every need and desire is immediately catered for, until around the age of five when Oedipus takes over and we are forced face to traumatic realities where we have to strive to create and reproduce in the teeth in competitive antagonism. We might say that for Freud, only in a liberated imagination can we find solace in the basic traumatic separation from the affective context of our infancy.

<sup>34</sup> The infant, conceived in psychoanalytic terms, is “his majesty the baby” – the world is primarily there for him/her in a highly “pre-egoic” way that suggests a primordial pleasurable immersion in all things. Freud believed that in this condition there is no distinction between the world and baby: the world is seen as an extension of the baby and baby exists in a relation of conjunction rather than disjunction with respect to the external world. Freud believed that we have since forgotten this experience, few of us can remember much before the age of 4-5 and then our memories seem to have a fundamentally different quality. This primordial experience is one that for most is extremely enjoyable – something that we never fully recover from the loss of (just imagine what it would be like to be pushed in buggy as an adult, and fed immediately that you demanded food).

<sup>35</sup> Freud believed that the prevalence of unconscious thanatic urges is tied to a pathological transition through the key psychological event that emerges around the age of five – the infamous “Oedipus complex”. This, he believed, causes us to repress these infantile experiences into the unconscious where they remain active; especially after puberty when the libidinal aspects of our lives return. However, we experience the sense of loss (of an Eden) very profoundly and this memory gives further psycho-social succour to innate thanatic impulses.

cially competitive drives for social identity, status and achievement (Carr, Lapp, 2006, p. 43)<sup>36</sup>.

Thus, more generally, in the service of the maintenance of civilisation, Freud believed that the psyche has to either to repress the thanatic dimension of human existence or, more ideally, to “sublimate” it into “higher” social forms<sup>37</sup>. In this way, in Freud’s later work, the vitalism and the erotic

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<sup>36</sup> According to Freud – a claim that is now the central psychological myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity - around the age of five Freud believed that child starts to resent the relationship between mother and father. For boys, this hostility is directed towards the father; girls towards the mother. This is because the child has formed what can only be described as “love bond” with the parent of the opposite sex and so he/she sees the parent of the same sex as a rival. At this stage boys become aware, Freud believed, that “penises” are not universal features of the human anatomy and in awareness of this fact they experience a profound shock, a trauma. Freud believed that at first boys view girls simply “as boys without penises” and so they become anxious that they too might become “such a lesser boy” in losing theirs – something that Freud famously termed “castration anxiety”. In boys, in their rivalry with their father, the father produces castration anxiety in the child, the fear that he might remove his penis – “his nascent sense of power and independence” – as punishment for the love bond that he has with the mother. After all, the father’s penis (in both the psychological and physical sense) is much bigger than the boy’s – and Freud believed that it is this fear that forces the male child away from an attachment to the mother towards identification with the father and thus towards a legitimate social identity. The Oedipal situation, we might say, forces the child to break away from the blissful submersion in the pre-erotic world that he experienced as an infant to the extent that after Oedipus the boy child has now taken the first steps towards becoming an individual with a gender identity.

With girls, however, matters are much more complicated and the Freudian apparatus struggles to make sense of this aspect of human psychological development. According to Freud, the girl realizes that, at first, that she belongs to the one half of humanity that is “devoid of a phallus” – that she is effectively lacking in something, something that seems to give those who possess it a sense of power and independence. So she desires “one of her own” and envies those who already have one. However, the girl realizes that she can’t really possess one in the way that a boy possesses one. At first, she thinks she may be able to own her father’s power, after all a love bond has developed between them. However, Freud believes that the girl child “realises” that a relationship with the father is impossible and instead identifies with the mother in the hope that one day she will be the mother of a male child and then possess a penis of her very own – and she represses all those desires she once had for a penis into her unconscious. However, the mechanism through which this sense of impossibility is realised in girls is almost impossible to conceive in the standard Freudian account of the oedipal moment.

<sup>37</sup> For Freud, the super-ego was generally viewed as allying itself with thanatic drives in order to keep the erotic in check. However, in this case matters must be the other way around.



optimism of the early work is significantly complicated in a new metaphysical awareness of the close interrelation that always exists between life and death forces and through an understanding that *Thanatos* may well, under certain circumstances, triumph over *Eros*; something that in the age of modern technology Freud and many of his more radical followers believed poses a very significant threat to the future existence of the human species. This embracing of the metaphysical dimension of life and death represents Freud's "return to philosophical tradition" in many ways – to religion, broadly conceived and to Gnosticism in a way that allows the tacit theological dimensions of modernity to become all too apparent. In this regard, civilisation, for Freud, is of necessity comprised not only of a series of ego-strengthening instruments that secure the forms of psychic repression demanded of highly collectivised forms of social life, but also of a series of "objective constraints" that are forced to operate in favour of the forces of life over and above those of death in a radical social inhibition or sublimation of a death drive into more eroticised forms; the drive that demands that we as a species remain/regress into simplicity rather than "progress" into the demands of social and political complexity and requires an erotic direction if its action is to be neutered. Freud himself was completely aware of the wider socio-political dimensions of his thought when he acknowledged that thanatic drives needed to be socially administered into more socially useful forms if the threat they pose to civilised forms of human life are to be thwarted (and it was at this point psychoanalysis crossed over into the political domain proper, emerging as a modern political philosophy rather than a general theory of the mind)<sup>38</sup>. As Freud stated in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, the work where the significance of a modern politics of death is explored most explicitly, "the

<sup>38</sup> Psychoanalysis, I want to say, was the cultural instrument through which the modern social imaginary of classical liberalism (of rights, to "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" and so on) was transformed into what might be termed "psychoanalytic liberalism" (that stands midway between classical liberalism and contemporary neo-liberalism) via the production a tabulated social objectivity that allowed for "the enfranchisement of the thanatic desire" and "disenfranchisement of critical thought".



advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct [*Thanatos*] an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive their aggression” (Freud, 1985, p. 305). In other words, perhaps the mature Freud’s main political claim was that the maintenance of the social bond required the sublimation/displacement and eroticisation of *Thanatos* in the direction of a socially binding function, and its restraint within a correspondingly sublimated erotic order so as to maintain extant social relations within specific communities and nation states<sup>39</sup>. The entropic bio-energetics of *Thanatos*, Freud believed, has to be sublimated and counter-balanced in this way, as it posed a specific threat to civilised life in its tendency to support the emergence of “psychologically impoverished” collectivities whose thanatic aggressiveness and mindless self-destructiveness always threatened to take modernity back into a barbarism that its intellectual foundations had so vehemently rejected; foundations that had been understood as what Kant was to term an *ausgang*, an exit, from pre-modern forms of heteronomy (Freud, 1985, p. 307).

Here we can discern the most significant component of the modern psychoanalytic social imaginary – that the objective world of material processes and things must be made to emerge within a new imaginary form in order to allow for the sublimation of the death drive and its control by means of an erotic counter-balancing via the design and presentation of a new kind of object. By these lights, 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity can be seen as having been formed within the matrix of processes of “death-drive sublimation” where aggressive and potentially self-destructive unconscious drives were “re-catheted” into an array of objects and devices for wider

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<sup>39</sup> In Freud’s view, an appropriate sublimation of both erotic and thanatic impulses can reflect the values of liberalism – respect for the individual and its creative powers, for the super-egoic rule of law that stipulates “thou shalt not kill” and that punishes aggression and so on. The bio-energetic (we might say today “fascistic”) dimension of existence that seems to move the human inexorably towards its self-dissolution can only find a home in liberalism is super-egoic commands to work and consume.



social and political ends that are then re-eroticised (for a discussion of the idea of “death drive sublimation”, see Fon, 2013)<sup>40</sup>. There is an objection that can be made here: for “sublimation” is one of Freud’s most slippery and problematic theoretical terms and Freud himself would have viewed any attempt to conceive of a modernity founded upon a sublimation of the death drive as a conceptually incoherent – in that for him aggression and self-destruction cannot, unlike its competitor drive *eros*, transform themselves into more significant (higher) meanings and values. However, many subsequent psychoanalytic thinkers (Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse in particular) became increasingly aware of the socially “useful” potential of the death drive in relation to established structures of domination and they became the first thinkers to understand modernity in a Holbeinian manner as that which in its ignorance of death threatened to collapse back into barbarism. In this vein, Karen Horney, in her influential 1930s treatise *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (Horney, 1935), pointed out that modern forms of neurosis, such as the forms of neurotic competitiveness that were evident in most forms of 20<sup>th</sup> Century quotidian existence, are the result of the sublimation of the thanatic drives and their affective counterpart hostility, rather than repressed sexuality as Freud had initially claimed – a hostility that is itself often eroticised into sadomasochistic longings for the desire of total control over life and work and in the consumption of objects whose enjoyment often has a sadomasochistic dimension in its very excessiveness. In this way, many later psychoanalytic thinkers recognised that most common forms of neurosis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not due to sexual repression (as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) but were on the contrary due to a “thanatic repression” that could be relieved via forms

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<sup>40</sup> Although there are significant disagreements in the psychoanalytic literature as to whether the death drive can be sublimated into higher and more socially useful forms, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the relationship between a metaphysical ideal of death and a social imaginary that seems to naturalise a Hobbesian condition of total war was centrally significant. Psychoanalytic theorist Herbert Marcuse recognised this in his attempt to link modern technics, fascism and the psychoanalytic death-drive in *Eros and Civilisation* (see Marcuse 1955)

of thanatic sublimation that allowed for the emergence of a over-assertive (and in some cases paranoid) culture seemingly in a state of permanent preparation for interpersonal conflict and on a more global level war.

### **Psychoanalysis and the Thanatic Imaginary of 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernity**

In fact, what Freud termed “the psychological poverty of groups”, their tendency towards a barbaric mindlessness in their rejection of higher sublimated values and ideals became one the main concerns of intellectual and political elites during the early decades of last century. Read sociologically, we can see that the threat posed to civilisation from the death-drive emerged primarily as a desire to escape to a world in which the erotic had to be subject to a strict “surplus repression” in a modernising context where its harmonisation with wider cosmological realities had become impossible. This created a socio-historical condition where the individual expressed unconscious longings to destroy the frustrations of a modernity that he/she inhabited now entirely as space of necessity and return to the nirvana of a pre-oedipal historical condition, a condition before “the castration of modernity” had allowed for the emergence of the modern individual as such. Clearly popular support for the First World War can easily be understood in such thanatic terms and it was this conflict that was the historical point of departure in the later development of the psychoanalytic social imaginary (and much of Freud’s thinking about the death drive was itself a reflection on the psychic origins of shell-shock and other forms of war trauma<sup>41</sup>).

In this way, Freud’s idea of a subject conflicted against itself in terms of its basic orientation to the metaphysical realities of life and death was

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<sup>41</sup> In many ways, it is this conflict that provided much of the impetus behind the construction of the psychoanalytic social imaginary. The application of Freudian ideas in projects of economic demand-management and opinion formation after the First World War was to a large extent inspired by the success of war time propaganda initiatives in the US.



to form the nucleus of a new conception of modern society that rejected rationalist models of the relationship between the individual and society derived from the Enlightenment. In this regard, Freud's awareness of the social and political significance of the death drive undermined the foundations of the classical psychoanalysis of the early Freud that had privileged the erotic dimensions of the human motivation from within (Dusfresne, 2003, p. 72). In so doing, Freud's turn to metaphysics essentially repositioned psychoanalytic thought as a modern variation on classical philosophical and theological themes. When viewed in this way, in psychoanalytic terms, the modern social imaginary becomes reconceived not only in terms of new autonomy for a sexualised bodies but (also) in terms of the basic need to regulate the "thanatic other"; the demand that the desire to "destroy and return" be subject to new technical modes of social regulation. Moreover, idea that the destructiveness of groups could be sublimated for socially useful purposes in *a displacement and re-erotisation of thanatic desires in relation to the social domain especially its displacement into object worlds* formed the basis for a the emergence of the psychoanalytic social imaginary proper, based upon a new kind of fetishisation of the object where objects were now designed in order to convey both thanatic and erotic resonances in ways that brought the former into to orbit of socio-political forms of control<sup>42</sup>. In the construction of this Freud's followers believed that they had found a new and more socially functional balance between the forces of life and death in the construction of what a "psychoanalytic culture" of objects – (Parker, 1997) – where psychoanalysis became inte-

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<sup>42</sup> This touches on another important aspect of Freudian theoretical apparatus – the idea of the psyche as *projective* to the extent that for the Freudian subject the boundary between internal and external worlds is fluid and open to an ongoing process of psychic negotiation. For Freud, the unconscious is essentially dynamic and its imaginings do not remain within the bounds of the psyche but are often satisfied via a process of radical externalisation – to the extent unconscious desires are often satisfied in a highly symbolic way. In this regard, Freud was not what we would today term a psychologist at all but rather a social philosopher whose aim was to forge another conception of balance and harmony between the inner and the outer worlds after the erasure of the cosmic horizon of the pre-modern social order.

gral to an array of depth-rhetorical techniques of mass-persuasion that mediated between the primordial desires of the individual subject and the political demands of the wider community (Bush, 2012). Key to understanding the psychoanalytic social imaginary in this regard was the way in which psychoanalytic thinkers came to realise that the internal division between the psychic forces of life and death exposed modernity to a new autonomy *vis-à-vis* the thanatic drives and that this could only be militated against by means of the construction of an entirely new set of object relations, one where objects were capable of functioning as symbolic/imaginary satisfactions for these drives. In other words, these threats to the internal equilibrium of the modern subject were deemed to require external political management via a new kind of object relation (and they found their economic counterpart in the Keynesian notion that modern mass-production/mass-consumption societies required the management of economic demand)<sup>43</sup>. In an important sense, modern mass production-mass consumption societies needed psychoanalytic ideas and techniques in order to create and manage the demand for the goods that modern production processes produce – things that, in the main, were not “naturally desirable” but had to be packaged and designed in order to represent and ultimately resonate with deeper unconscious psychic motivations. In as much as which, the Freudian re-imagining of the social (as that which facilitates an imaginary satisfaction of basic psychic drives) appealed to new forces within the state and large corporations who viewed psychoanalytic ideas as the basis for a new political *a priori* concerned with creation of social worlds that allowed for the satisfaction of repressed erotic and thanatic impulses. Thanatic themes (as I show in more detail below) were thus centrally involved in the design of many 20<sup>th</sup> century objects often in order to make them more amenable to forms of wish-fulfilment to return

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<sup>43</sup> The stability of the modern individual required planned production/consumption and the “free society” was redefined in the light of Freud’s ideas as freedom use one’s imagination to produce and consume – a freedom that remains central to the functioning of contemporary capitalism.



to earlier stages of psychological development<sup>44</sup>.

The modern psychoanalytic social imaginary was thus founded upon a new objectivity – an artificial cosmos that brought the forces of life and death into a new balance – and was the result of a deliberate redesign of modernity. It was the end product of a systematic attempt to apply a Freudian psychology in order to make uncivilised instincts, especially thanatic ones, socially and economically “functional” especially in relation to a nascent mass-production/mass-production economy. As one mid-century popular commentator claimed “the use of mass psychoanalysis to guide campaigns of persuasion has become the basis of a multimillion dollar industry. Professional persuaders... seized upon it in their groping of more effective ways to sell their wares – whether products, ideas, attitudes, candidates, goals or states of mind” (Packard, 1957, p. 11). It has become a very familiar story to point out the way in which psychoanalysis became a psychological instrument of peacetime propaganda (often referred to today as “public relations”) in a new “the engineering of consent” facilitated by a technocratic invisible government of psychoanalytically informed “social engineers” (Jackall, 1995). However, what such analyses really show is that much of the politics of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity signified a significant loss of faith in the power of modern democratic forces in the face of thanatic drives that seemed to demand a less rational form of political engagement. Nowhere was this more evident in the political thinking of the American political philosopher Walter Lippman, who in 1925 indentified what he termed “the phantom public” that only exists only as a fiction manufactured by advertising and public relations professionals whose avowed aim was to mobilise *thanatos* in the name

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<sup>44</sup> Freud effectively turned the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism – where a fetish is an object-substitute for a real political need – on its head. For Freud, politically, *the fetish is the real thing* – there is no civilisation without the fetish, the question is whether the fetish can be liberated from its connection with “religion” and deployed on a more rational basis. The only distinction to be made is between those fetishes that facilitate modern enlightenment (and its liberal-democratic forms of politics) and those that don’t.



of social stability, peace and economic prosperity<sup>45</sup>.

And it is indeed in the activities public relations professionals and marketing experts that we can discern the social processes involved in the construction of the psychoanalytic social imaginary that positioned the new mass-manufactured object within the space of life and death<sup>46</sup>. One does not have to consider the obvious *zeitgeist* objects such as a nuclear bomb to substantiate this claim; this was true, as I show below, for many other objects that possess a less immediate set of eroto-thantic resonances (that in the case of the bomb were wonderfully explored by Stanley Kubrik in his 1961 film, *Dr Strangelove*). The founder of the public relations profession, Edward Bernays, clearly understood this in that he recognised explicitly that the powerful thanatic motivations that were unleashed (and effectively mobilised) during the First World War had created a new understanding of the irrational and destructive aspects of modernity that he believed could be put to use in order to re-mobilise individuals as foot soldiers in the new corporate war that was to be the means for the attainment of American hegemony<sup>47</sup>. Bernays became convinced that the “American mind” (that had

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<sup>45</sup> In the light of the need for a new kind of public Lippman made an important distinction between actors and bystanders – that is those who act exclusively on the basis of these decisions and the spectators of those actions. Lippman believed that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century individuals were more and more like spectators in the back row and as such classical democratic theory, that assumed that democracy was founded upon the will of the people, had to be rethought. This was Freud’s position as well.

<sup>46</sup> Bernays was originally a propaganda expert working for Woodrow Wilson’s government in the US when America entered the First World War in 1917. The problem that Wilson’s government faced was that the majority of the American public was opposed to American involvement in a war being conducted thousands of miles of away. We might say that American public opinion was “isolationist”, but the government was of the opinion that American interests were best served by siding with the British and the French. How then to mobilise public opinion behind the goal of military intervention – how could the government “persuade” to support American involvement? This was Bernays’ central problem and it becomes the context for the emergence of the psychoanalytic social imaginary for he became aware that the eroticisation of thanatic impulses was an important way of mobilising entire populations behind strategic goals.

<sup>47</sup> This claim was popularised in a highly influential UK television documentary, Adam Curtis’ *Century of the Self*. However, this series’ attempt to expose the anti-humanist dimensions of the psychoanalytic social imaginary fail to appreciate the way in which Freud’s social philosophy was not simply one of finding ways to produce “happy



been significantly thanatised) by the war could be reshaped in order make it more amenable to the economic demands of American monopoly capitalism – to the extent that we might say that, for him, the thanatic rage upon which modern forms of national self-interest are founded could be redirected for wider economic purposes in order to create a commercial peace that is simply a form of war in another guise. In order to engineer political consent to 20<sup>th</sup> century economic realities, Bernays suggested that the task facing the 20<sup>th</sup> century political strategist is effectively one of religious conversion (Bernays, 1947, p. 117); the transformation of psychic drives in ways that support emerging socio-economic structures, or the transformation of “deathly war” into “economic life”<sup>48</sup>. Explicitly drawing on the late Freud’s ideas, Bernays realised that basic psychic drives could be satiated by means of a combination of “[w]ords, sounds and pictures” that acted as

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consumers” via the satiation of their desires – this reading is too Marcusean and misunderstands the significance of the tension between *Eros* and *Thanatos* in Freud’s work. Freud was in many ways a theorist of death not sexuality and for him the difficult task, theoretically speaking, was how we are to make sense of the obvious relationship that exists between the two.

<sup>48</sup> This, he believed, required the public relations professional to explore the relationship external contexts and inner impulses that govern these attitudes. In relation to the former, Bernays suggests that creation of a new socially harmonious commercial order, in turn, requires knowledge of who the group leaders of these attitudes are and who might be able to facilitate a transformation of group attitudes in this context. This is because he believed that the group mind follows leaders in pretty much the same way as a child follows their parents – it always looks for guidance from its elders and betters. Freud had claimed that leader figures are parental substitutes (or sometimes psychological substitutes for elder siblings) in that they provide an outlet for unconscious needs for safety, guidance and security in the face of a hostile world and are able to control the thanatic aspects of childhood. Aggressive and self-destructive impulses are in this way held in check via the terrifying powers of the tyrannical father-leader whose power transforms these thanatic desires via a reaction formation into erotic ones. The first thing, then, that the public relations professional has to do is to link the desired attitude to a relevant leader figure and opinion former. In relation to the latter, the public relations professional has to develop a sophisticated understanding the short and long term trends in public thinking as well “the underlying motives” behind these (p. 118). Motives, he claims, “are the activation of both conscious and unconscious pressures created by the force of desire” – and in relation to these the function of PR is to consider the “actions, words and pictures” that could affect these motivations: that is either transform them or in some cases liberate them in setting them free from the social constraints that they currently exist under.

substitute gratifications that were then internalised in a general process of social identity formation (Bernays, 1947, p. 120). In this regard, Bernays realised that the task of successful popular peace-time mobilisation required a strategy for the formation a specifically psychoanalytic social imaginary, that, to borrow a slogan that was used to mobilise the United States behind the war effort, rendered the United States “safe for democracy” through the consumer satisfaction of the basic drives<sup>49</sup>. More generally, for Bernays, mass produced objects reconceived and redesigned as sublimated wishes and dreams became the foundation of a new kind of democracy and modernity, a modernity of the symbolic image-object, a totemic modernity, where reason was understood as efficient drive-satisfaction. As Bernays put this “many of man’s thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires which he has been obliged to suppress. A thing may be desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because he has unconsciously come to see in it a symbol of something else, the desire for which he is ashamed to admit to himself” (Bernays, 2005, p. 75). Key to any successful manipulation of the public mind, in Bernays’ view, was the ability of the psychoanalytic professional to manipulate unconscious meanings in order to sublimate them into higher social forms, especially thanatic significations associated with aggression – or what Bernays referred to as simply “pugnacity” (Bernays, 1923).

What Bernays’ work shows the extent to which Freud’s ideas about necessity of mobilising pugnacity in the name of new kind of social order played a central role in the emergence of the political-economic universe of 20<sup>th</sup> century that has been theorised in the Marxist literature as Fordism. In this regard it is important to link, as Aldous Huxley did in *Brave New World*, psychoanalysis with the arrival of a scientifically managed capitalism (a capitalism that is now in the process of being replaced by

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<sup>49</sup> Although Freud was an inveterate dualist, *Eros* and *Thanatos* should be seen as two modes of a single vital process. They are two directions that life can take – into form and formlessness respectively.



new forms of self-management in contemporary neo-liberal contexts)<sup>50</sup>. Bernays and his followers believed that monopoly capitalism could be managed with some precision via a psychoanalytically informed *techne* that incorporated psychic drives into wider processes of mass-production and consumption, a *techne* that was directed towards the forces of death now rendered visible to a new generation of thinkers by the fall out of the First World War<sup>51</sup>. For them, thanatic “pugnacity” could be re-deployed in order to maintain modernity not undermine it in a new modernity now fully conscious of its complicity with the forces of death.

The Freudian marketing analyst Ernst Dichter developed an entire Freudian research programme around this very idea. He observed that consumer goods should not be marketed as mere things in possession of specific utility but rather as objects with a psychodynamic, “mythical”, significance and that they should appeal to the aspects of the psyche that worked against the desire to return and disappear into pre-capitalist deathly serenity; that objects should be designed as “fantastic life-enhancing” products in order to redirect and sublimate thanatic drives in the direction of more eroticised aims. In this regard, Dichter suggested that familiar objects need to be reconstructed along imaginary lines and this requires that the modern marketing professional return to a pre-modern conception of objectivity, to a kind of magical realism of mass-produced objectivity that articulates a new modern mythology of life against death (Dichter, 1964,

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<sup>50</sup> Psychoanalysis can thus be seen as the first technique for the production of social imaginaries to emerge in relation to the appearance of a world of mass produced commodities – of things not only with the imaginary value of “prices” and possessing a radical autonomy *vis-à-vis* their traditional instrumental uses, but also with the value of an (imaginary) self-identity in relation to personalised life projects. In psychoanalytic models of economic life we may value things for their prices, but the fact that we can afford things says something important about us.

<sup>51</sup> Fordism produced a phantasmagoria of objects against and through which the 20<sup>th</sup> century subject emerged as both a problem and project. Fordist objectivity was the result of a specific kind of creative design (as such 20<sup>th</sup> century object worlds were always much more than a Heideggerean world of *das Zeug* – for Heidegger the idea of the object as an imaginary formation was never really fully appreciated).

pp. 67-68)<sup>52</sup>. As is well known, in fairy tales and myths ordinary objects typically take on a magical significance in relation to the thanatic dimension: either as its opponent (soup, milk, water, hair and stones of various kinds) or its facilitator (apples, mechanical devices, particular birds such as magpies and ravens and money). As a marketing professional Dichter developed his research programme (“Motivational Research”) that was dedicated towards mobilising the forces of *eros* against the thanatic desire to return with a view to promoting a new valorisation of US society as an image of modernity *as* American. With the arrival of Fordism, Dichter recognised that the modern subject was now in indirect communication with its object-contexts, and he recognised that that objects produced for mass consumption now “spoke to us” in a new animistic language that could redirect and ultimately cure the excesses of our thanatic urges (Dichter, 2002, p. 175). This new animism Dichter referred to as a form of sociality based around “the soul of things”. It was, he believed, by mobilising the soul of things around a new psychoanalytically enchanted objectivity that modernity could provide new sources of enchantment that worked against the thanatic desire for the “false nirvanas” created by the instinctual desire to return. As he stated:

We are still attempting to escape back into the Nirvana of womb-like warmth and dreamy ignorance. We are afraid of persuasion techniques because they are the flaming sword sharpened on the grindstone of science that prevents our return to what we erroneously call paradise. Human de-

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<sup>52</sup> Dichter also provided a myth-analytical conception of soap – based on psychoanalytic research of why people take baths. Soap, in his view, is something that allows for a cleansing of both body *and* soul – it is the means by which we “wash away our daily sins”. Soap is thus akin to the Christian Eucharistic wafer and can link directly to a neurotic dimension that is fundamentally compulsive. Psychoanalytically, Dichter believed that we rejuvenate and reclaim our better natures with soap, even in everyday situations today of someone with a “foul mouth” in English-speaking countries someone may well say that he/she needs to “wash your mouth out with soap”, that is to purify their moral inclinations. With this in mind in the 1950s Dichter came up with a marketing slogan for a particular kind of soap – use this soap and “wash your troubles away” (Stern 2004, p. 166). This, he believed, would be a more powerful advertising slogan that say, “use this soap it will make your skin clean and make you smell nice”.



sire is the raw material we are working with. The strategy of human desire is the tool of shaping the human factor, the most important aspect of our worldly arsenal. Human progress is the conquest of the animal within us (Dichter, 2002, p. 13).

### **Cigarettes and Cybernetics: From the Sublimation to the De-sublimation of Thanatos**

Psychoanalytically-informed attempts to manage the thanatic dimension of modern existence (in the manner prescribed by Dichter above) can be found in many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century marketing strategies. They can be seen in many advertisements of that era (one famous example was early advertisement for the coffee brand *Maxwell House*, where a percolator was depicted to signify the possibility of a return to oral bliss of breast)<sup>53</sup>. However, there is one object that is paradigmatic in relation to the psychoanalytic social imaginary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the cigarette, especially in its eroto-thanatic (and sado-masochistic) resonances – even though this object now symbolises the thanatic in a less symbolic, more directly referential, manner. George Orwell (Orwell, 2008) recognised the centrality of the cigarette to the lives of the majority of individuals in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that they were deemed to be much more important to the “ordinary working man” than cultural productions, being in many ways the material substitute for orality of the classical *logos*, a *logos* that was articulated in a deathly silence. One of the main questions that any adequate social history of objects has to answer is the question posed by Jean Cocteau, the mystery of the cigarette’s “conquering of the world”. One way of accounting for this is via reflection on the fact that the experience of the cigarette smoker is one that combines both erotic and thanatic drives in a peculiar sublimity, one where the pleasure of danger and erotic

<sup>53</sup> In this advert the coffee percolator is represented as a nipple – and attempt to associate coffee and maternal love, warmth and kindness but also with the loss of self in its immersion in the breast.



pleasure are strangely combined in ways that bring life and death into a new kind of rapprochement. As one commentator has pointed out, the cigarette provided the smoker with new “wordless forms of expression” in a return to pre-oedipal, oral, infancy that linked the cigarette with mystical aphasia and a new aesthetic of danger and death (Klein, 1995, p. 182). In this vein, no object signifies the thanatic urge to return to pre-oedipal states of ontological immersion in ways that eroticise the thanatic as much as the cigarette. With a filter often designed to resemble a nipple – that secretes a white milky fluid-like smoke – the cigarette signified a desire to return to the bliss of a primary set of object relations in the satisfaction of unsatisfied oral cravings left over from the oral phase of psycho-sexual development (probably because fewer westerners are now breast fed and are breast fed for a much shorter periods of time).<sup>54</sup> Dichter himself recognised this when he suggested that the psychological significance of the cigarette was tied up with the desire to return to childhood experiences of freedom, that is with the desire for care-free self-expression no longer under the aegis of logic, rationality and truth (Dichter, 2010). With the cigarette, the desire to return, for childhood nirvana, was re-eroticised as a breast substitute; the artificial erotic stimulation of the mouth becoming the antidote to the violent desire to return to pre-modern in a significant reworking of the earlier social imaginary that challenged the authority of the classical *logos* via the ideal of democratic free speech.

Smoking, in this sense, becomes the erotic substitute for aggression, violence, hatred and ultimately death. However, the forms of thanatic sublimation involved in cigarette consumption were not successful, no matter how hard the attempt to make the cigarette appear erotic, this could not prevent the emergence of thanatic effects on a mass scale (as seems as though the sublimation of the death drive was not able to channel death

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<sup>54</sup> As we know, it would be difficult to market the cigarette thanatically today, as these days governments have bombarded consumers with facts and figures about how cigarettes impact adversely on our health. In the 1980s the Silk Cut brand of cigarettes used thanatic images directly in order assuage the anxieties surrounding this product, suggesting a new autonomy for thanatic drives in contemporary neo-liberal contexts.



into life, as Freud himself would have predicted). In fact, the failure of the cigarette to sublimate thanatos in the prescribed manner was itself symbolic of the failure of psychoanalysis to function as an effective tool of societal regulation. Whereas in Fordism the thanatic was contained, in part, by means of an objectivity that allowed for a safe and pleasurable return to pre-oedipal realities in a way that diluted much of the death-drive's self-destructive force, it is clear that we can now see that this was only partially successful and that thanatic forces in the guises of many types of mass-produced object drove the 20<sup>th</sup> century world to the point of self-destruction (Rubin, 1991). Overall, the psychoanalytic imaginary by itself was not sufficient to rebalance the forces of life and death obscured in the transformation to the modern – as a quasi-religion and an ersatz philosophy it was a manifest failure, something that modern societies are still coming to terms with. In this regard Freud's pessimism about modernity proved to be entirely correct. War and social unrest in Western societies revealed the weakness of the psychoanalytic social imaginary and through this undermined belief in its capacity to maintain an appropriate societal order – the appearance of social unrest in much of Western modernity in the 1960s and after indicated had failed to regulate the thanatic elements of human life in psychoanalytically prescribed ways. The 1960s, in many ways, represented a rebellion against the very idea of a psychoanalytically regulated modernity in the name of a more highly eroticised conception of the modern, and what we today term “neo-liberalism” must be seen as the most significant political consequence of this rebellion - one that gave rise to a new kind of *laissez-faire vis-à-vis* the forces of life and death, especially the latter that today seems to have found a new power and significance in a global neo-liberal “culture of death” where life becomes reduced to something that now has little value in relation to wider socially entropic processes that are increasingly fatalistically accepted as inevitabilities. Today, thanatic forces are still soothed by consumer objects to some degree but at the same time there is now a sense that in neo-liberalism, Bush-era politics in the US notwithstanding, the ancient war

against *thanatos* has now ceased and there is now little effort to manage the dynamics of collective life via thanatic sublimation strategies. Today, the thanatic is increasingly de-sublimated into the virtual, into highly individualised forms of market competitiveness, the technological intensification of labour, personal risk-taking and a general cynicism and nihilistic hatred towards “everything”. It is also now “repressively de-sublimated” into the inhuman proper and the cybernetic ideal of the post-human – as the mechanical compulsion to repeat and to return to a purely mechanical state entirely consonant with scientific conceptions of humanity’s “origin in nature.” In this regard, in an important sense, today death has ceased to be regulated via socially sanctioned fantasies and dreams but has again become an aspect of social reality and is now perfectly visible but, like Holbein’s ambassadors yields no significant emotional response at the popular level (Brassier, 2012). The new autonomy of the forces of death has now become perhaps the central feature of the neo-liberal world – as what Foucault termed biopolitics, primarily – but now without any sense of the erotic as a counter-point. In the current context, perhaps, we can say with Marx (and Holbein) that contrary to any residual liberal optimism that in our modernity – *mors immortalis*. As such the modern social imaginary is moving closer to a thanatic real and the control of modern society is no longer based upon erotically constructed ideals and dreams but rather upon entropic processes of aggression and destruction. What this shows is that the failure of psychoanalysis, from the perspective of today’s bio-politics, was that, as many have pointed out, it simply wasn’t scientific enough as a social technology. The question for today’s modernity is that after the failure of psychoanalysis and the waning of the power and influence of its social imaginary – what follows?

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