

# Clean perversion in consumer culture<sup>1</sup>

## *Perversão clean na cultura do consumo*

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary culture is a perverse assembly, as it seeks to liberate the selfish subject to the world of the sensitive and the drive. In the 20th century, an increasing liberation of the drives occurred, connecting the neurotic consumer and the puritan perverse. The perversion is sought, but remaining *clean*, demanding strong musical beatings and varied substances varying between the postmodern neurotic consumer and the puritan perverse to this end. The result is a society in which everyone internalizes the law of the market to satisfy the drives, disconnecting the subject function. To understand the transformations of communication culture of the perverse city, a psychoanalytic theory of the drives and passions is necessary.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, perversion, communicational capitalism, consumer culture, drives

### RESUMO

A cultura contemporânea é montagem perversa, na medida em que busca liberar o sujeito egoísta para o mundo do sensível e da pulsão. Durante o século XX, houve crescente liberação das pulsões, estabelecendo-se uma ligação entre o neurótico consumidor e o perverso puritano. Busca-se a perversão, mas permanecendo-se *clean*, exigindo, para tal, batidas musicais pulsionais e substâncias variadas com graus entre o neurótico consumidor pós-moderno e o perverso puritano. O resultado é a interiorização da lei de mercado a fim de buscar a satisfação das pulsões, desligando quando possível a função *sujeito*. Para entender as transformações da cultura comunicacional da cidade perversa, é preciso uma teoria psicanalítica das pulsões e das paixões.

**Palavras-chave:** Psicanálise, perversão, capitalismo comunicacional, cultura do consumo, pulsões

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OVER THE LAST few years, I have been studying the symptomatic points of communicational socialism based on varied *corpora* (Prado, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2015a, 2018; Prado & Prates, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Prado & Cazeloto, 2017) from the traditional media and social networks. In this theoretical essay, I will endeavor to investigate how the current consumer culture builds the perverse scene, focused on an attitude of the *clean* perverse based on the neoliberal logic, which advocates the capitalization of the self. This topic relates to the previous research, although we will not examine any specific *corpus* here, but we will refer to some exemplary mediatized objects: to sports, pornography, music, and raves, as well as to those connected with ordinary judicialization, etc. Continuing the previous research, we will now analyze the consumer culture not only from the viewpoint of cognitive modalizations (Prado, 2011), but also based on the affective logics of the search for pleasure anchored on this perverse background of cultural support. To this end, resorting to psychoanalysis is a fundamental procedure, chiefly regarding the *denial* and the existing porosity in relation to perversion. Speaking of the imperative of pleasure in the current consumer culture implies thinking of the consumer as a sensitive body, identified with many affectively charged actors in search of pleasure. How speaking of *clean* perversion will help us to understand this culture? This will be our path.

### CONSUMER CULTURE AND THE NEW SUPEREGO

The passage from the capitalism production culture from the early 20th century to the consumer culture of communicational capitalism after the 1970s, chiefly after the advent of digital networks and digital currency, came about with strong transformations in society and in consumers' psychic education. Generally, we can say that the Freudian superego waned and gave way gradually to the Lacanian superego that, instead of crying out the imperative: This is forbidden, shouts forcefully, while shaking its own and the other's body: Be an Ego Inc.! Earn a lot of money! And enjoy more and more! Some theorists have said the individuals in our societies, despite being still neurotic, seek perverse setups. Dardot and Laval relate this to the neoliberalism development, in which a performance and enjoyment<sup>2</sup> apparatus was erected. In this text, we intend to explain this apparatus and how the communicational functioning of globalized capitalism depends on it.

Consumer culture grew insofar as it *produced* the consumers' figure (Fontenelle, 2017), teaching them to consume, freeing them from some modern cages and inviting them to a kind of happiness created from positive psychology (Freire

<sup>2</sup> We refer to *enjoyment* in the Lacanian sense, translated from *jouissance*. Lacan refers to drive satisfaction. In the Seminar 20 (1985), he pits enjoyment against utility, portraying the former as something worthless.

The Chemama dictionary defines enjoyment as: "different relationships with the satisfaction that a desiring and speaking subject may expect and experience in the use of a desired object" (p. 90).

Filho, 2010; Freire Filho & Pinto Coelho, 2011). The consumer's subjectivation is characteristic of liberalism, being presented as rational and autonomous, with freedom of choice. However, it constitutes in fact a sensitive body and cannot be understood unless we examine a theory of the passions. This throbbing body, when called upon, must dive into the experience, invited to enjoy it. In this trajectory, the intensification and liberation of drives and enjoyment increasingly appealed to the emotional aspect of the bodies. Since the 1980s, convocations have increasingly challenged consumers in this sensitive level, beyond the rational argument. As Dardot and Laval (2015) said, neoliberalism does not impose behaviors, rather it creates spaces for subjects to dive headlong with their innermost emotions in a game of competition and performance: "the self-entrepreneur is a being made to succeed, to win" (p. 353). In this game, there are exemplary spectacles for the learning of such processes. The sport of competition is exemplary for it represents a grand social theater, suitable for this summoning capitalism, because it shows performatively a model of action of the subjects. One example is the Bravus Race (Pezzotti, 2018), in which participants have to overcome a series of obstacles. Images show people bogged in mud, crossing difficult obstacles, exhausted, but driven by demands motivating them to reach their goal, not to fear the obstacles, to face their fears, etc. An entire set of the economy focuses on sports, on races, including gyms, food supplements, and specific clothes and gadgets for athletes to get ready to enter the race. In the same way, there is a pornographic market.

Reality shows are another example, with their cruel endurance tests and "chopping blocks" in which the audience eliminates contenders. Viana states (2012, p. 45):

Whether through passion, calculation or calculated passion, everyone acts as if they had a gun pointed to their forehead when faced with the 'chopping block', as if they faced the end . . . Defeat does not allow half-tones, it is absolute, it means extinction. According to a contestant of the tenth edition (of the reality show "A Fazenda"), 'the chopping block is like death.' And being at the block is being 'death sworn.' When it comes to ideological fantasy, it is the exaggeration that is effective; in this case, the exaggeration fell short of the phantom of the chopping block, as the departure from the house is, simultaneously, a passage to another reality and to no reality. It is a death, but a death without transcendence as, because the symbolic annihilation, oblivion, is on the other side of the block.

It is an entrepreneurship for real, in which failure is death, oblivion, defeat. Sexual practices also follow the demanding prescriptions of this model of entrepreneurship:

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Sexual practices, in the massive ‘psychological’ speech that analyzes them nowadays, stimulates and provides all types of advices, become exercises through which each one of us is led to face socially required standards of performance: number and duration of relationships, quality and intensity of orgasms, variety and attributes of partners, quantity and types of positions. Stimulus and maintenance of libido at all ages become object of detailed research and precise recommendations. (Viana, 2012, p. 353)

To confirm this, all that is needed is to examine the social networks, as well as periodicals such as *Nova* (Prado, 2011, 2013). But what does this have to do with the figure of perversion? In psychoanalysis dictionaries, perversion is linked to a *prescriptive* conception of sexuality, anchored on the maturity brought by the genital phase: perverse is whoever, somehow, needs to deviate from this normal genital model to be satisfied, perhaps because they were obsessed with previous phases, dominated by some partial drive. However, Laplanche and Pontalis (1992) tell us, “numerous perversions, such as fetishism, most forms of sexuality and even incest when actually practiced presuppose an organization dominated by the genital zone” (p. 342). This complicates the statement that the perverse deviates from the genital standard.

We prefer Chemama’s dictionary (1995) that defines perversion as “an obsession with an imaginary object in lieu of the symbolic phallic function, which organizes desire through castration and lack” (p. 162). In other words, perversion is not a mere deviation from norms established, but some function of the drive circuit in which the *object is isolated in relation to the complex of castration*. For example, if the sexual norm affirms that sexuality is only valid for reproduction, screwing for fun would be perversion in the common use of the term. In psychoanalysis, it is a bit more complicated: in fetishism, perversion appears in a particularly exemplary manner by triggering the functioning of *denial*. The perverse *denies* feminine castration by concentrating on the veil, the shoes, the shine on the dress, hiding the fact that the woman does not have the (symbolic) phallus. In Lacan, it is not a matter of having or not having the penis, but to be “on a par with the mother’s desire” (Julien, 2003, p. 108): the child is placed as an imaginary object to fulfill the mother’s desire. Julien (2003) says: “There, where in the mother the *symbolic* phallus lacks, the subject places a fetish as an imaginary phallus” (p. 108)<sup>3</sup>. Strictly speaking, what occurs is the “installation of a metonymic object of substitution in his relation with symbolic castration” (Chemama, 1995, p. 163). Therefore, perverse individuals refuse castration, but placing themselves in the place of law, seeking a clandestine enjoyment. He is a denier, as Lebrun says (2008, p. 345), as he reneges the loss of enjoyment – a symbolic castration – implied by the human

<sup>3</sup> Julien (2003) reports that: In 1956, W. Granoff made a theoretical analysis of a case of fetishism in an article signed with Lacan: “It is about a 4-year-old boy, Harry, who A. Lorand met once or twice a week for more than six months. He used to stroke and kiss the shoes of his mother’s friends. He asked if a certain friend had a big ‘cock’ like his father, and draws both girls and boys with a ‘cock’. . . . W. Granoff replies: it is not a real penis, but a symbolic phallus. Indeed, the fetish should be considered an element of a symbolic activity, without confusing the word with its reference.’ The word makes present what is absent. . . . The case of little Harry clearly shows what analytical interpretation is: going from a couple’s relationship according to visual imagery to a father-mother-subject relationship according to a symbolic trade-off system. Thus, *Verleugnung* (denial) is the sign of a fluctuation maintained between one and the other” (p. 110).

condition of the language beings that we are. And what does this have to do with our current societies, with our consumer culture and its contemporary social ties? To this author:

The type of social tie organized over the former patriarchal model had enabled the subject – and equally psychoanalysis – to ignore its incidence outside perversion in the strict sense. Today, with the end of patriarchy, neuroses and repression tend to lose their prevalence, and the psychic mechanism of denial, until then confined to the shadows, emerges in the foreground. . . . If we are always coming to grips with neurotics, they cannot be ‘common’ neurotics, since the denier prevails in them. It does not mean that they are perverse in the strict sense. . . . But they are very prone to perversion; they tend to espouse its economy. (Lebrun, 2008, p. 345)

## DENIAL

Thus, what occurs in the contemporary society is the promotion of a *denial of the loss of enjoyment*. This post-patriarchal society, of social movements and multiculturalism, whose cultural logic is supplemental to the functioning of neoliberalism, is still composed of neurotics, albeit being “very prone to perversion” (Lebrun, 2008, p. 346). Lebrun (2008) calls them *common perverse*, in the sense that they are not the strict perverts of Freud’s time. Let us attribute this idea of *porosity* to perversion. The neoliberal neurotic is prone to perverse assemblies. We are here before an anthropological change: perversion today “can no longer refer solely to the forensic pathology that made us recognize it” (p. 346). If the common perverse feels the loss, he or she covers it with a veil, refutes it; the consumer culture is there to serve consumers with countless blocking objects, actual corks, or nontransparent veils. Such objects were studied in previous research (Prado, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015a, 2018; Prado & Prates, 2017a, 2017b, 2019), appearing not only in classic magazines, but also in blogs and sites of influencers who show and modalize how to be successful, how to be a stud, the foremost, the *extra*. These objects appear as a fetish, as paths of full *jouissance*. As Julien (2003, p. 111) says, “the veil is, simultaneously, what hides and what designates”. Faced with the possibility of loss, the subject could fall into despair, unless consumer culture offers the object “free from all negativity, suggested to the subject to ensure that he/she does not collapse” (Lebrun, 2008, p. 346). To Lebrun, “this deceit, to which the subject can connect, will help him primarily perpetuate the avoidance of the confrontation with the loss” (p. 346). It is, so to speak, a way out, a solution hinged on dispersion when facing loss.

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Dunker (2017, p. 229) defines contemporary perversion as “the name of what arouses indignation”, what is abnormal. But we have seen that this is not enough: anomaly is not always a bad deviation: “the anomaly that denies the norm can be a progressive, useful, or beneficial deviation” (p. 229). He defines three categories of perversion:

- a. *That linked to a trait of exaggeration or the reduction in something that, in due measure, would be tolerable or desirable.* “Perverse people stereotypes a behavior, focuses on a way of being with the other and on orienting their satisfaction” (Dunker, 2017, p. 229). Example: the subject that requires the woman to wear a 10-cm high heel and strokes or licks it to be able to enjoy.
- b. *That linked to deviation:* the perverse breaks out from the others and takes a position out of order. Here, Dunker (2017) says, the denial of the norm is an assertion of power. The central idea is one of “displacement, inversion and dissociation” (p. 230). The most important thing in the company is not for the employee to strictly comply to orders, but to lead the company to the podium, to profit, to the objectives of the system.
- c. *That linked to transgression and violation of the law,* based on the subject’s identification with it. He indicates two forms of perversion of the law: “affirm it through a denial, or deny it through its affirmation” (Dunker, 2017, p. 230). For example, I affirm the law, disobeying it.

Here the author touches on an important point: perversion has a character of fixity and of *repudiation of the law*. It is not only infringement of the law, as the way “we place ourselves and situate the other, in relation to what we do” must also be considered (Dunker, 2017, p. 233). Dunker states that “knowing whether the act is within or against the law is not enough, but what experience it produces on those who practice it, and the type of position it confers to the other” (p. 233). a superego would exist, indeed, but it would be displaced, “out of the subject, in his unhappy and circumstantial partner” (p. 233).

Various examples show how enjoyment, that is, the type of satisfaction ordered by the superego, constitutes a particular perversion and, at the same time, an unavoidable political factor. For example, a spontaneous fascination for whoever is in the place of the superego is held. The attraction wielded by leaders and celebrities, as well as by

totalitarian systems, whether nations, institutions, corporations, or even companies and groups, is based on this feeling that they externally express our own perverse relationship with the law. Therefore, we will be voluntarily willing to serve as an instrument of the enjoyment of others, since they are the means for a *displaced* access to my own fantasy, *exaggerated* by the fact of being lived *en masse*. All this without the onus of guilt and the risk that would be at stake if we were willing to fulfil it through individual means. (Dunker, 2017, p. 233)

Dunker (2017) provides other examples of how the perverse assembly occurs in the materialization of social activities, besides those hitherto addressed:

The bureaucratic systems and devices responsible for the judicialization of everyday life are another example of perverse assembly. Bureaucracy is a regulated and methodical form of producing anonymity and alibi for our desire and, therefore, for confirming the perverse maxim that *the other desires, but according to the law I determine*. Consequently, perversion is present both in dietary excesses – bulimic and anorexic – and in the discourse on food sanitary surveillance – not to mention the exhibitionism of a sexualized childhood by the fashion world, the voyeurism of our reality shows, the pornographic aesthetic of our cultural productions, the sadism of our programs of live violence, the masochism of the corporate work and life, the liquid uncommitment of our love life, the culture of (legal and illegal) drug addiction, and so many phenomena that come usually together under the hypothesis of generalized perversion. Contrary to the classic perversion, the ordinary perversion of our times is a flexible, silent and pragmatic perversion. (pp. 234-235)

### **LIBERATION OF THE DRIVES AND PERVERSE ASSEMBLY**

Moreira and Rosário (2012) speak not on perverse society, but on *perverse scene*, in which the social field is dominated by the figure of the narcissist. Narcissistic societies would have a perverse component, blurring the paternal figure and social ties, promoting a growing individualism around the consumer culture and the neoliberal ideals of the Ego Inc., which is characterized, in our terms, by an investment concentrated on the self-micro-entrepreneurship, on capitalizing the Ego.

If we think of these issues through a combination between guilt and narcissism in postmodern society, we would say, as Moreira and Rosário (2012), that there was a decline of guilt in its “civilizing aspect, that is, the one promoting the social tie as a value present in relations”, corresponding in contemporaneity

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“to the configuration of a perverse and narcissistic social relation” (p. 74). On the other hand, an exacerbation of the feeling of guilt in relation to the subject himself may exist, creating a scale linked to guilt:

While the absence of guilt points to a disregard of the dimension of otherness, its excess would be linked to the primary narcissism, which results in the same blurring of otherness. Thus, the subject is exonerated in his relationship with the other and blamed in his relationship with himself for not responding to all the signs of success that raise his majesty – the ego, to the *status* of an ideal ego. (Moreira & Rosário, 2012, p. 74)

The authors conclude that the postmodern world reduces the field of the relationship with otherness in two ways: “either the other is reduced because of the diminished blame of the ego in relation to the other, or the other is reduced because we experience an exacerbation of the ideal ego locked in its magnitude of king” (Moreira & Rosário, 2012, pp. 74-75). The social becoming perverse refers, therefore, to a reduction in the field of the other. Generally, the Freudian argument of Totemic culture was linked to the feeling of guilt (the murder of the father of the horde), which demanded drive renouncement. But we must consider that:

Initially, conscience is the cause of drive renouncement and, later, the relation is inverted. Renouncement becomes a dynamic source of consciousness and each new renouncement increases the harshness and intolerance of the latter. Therefore, the conscience results from drive renouncement, which, in turn, creates the conscience that requires more renouncements. (Moreira & Rosário, 2012, p. 75)

Thus, in this reading, the perverse assembly of the postmodern consumer culture would be characterized by the exacerbation of the narcissistic individualism, by the consequent reduction/denial of the other in its radical otherness (the other is who sequesters my enjoyment), with the reduction in collective projects and the intensification of each one’s investment in the enjoyment embodied in the other, “without alteritary denseness” (Moreira & Rosário, 2012, p. 81). Struggles for recognition would be a reaction to this tendency of the consumer culture and to the neoliberal individualizing policy, as well as to the focusing of the modern project on the opposition capital and labor. On the other hand, the recent and intense response of extreme rightists would be the reaction to the culpability evoked by such recognition movements. The authors synthesize this postmodern ill-feeling:

Dufour states that we are no longer dealing with the neurotic subject characterized by a compulsive guilt in postmodernity. What defines him/her is something like the feeling of omnipotence when he/she is successful, and impotence when he/she does not. The guilt derived from frustration implied the creation of a personal project that, in modernity, could cross many paths and unfold in one of the fields in which a symbolic compensation seemed possible. In Dufour's position, what replaces the feeling of guilt in postmodernity is the shame that expresses the narcissistic intolerance to frustration and summons a quick remission. (Moreira & Rosário, 2012, p. 82)

Melman (2003) addresses this new psychic economy linked to neoliberalism, in which the solidarity pact does not dominate, but rather competition and aggressiveness. To him, "formerly, identity was organized based on an acknowledgment of oneself by the Other" (p. 172). The question is that, today, this acknowledgment is organized based on a regime of visibility in which what appears as valid and alive is only whoever follows the trails of Ego Inc., that is, the subject who sees himself as a mini-corporation, as a successful mini-entrepreneur, a subject that produces himself from the modalizations of the technologists of discourses and strives not to be extinguished by the chopping blocks of the competitive process. To Melman (2003):

So far we were sensitive to a clinic organized by repression. It is through it that psychoanalysis came to light when, continuing Freud, we accepted to hear the 'sounds' the sighs that the stifled desire made in the field of reality. We went from this regime to another, in which not only desire is no longer repressed, but also enjoyment manifestation is what prevails. Participating in the life of society, the social tie, is no longer about sharing a collective repression, what we call uses and customs, but, on the contrary, about a reunion in a kind of permanent party to which everyone is invited. Today, the subject's burden is to stay in the race for enjoyment. (pp. 172-173)

But this race produces a dissociation linked to fantasy and fetish. To Dunker (2017):

The key to understand this type of *ordinary perversion* is in the dissociation and simplification produced by the assembly of fantasy. Dissociation and simplification are found in the main symptomatic expression of perversion, namely, the fetish, that is, that property or function that enables transforming the other in an inanimate object (means of enjoyment to my ends) and inversely the object in an animated other (an end for which all means are justified). According to the perverse inversion

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rule, fetish is the basic condition to which every object must meet to become viable in the consumer universe. To function as such, it must be able of dissociating its illusion potential, on the one hand, from its deception effect, on the other. Not by chance, Marx had described the capitalist economy based on the fetish of the commodity. (p. 234)

Without these effects of illusion and deception, we cannot understand the current functioning of the consumer culture. With the commodity of oneself, the entrepreneur should shift from a decapitalized invertebrate<sup>4</sup> to a brilliant entrepreneur, who escapes from the chopping block, conquers the audience and seeks the podium of visibility of the VIPs.

<sup>4</sup> Viana (2012) quotes the line “Ask to quit”, from the movie “Elite Squad”, in which the captain of BOPE (Brazilian Special Police Operations Battalion), slaps candidates during recruitment and makes them undergo painful training.

Viana says: “As is only to be expected, the film became a theme for one of the privileged spaces for disciplinary mobilization of the labor force, the motivational lectures. The former captain of BOPE, Paulo Storani, barks to the audience, composed of executives of a major insurance company: “Are you a special operation or conventional in your activity?”

The conventional is the invertebrate that collapses in the first shot or first goal.” His final point, “And whoever is not happy..” is completed by the audience: “ask to quit” (p. 162).

### FROM PASCAL TO SADE

Let us return to Dany-Robert Dufour’s trajectory to better contextualize the question of common perversion. To Dufour (2013), what was built on the path from Pascal to Sade, from Mandeville to Adam Smith, is the liberation of passions and drives. Without the rehabilitation of egoism, the culture of consumption would not be constituted the way we know it today. Psychoanalysis is fundamental to think of a theory of passions that can cope with affections in the operation of consumer culture. This assembly endeavors to liberate the egoistic consumer subject, submitted to the superego and moral conscience, and release him/her in the world of sensitiveness and drive, numbing the neurotic and ruffling the furs of the perverse assembly. This does not mean that the puritan had evaporated from the world, as the imperative of current enjoyment is to be perverse, to carry out “the most radical possible experiences and, above all, continue *clean*” (p. 380). This transit is supported with dancing and the beat of rave music, with the use of narcotics and other substances. There is a series of learnings and objects around this enjoyment dance.

This figure, equally perverse and *clean*, is Lebrun’s common perverse, the puritan perverse referred to by Dufour, or the ordinary perverse by Dunker. Here, we propose to understand the *perverse assembly* not as a house of suffering, but as a horizon of aggressive competition, a minefield where the entrepreneurial ego must outdo itself to defeat others; this assembly is, therefore, a background of cultural support in which the subject is motivated to become a self-entrepreneur, that is, always producing more and enjoying always more, as we used to say, based on Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 356): “this is the double meaning of a discourse that turns good performance into a duty, and of an advertising discourse that turns enjoyment into an imperative”.

One does not pursue equilibrium, but maximum performance of a champion, aiming for the podium, the maximum enjoyment, both in the corporation and in the rave. “Hence the interest in identifying the subject as a self-corporation and human capital: extracting an extra enjoyment from himself, from the pleasure of living, from the simple fact of living, is what makes the new subject and the new system of competition function” (p. 356). Subjectivation occurs, therefore, through self-excess, both in the corporation and in the rave, even there, where the subject fades. He fades, but will return laden with enjoyment to regain the enterprise from himself. Unless he is depressed and considers himself invertebrate. Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 357) speak of ultra-subjectivation

whose objective is not an ultimate and stable state of self-ownership, but something beyond himself, always repelled and, furthermore, constitutionally ordered in his own regime, according to the logic of the corporation, and beyond, according to the ‘cosmos’ of the world market.

In various ways, the market produces condominium spaces with perverse circuits – in fifty shades of grey, and occasionally with billions of colors – for neurotics to dive into, softly but intensely, after working hours and even during the day’s work. Sometimes he/she may desire a small whip, or something more spicy, to the sound of the rave. This is entertainment: diving into sensitiveness, congealing the intelligible, in raves and in the 4D cinema, in sports arenas, in swing houses, in games and virtual reality, and even in marketing experiences. But this is not all. During work, winning against adversaries in the gambling casino is also a test of performance/enjoyment<sup>5</sup>.

In raves, the use of chemical substances eases the passage to the perverse circuit. Dufour (2013, p. 369) says:

The explosive mixture (drugs plus ‘tum-tum’) serves — literally — to ‘split’ the head or burst the head and gain access to enjoyment — and we should therefore take these expressions (created by techno and rave lovers to be, subsequently disseminated widely among the youths) literally, since this is a case of blowing sky-high a place from where perhaps a judgment destined to keep the body within certain rules could come.

As Fontenelle (2017, p. 191) says, “mercantile economy and psychic economy converge” through the libidinal economy. For this reason, we cannot separate the moment of concentrated labor and the moment of enjoyable entertainment. One supplements the other. Without the liberation of drives consumer culture

<sup>5</sup> One has to stress that the marketing of experience (Fontenelle, 2004) also acts to build programmed consumer spaces where the convocation urges the consumer to live an experience, with smells, colors and psychedelic images.

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would not have developed in the 20th century: “although the enjoyment in consumption was already contained in consumer culture since its inception, this passion/drive, which is destructive if taken to its last extreme, could be contained by a cultural precept of the postponement of satisfaction as virtue” (p. 195). But no longer.

Consumers cannot be kept satisfied, as for capitalism they need to be in a state of constant desire. They need to reach the verge of their fulfilment, but always retreating, so as to keep them always desiring but never satisfied. If satisfaction is gained, this experience is swift and points to a greater and more complete satisfaction, built imaginarily by the consumption culture and transferred to the future. The drive circuit is activated and reactivated unceasingly, to maintain consumers always driven to this greater satisfaction, projected on the future horizon as a promise.

### THE NEW FRAMING RATIONALITY

The new rationality of the world, that is, neoliberalism, transforms the social relations, the State, and the subjectivity. Neoliberal reason is not only economic, but also political and cultural. This involves, according to Dardot and Laval (2016), a system of elementary norms, with:

1. a transversal universal norm that offers ways of relating to one another – we should live gambling on the construction of our ego capital, in our image; this, sooner or later, leads to a perverse experience;
2. the imposition of a model of enterprise, from the functioning of corporations, as if we were micro-corporations focused on our self-capitalization (pp. 144 and 333).

In the long run, the competitive model is what governs, the sort of competition seen in sports and in reality shows. Therefore, capital rationality expands to other spheres, beyond strict economic areas. As a consequence, these models start to regulate spheres, such as love and friendship – the case of dating applications, each body offering itself as a profile-product, experiencing the greatest possible number of positions and partners (Prado, 2015a). The State itself is transformed into state-corporation to support markets, decommissioning citizenship. Entrepreneurship becomes a *way of self-government*; the entrepreneur speculates, mixing risk and forecast, attempting to foresee uncertain events. Therefore, *homo economicus* becomes more dynamic, more dedicated to the

body than he was in the past, for the competitive battle. Whoever loses is out, becomes invisible, invertebrate, symbolically dead.

Among the characteristics of neoliberal reason, Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 377) mention:

1. The market is not natural, but constructed, requiring State intervention. The essence here is not in barter, but in competition.
2. The State is not just vigilant, a guardian of the framing order of neoliberalism, establishing rationality and competition. It is more than that, it is an activator and a market partner. *It is the State-corporation*, one of the guarantors and leading primers of major capital enterprises (megaprojects) in the destruction of large parcels of soil to build long stretches of large building based on a logic of financialization in re-urbanizing space, as occurred in the Berrini avenue in São Paulo, with a major presence of capital from mutual and pension funds.
3. The generalization of the norm of competition reaches even the individuals in their relation with themselves. *The corporation became a model of subjectivation.*
4. The frontier between private and public sphere disappears, eroding the foundations of liberal democracy. According to these authors, neoliberal rationality adjusted to what remained of this distinction on the scope of ideology, at the same time that it deactivated its normative character. This deactivation introduces the perverse character into institutional and subjective functioning, having as a consequence: the dilution of public law, the limitation of public action to profitability/productivity criteria, the symbolic depreciation of the law as specific congressional action, the tendency of police powers to exempt themselves from judicial control, the promotion of the consumer-citizen charged with arbitrating between competing political offers, etc. (Dardot & Laval, 2016, p. 379)

Citizenship, therefore, starts being questioned in the social spheres with strong political polarization (Prado, 2018), gambling that rights can no longer exist without *quid pro quos*. Citizens vested with collective responsibility and rights disappear and are replaced by the *clean* perverse entrepreneur. Dardot and Laval (2016) call this process a managerial reform of public action. It goes

against the democratic logic of social citizenship, reinforces social inequality in the distribution of aid and access to jobs, health and education, and intensifies the social logic of exclusion that increases the number of sub-citizens.

For the establishment of this new neoliberal rationality, we saw that one required the liberation of drives, which promoted their own validation criteria disconnected from the moral and juridical principles of liberal democracy. It is now *a managerial rationality*, for which laws and norms are mere instruments needed to reach calculated objectives, occurring a *desymbolization* that affects politics and subjectivation (Dardot & Laval, 2016, p. 368).

The political polarization between groups upholding democracy and others adhering to neoliberal values and way of life and/or fundamentalist values established in Brazil since 2015, which resulted in the impeachment of the President of the Republic, is linked to this desymbolization process<sup>6</sup>. The common, ordinary or *clean* perverse puritan is the figure of this post-citizen self-entrepreneur, who throws away the principles of liberal democracy, wearing the green-and-yellow flag.

<sup>6</sup> On polarization during the impeachment, see Prado (2016b, 2018); Prado & Prates (2017a, 2017b, 2019).

## DRIVE BEATS

Dufour's theory (2013) is that music can be pornographic: both the techno-rave of the youths from middle classes and the gangsta rap of the youths from poor class are the same. "They are suitable for subjects to make for themselves, for a period of time, a pornographic body" (p. 370). This "punishing" drive acts on the bodies before the subject's permission. Somehow the subject dies to himself/herself to enjoy it, says Dufour (2013, p. 372), becoming a sexual automaton. A series of substances may help in this process of liberation and lowering of the intelligible and the moralizing, to establish a regime of free drives. This is analogous to what occurs with the market, increasingly requiring the "industrial liberation and exploitation of the drives" (p. 375). The pornographic market provides the conditions for each consumer to assemble their pornographic body, for the subject withers and the body dives into the perverse "pool".

Thus, with the growing liberation of the drives, the pornographic market also grew and a link was established between the neurotic and the perverse (more or less puritan) consumer. Therefore, the enjoyment sought by the neurotic consumer is that of the perverse, in which the subject withers, requiring, for this process, those strong musical drive beats and various substances to numb the argument and release sensitivity in pursuit of enjoyment, as Dufour (2013) says. However, the neurotic and *clean* perverse are not two isolated poles. One supplements the other, as we said.

Here, there would be a oscillation between degrees of enjoyment. On the one hand, we would have the classic neurotic, still subjected to the feeling of guilt and, on the other, the neurotic immersed in the perverse assembly (Dufour's *clean* or perverse puritan). Strictly speaking, a *passage* from one to another extreme occurs, in which the subject gradually disappears to intensify sensations in the sensitive body, releasing its enjoyment power in the imaginary assurance of a full and total enjoyment. The body plunges into the tensive horizon (Zilberberg, 2011) of perversion, letting the subject cool down until he freezes, while the body warms up and throws itself into sensations and enjoyment. We must stress that this passage between extremes does not occur only in a rave, but also in the enterprise, when working is a battle for victory. In movies about Wall Street, this is very clear: the intensity of the gambling games in the world casino is a spurt of enjoyment, just as the nights out in the luxury brothels in which Wall Street gamblers plunge.

The consumer world, therefore, invites consumers to become *clean* perverses and return to their “normal” neurotic lives after the liberalizing sensitive “experiences.” Nevertheless, it is not a division, such as in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide, since here the perverse assembly is a sensitive substratum in which an imaginary object caps the hole of symbolic castration to place the law (the language, the symbolic) in parentheses, so that we may enjoy at the peaks or take an imaginary look at them – at least until the audience (whether that of the reality shows or of Facebook ‘friends’) throws us on the chopping block and turns us into invertebrates. There are those who cannot return from the “peaks”, addicted on drugs, sex, loud sound, and experiences of pain. And those who simply give up. And those who get depressed.

The outcome of all this is a society in which everyone interiorizes the law of the market to pursue the satisfaction of the drives, whenever possible disconnecting the subject function. The subject becomes an evanescent function that is called upon when the social world solicits, when discourse and circumstances summon. Or when the party of justice decides to incarcerate someone undesirable to the entrepreneurial system.

When the subject is disconnected, that is, when an occasional passage to perversion occurs, the substratum of the perverse puritan emerges, and the somatic face of the drive becomes autonomous. This certainly is not a happy world, despite convocations, promises, and incitements. The consumer pursues enjoyment, but ends up feeling the despair and lack of references (Dufour, 2013, p. 173). Hence, the system is not as liquid as announced on the publicity surface, providing the clinic, the medication, or the prison.

# D

## Clean perversion in consumer culture

Dardot and Laval (2016) state that this oscillation of the neosubject (the neoliberal self-entrepreneur) “between depression and perversion” (p. 374) can lead us to a tiresome presentation, and such presentation

made between a ‘hedonistic individualism’ or a ‘mass narcissism’ appears as a disguised way of appealing to the restoration of the traditional authority forms. Considering the neosubject in the manner of conservatives is a mistake. He is not at all the man of the anarchic enjoyment, ‘who has no respect for anything.’ A symmetrically equivalent mistake is to condemn only the mercantile reification, the alienation in mass consumption. Obviously, the publicity injunction to enjoyment is part of this universe of elective objects that, through the aestheticization-erotization of the ‘thing’ and the magic of the brand, constitute ‘objects of desire’ and assurances of enjoyment. However, it is also worth considering the way this neosubject, far from being left on his own whims, is governed in the mechanism of performance/enjoyment. (Dardot & Laval, 2016, p. 374)

One should not keep throwing stones at narcissism and having nostalgic fits faced with the loss of paternal function<sup>7</sup>. According to Dardot and Laval (2016), what has to be carefully examined is:

<sup>7</sup> A reading of Moreira and Rosário (2012), already mentioned, could induce this. In this respect, the caution of Dardot and Laval (2016) is relevant.

- vigilance of the public and private space
- traceability of movements in the Internet
- detailed and stingy scrutiny of the individuals’ activities
- increasingly equitable action of the joint systems of information and publicity
- forms of self-control by the subjects themselves.

As these authors say, it may seem that, today, nothing else ‘holds back’ the subject and what is lacking is the force of authority. It is useless

to bemoan the crisis of the framing institutions, such as family, school, labor, or political organizations, or rue the decadence of culture and knowledge, or the decline of democratic life. A better strategy is to try to understand how all these institutions, values and activities are today embodied and transformed into the performance/enjoyment mechanism, in the name of their necessary ‘modernization’; to closely examine all the technologies of control and vigilance of individuals and populations, their medication, the filling and recording of their behaviors, including the most precocious; to analyze how medical and psychological disciplines coordinate with the economic discourse and the

discourse on public safety to reinforce the social management instruments. (Dardot & Laval, 2016, p. 375)

### SATISFACTION AND THE COMMON SPACE

The question placed here is: how can isolated subjects, out of touch with the collective, be accountable for their enjoyment? Or, in other words, how should we think a society in which this perverse assembly isolates subjects in pursuit of enjoyment? Is it prone to disintegrate? Consumers mired in enjoyment only relate to their condominium cronies. How can they make the leap to the collective? How to create the common, the community to come? This is our quintessential political issue. We are at a *cul-de-sac*:

It all depends on what society had demanded and obtained from future subjects: one cannot expect to produce subjects capable of discerning what they continue to owe to the collective without having been, first and foremost, introduced by this very collective into the requirements of the human condition. (Lebrun, 2008, pp. 349-350)

Under this perspective, technology is also shown as a production field of magical gadgets that positively transform relations between people, creating an image of the networks as a promise of a future thought as a paradise of successful entrepreneurs. In these contracts of communication of the consumer culture, the broadcasters project a future, but make other possibilities invisible. The meanings of technology are fought over by various sectors in societies, and these imaginary paradises linked to worlds of enjoyment, saturated with technology, do not consider a less market-oriented view of the future, more focused on social and shared projects. For this reason, Prado and Cazeloto say (as cited in Prato & Prates, 2017a, p. 126):

the colonization of the future is a discursive strategy restricting the possibilities of current choices by presenting transformation as an unequivocal direction, as if the future were always inscribed in the present. Under this strategy, the belief in the lack of alternatives creates conformism. Therefore, the central task of social criticism is to demystify unequivocal imaginary futures and to affirm its deterministic imponderability.

The projection of a present propelling the bodies to dive into the enjoyment pools is also linked to these imaginary futures. This is supplemented by a tendency

of consumers to remain situated (sited) in specific condominiums, preparing their bodies for enjoyment, for self-entrepreneurship and self-capitalization toward these imaginary futures. This perverse horizon is supplemented by the visions of technological futures laden with magical gadgets.

In this discursive drive context of communicational capitalism, fantasies related to consumption make consumers always dissatisfied and always summoned to pursue new satisfactions. The structure of this discourse is that of *promise* (McGowan, 2016). The consumer has to be maintained in a state of constant derise, never satisfied, leaving satisfaction projected in an imaginary future (the city without wires, all interconnected through networks, the cyborg-man with a perfect body, eternal life after death) as a promise. To McGowan (2016):

In all cases, the future embodies a type of satisfaction foreclosed to the present and dependent on one's investment in the capitalist system. The promise ensures a sense of dissatisfaction with the present in relation to the future. . . If one invests oneself in the promise of the future, through this gesture, one accepts the basic rules of the capitalist game. . . . The promise of a better future is the foundation of the capitalist structure, the basis for all three economic areas — production, distribution, and consumption. If we examine only the field of consumption, commodification seems to be the key, whereas if we confine ourselves to the field of production, the imperative to accumulate appears foundational. In the field of distribution, it is the idea of speed: one must move commodities to market as fast as possible. If we look at what these three fields have in common, however, the answer is the promise of the future. One buys the commodity to discover a potentially satisfying pleasure, one accumulates more capital to some day have enough, and one speeds up the distribution process to increase one's future profit. (p. 12)

McGowan (2016) says that, precisely, we should abandon this investment in the promise: “the revolutionary act is simply the recognition that capitalism already produces the satisfaction it promises” (p. 13). What does it mean? To McGowan, it means to situate the future “not as a possibility on the horizon, but as the implicit structure of the present” (p. 13); hence the need for an immanent critique. The future should not be projected as responsible for our fulfilment. We should not make psychic investment in the promise of the commodity. To this author, capitalism works because it provides consumers with satisfaction, but equally hides the acknowledgment of this satisfaction. We must break this circuit and acknowledge the satisfaction that capitalism

brings. This means that we must make efforts based on the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, understood from the text *Beyond the pleasure principle*, in which Freud addressed the concept of *repetition*. The subject feels satisfaction in repeating experiences that do not always give pleasure. The unconscious is not only that of repression, hiding sexual ideas that disturb the conscience, but impels consumers to act in ways that subvert their interests, and they feel satisfaction in this: those acts produce a lost object for the subject to desire and enjoy. Therefore, the satisfaction of the subject is inseparable from the self-destructive loss. According to McGowan (2016), repetition acts as a barrier to a better future. To him, the current political task is to understand how capitalism protects us from the encounter with the public, from the absence of guarantees, from infinitude, from love, and from abundance. Consumers are attached to their dissatisfaction, making them adhere to capitalism. They see themselves as dissatisfied beings pursuing satisfaction and, therefore, do not recognize the satisfaction they have already found. The critique of the system should start there, the satisfaction already obtained, with the feet firmly on the present. Only then the subject stops accumulating (production) and accelerating (distribution). Otherwise, this cumulative repetition is accelerated and continues to serve as a cap (or screen) for the sacrifice (of time, energy, freedom) required by the system. No satisfaction is unrelated to loss. Capitalism protects us from this relation with loss, hiding it. The question is that no object of desire, says McGowan (2016), can wholly fill the place of the lost object. The functioning of this consumption device makes us confuse the object of desire with the lost object. This is where the constitutive illusion of the consumer culture is situated. Without facing this loss, moving the logic of accumulation to the logic of satisfaction — that requires us to accept the fact of our relation with the object loss — we cannot escape from this trap.

### BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The current consumer culture promises unlimited enjoyment. It summons consumers to its communication contracts based on watchwords that promote the pursuit of success, money, happiness, and enjoyment. To attain it, the consumer must adhere to mediatic convocations from discourse technologists to be correctly modalized and acquire knowledge, learn to want (enjoy), understand what has to be done, and can be done, in order to enjoy. The bets are on the construction of the Ego Inc. This Ego is egoistic and isolated, enjoying in specific condominiums, in free *jouissance* zones. The loss of enjoyment is denied in the promise of enjoyment (through a symbolic castration). Speaking

of the cultural horizon of the *clean* perverse that supports the current consumer culture is to face this denial head-on.

Thus, this is not a matter of talking about perverse society as a destiny, as a situation with no way out, dominated by narcissism, but of understanding the changes in the current consumer culture in relation to the previous period of modernity, as well as finding the general lines through which the current consumer culture deals with antagonisms and sexuality. An eventalization of politics calls for subjects to situate themselves in a non-reactive way when faced with events that are open to the future from the democratization of the present. And this requires shifting the emphasis of the promise to the structure of the present, facing the role that loss plays in satisfaction. Therefore, it is not a matter of saving the symbolic (McGowan, 2016, p. 347), but the possibility of situating it in view of the ongoing desymbolization. As it cannot be situated, we fall into the imaginary civil war — polarization. To get out of it, a policy of the common must be introduced or, as Lebrun says, a new coordination between the singular and the collective, moving from the logic of accumulation to the logic of satisfaction in its relation to loss. ■

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