

Against ‘Homo Entrepreneurialis’: *The Capitalist Unconscious* by Samo Tomšič

It’s a blazing hot June morning in Vienna’s Café Sperl, and Slovenian philosopher Samo Tomšič is taking the world to rights. He talks at lightning speed about his work, problematic intellectual trends, and the possibilities of political action in the Trump era. He says Trump is not only a “hiccup of postmodernity”, but its “degenerate truth” – the return of postmodernism within politics with vengeance. There is more of this to come.

Café Sperl is an appropriate location. The original meeting place for the Vienna Secession—the bohemian turn-of-the-century art movement once headed by Gustav Klimt—was also a Gestapo favourite, though people are suspiciously reluctant to talk about it. Sperl’s unconscious is a peculiar brew of avant-garde transgression and totalitarian repression served up with brutally strong coffee and sweet, fluffy apple strudel.

Tomšič has a gift for explaining complex ideas. We discuss his first book in English, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (Verso, 2015), and his current thinking about different historical, philosophical, and economic regimes’ ideal subject-types. Foremost among them is ‘homo economicus’, which he decries as “a fiction we are more or less politely invited to live up to, though we are doomed to fail”.

Tomšič represents a kind of ‘generational turn’ in Slovenian thought. Like his predecessors—Mladen Dolar, Renata Salecl, Alenka Zupančič, and Slavoj Žižek are all generously acknowledged in the book—Tomšič graduated from the University of Ljubljana’s Philosophy faculty. Like them, he follows the university’s Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis in applying Lacan to philosophy (Hegel, Marx, and Freud) and the post-Tito communist regime of 1980s Yugoslavia, whose disintegration led to Slovenia’s post-1990 transformation. Unlike them, Tomšič was only a child during communism’s collapse and Slovenian independence. His methodological moves reflect his fresh perspective, emphasising Lacan’s reading of Marx—the book is as much Lacan’s take *on* Marx as the two together—and challenging later reproaches of structuralism and optimistic revolutionary humanism.

He says that middle-period Foucault admonished the neglect of dialectics, historical breaks and discontinuities, and the transformation of the symbolic law in structuralism. He thinks that Lacan, however, was “more than merely flirting with dialectics,” because there can be no psychoanalysis without the diachronic element left out of traditional ‘readymade’ accounts of structuralism.

The Capitalist Unconscious’s final chapter explains how Lacan shakes blind Marxist revolutionary faith. Lacan never promises a happy land of sunshine beyond capitalist alienation. Instead, he criticised illusory ‘false consciousness’, which wrongly implies ‘true’ consciousness is possible. For we poor unfortunate souls, consciousness is always already ‘false’, and there is no guarantee of rescue. Conversely, the Marxist reading of Lacan questions his cynical rejection that radical social change is possible. This is because he thinks our relationships are constructed by paternalistic and repressive state institutions, making a life of equality and fraternity beyond fantasy impossible. However, Tomšič argues that both Marxism and psychoanalysis refuse to reduce the subject to an isolated consciousness, uncovering how both of them unmask the impersonal mechanisms of capitalist society that shape our interior lives.

The Capitalist Unconscious is skilfully argued, but its argument cannot be reproduced in total here. Tomšič even admits that the first chapter presupposes a technical understanding of the early Lacan, as he charts the psychoanalyst's shifting use slogans from the early 'the unconscious is structured like a language' to the later 'the unconscious is politics'. Though this difficult chapter connects Lacan's psychoanalytic adaptation of structural linguistics to Freud's 'labour theory of the unconscious', explored in the second part, it becomes more comprehensible in person when he explains the social production of neurosis and the neoliberal fiction of 'homo economicus'.

"Psychoanalysis is not about 'enlightenment' or leading the analysand to self-knowledge," Tomšič announces with a flourish, brandishing a bright polished teaspoon like a weapon, "it's *not* the Oracle of Delphi!"

Readers of Lacan will likely know of his 1950s 'return to Freud', but Tomšič argues Lacan makes a 'second' return after the crisis of May 1968. Here, Lacan added Marxian categories (labour-power, commodity fetishism) to structural linguistics, rearranging his understanding of what counts as 'politics', despite his well-documented Gaullist sympathies.

The roots of the second return lie in certain parallels structural linguistics pioneer Ferdinand de Saussure saw between himself and Marx. Both systems offer a scientific critique of a system that equates things from different conceptual orders (signifier and signified in Saussure, labour and wages in Marx).

Tomšič, however, says this goes further. He explains the overlaps between commodity-exchange (value) and language (the signifier) by comparing the difference between use-value and exchange-value (Marx) and linguistic value and meaning (Saussure). With language on the side of exchange value, Marx anticipates a 'commodity language'. This implies that *commodity exchange* is 'linguistically' structured, anticipating Lacan's early slogan. Further, Marx and Lacan's respective understanding of the autonomy of the signifier and value makes the 'second return' a shift from Saussure to Marx as much as back to Freud.

This plays out in the political reality of May 1968, as Lacan thought the rebellious students misunderstood their own political project. The now-immortal graffiti slogan 'structures do not march on the streets' falsely opposes 'structure' to 'politics'. For Lacan, this shows how the students were unable to think of their own actions as an outburst of the traumatic 'Real'. He thinks they were, instead, guided by the fantasy of a 'pure' Real outside the very political order on which they depended for thinking and acting within and against it.

Tomšič compares the thought of the 68ers to the new university discourse: the proliferation of 'new materialisms' (accelerationism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology) since the 2008 financial crisis, all of which perceive themselves as examples of 'living thought'. He says that while Anglo-Saxon philosophy departments are dominated by the "mortification of thought" in analytic philosophy, there is on the other hand the apparent vitalism of new orientations that merely mimic the commodity-form.

"They get worn out very quickly like a pair of sneakers, and you have to buy new ones," he announces, clicking his fingers in the air, imitating a fussy customer's impatience at a shop assistant: "Go and get me my new ontology!". He compares this to the sudden popularity of Deleuze upon the death of Derrida: "It's as if the father dies and we can now spit on his grave! But Lacan never really became fashionable, despite Žižek."

Tomšič's impressive distinction between Lacan's slogans (earlier: the unconscious is structured like a language; later: the unconscious is politics) clarifies both of them. On the one hand, the unconscious is 'language-like' because it exhibits the logic and syntactical structure of speech (rather than literally 'speaking' French, German, or English). The unconscious 'speaks' for us in the sense that it indirectly expresses our desires. The analyst must then interpret what it says in order to "unmask the industry of sense-making as a libidinal economy".

On the other hand, 'the unconscious *is* politics' politicises 'subjectivation'—our being produced *as* subjects, inculcated with the mistaken idea that we are and have a unified 'self'—without psychologising it, saying it *is* unconscious (this would be like thinking that it speaks a *specific* language).

Tomšič explains that the 'is' here is non-reflexive, formally including the unconscious in politics, constituted by alienation and negativity. At stake is how the capitalism produces a specifically capitalist subjectivity that merely *appears* in the form of an autonomous individual, forever the good utilitarian. No ideological figure expresses this better than the mythical 'homo economicus', though Tomšič denies its existence along with the 'narcissistic' self-interested subject.

"There is no fundamental or constitutive narcissism in the depths of human nature," he explains, "but this remains the governing ideology and everything homo economicus stands for". This is derived from a misinterpretation of the original myth—the assumption that Narcissus looks into the water, falling in love with his own image because there is nobody as beautiful as him.

Narcissus does not know he is looking at his own self-image: "He thinks the image is *another being* and falls in love with it," he says, "and the drama of recognition ensues because seeing his own image 'over there' in the water can only lead to devastation". Tomšič emphasises that this condition is a *punishment* by Nemesis (an aspect of Aphrodite, the goddess of love): "There is nothing worse than being an object of the attention of the gods," he warns, "you can only ever screw up!".

Tomšič's point is that classical political economy presupposes the faulty narcissism model as its ideal subject, but even Adam Smith acknowledged a Lacan-esque 'ontological lack' in the subject, undermining the faulty model. "The split comes first, even with the godfather of capitalism himself," says Tomšič: "The ego is not mysteriously weakened," he explains, simulating fixing a flat tire in mid-air, "we do not get an 'ontological cold' making us 'pump up' our ego in therapy!"

This helps explain the current mental health 'crisis', since the current ideology, Tomšič says, is about "privatising the depression and anxiety accompanying precarity when it turns out that the fairytale of mobility and self-employment is anything but that", creating instead a catastrophic stress burden without a corresponding theory of the sociogenesis of mental health issues. He derides its apparent 'discovery' in left-leaning newspapers' comment pieces. "It's like they've discovered America!", he says, pointing out that the sociogenesis of neurosis was Freud's original thesis, clarifying the theses identifying neurosis with the proletariat and the 'labour theory of the unconscious' in the book.

The labour theory of the unconscious ties Freud's 'dream-work' to Marx's labour theory of value. Capitalism organises and territorialises the unconscious, conditioning our desires (not vice versa). This gives us two homologies between Marxism and psychoanalysis: not just between the critique of political economy and libidinal economy, but between Lacan's concept of *jouissance* (that excessive enjoyment beyond pleasure) and Marx's problem of production for production's sake. Tomšič defends the political potential of psychoanalysis, taking the labour theory of the unconscious as its point of epistemological continuity with Marxism.

Freud's language of 'energetics' describes different kinds of 'unconscious labour' (condensation, displacement, jokes, mourning, repression) worked-through in analysis. Further, he even makes an analogy between the economy of the unconscious and the culture of fin-de-siècle Vienna.

For Tomšič, Freud's claim that hysteria is resistance to oppressive bourgeois life (the ordered world outside, the disordered world of the mind) reflects Marx's understanding of the struggle between labour and capital. Though Tomšič openly says that "neurosis is Marx's proletarian" he says it is not *itself* subversive because there is "no equation between neurosis and revolutionary action", though resistance is *prior* to repression, which structurally implements the system in the mind: "This is why Freud saw in psychoanalysis a virtually infinite task. Once you've cured the person you haven't immunised them or produced an 'ideal' subject."

At the start of the book, Tomšič distinguishes between left and right-wing criticisms of psychoanalysis. This begins describing the infinite task of psychoanalysis. For left-wing critics, psychoanalysis prospers under capitalism by therapising the bourgeois ego, integrating it into capitalist property-relations. Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari all said psychoanalysis normalises desire, reproducing capitalist forms of domination, but right-wing critics—free-market ideologues, cognitive-behavioural therapists, neuroscientists—say it does not integrate *enough*, consuming time and money without producing an adaptable, flexible workforce for the market.

This is just of many homologies between the unconscious and value-producing labour. The displacement of painful experiences in 'dream-work' is not merely unconscious wish-fulfilment, containing formal mechanisms isolatable objects of scientific study for understanding the precise function of psychic satisfaction.

Tomšič says that "the first political lesson following Marx and Freud is linked to what Freud called *Durcharbeiten*: the *imperative* to labour", focussing on the link between production and repression on the one hand and labour as the source of all value on the other, with class struggle acting as 'structural negativity'—the social relation underlying the fantasies of the dominant mode of production.

There are some terminological complications here. Freud's distinction between *Wunsch* (a 'wish' directed at a *specific* object) and *Begierde* (a 'desire' with *no* strictly determined object) cannot accommodate unconscious desires. These desires *neither* have no object nor aim at anything specific, problematizing not only the idea of the absence or presence of the object of desire but the very concept of an 'object' in general. Wish-fulfilment, however, uses quantifiable 'energy' from conscious experience comparable to labour's 'double' character under capitalism. For Marx, all labour is both 'work' and 'labour', both use-value and

exchange-value, qualitative and quantitative, concrete and abstract, appearing at one time on one side and at another time the other.

Freudian unconscious labour falls on the side of abstract labour because it is not the labour of a specific worker. The division of labour frees labour from the individual labourer, rather than liberating them from the need to labour at all, which becomes an impossible task. The worker then becomes *ever more dependent* on labour. Their subjectivity is, then, determined *as* labour-power and they become an alienated, commodified capitalist subject.

Psychoanalysis shows us that the congealing of alienated labour in the commodity is evidence that the subject has become a mere labouring *object* meeting the big Other's demand for production and the surplus-object.

Tomšič's concern is that this is precisely Lacan's definition of perversion: as mere labour-power, the subject is robbed of their very subjectivity, becoming the object of the Other's *jouissance*. Marx's central achievement is to show how this can be reclaimed, and Tomšič applies this to our particular historical moment.

Neither unconscious nor abstract labour are concretely personified. They are not actions of a specific actor. This is why Marx and Freud describe distinct versions of fetishisation. Freud's asks why we need to find satisfaction through unconscious labour.

It involves a double contradiction, with two conditions of desire-satisfaction reflecting the double character of the commodity-form. In the apparent satisfaction of one (desire or reality), the other makes itself known and can only be reached by controlling material found at the edges of conscious experience that we can still formulate in conscious experience.

For Tomšič, this problematizes the idea of homo economicus, which he calls an "Orchestrated neutralisation of thought, an attempt to suture the subject onto the commodity-form entirely, without any remainder that would resist".

The appearance of certain types of wish foregrounds certain types of satisfaction, unifying its appearance of immediate meaningfulness, reflecting the structural gap between use and exchange. The shift from the qualitative to quantitative features of the experience requires a shift in the form of the object.

This is Lacan's 'objet a': the object of desire without qualities; presupposing the autonomy of value, it is possible only through the universalisation of commodity exchange by instrumental reason, thinkable only under the conditions of scientific modernity (mathematisation, quantification, etc). This brings us right back to the present, and Tomšič is quick to say that "If commodities could truly speak, they would speak in the language of the new materialists".

Tomšič denies the existence of 'left-accelerationism' and its structural conditions. "Accelerating what? It's not like pushing fast-forward on a remote control," he thunders, hammering, frustrated, at imaginary mid-air buttons. "This is just a kind of pre-modern techno-fetishism!". He says we can submit these new orientations to Marx's approach to the vulgar economists at the end of *Capital, Vol.1's* fetishism chapter, even as the abstraction that falls onto exchange-value gets ever more complicated.

Tomšič sees this in all 'postmodern' theories, finally calcified in the figure of President Donald Trump, whom he describes as a postmodern figure who has started to believe in a new bogus authenticity. "Where psychoanalysis demonstrates utter stupidity in language, Trump is postmodernism's final hiccup, where speech appears as non-speech: speech and politics about

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nothing.” He says of Trump: “He is just keeping the show running until everything finally explodes. He’s accelerationism’s wet dream, and they should embrace his compendium of economic, political, and human failures. He demonstrates the debilitation that takes place in language to everyone, turning these flaws into a new figure of the master in a masterful way. He is not there to be understood”.

By Max L. Feldman