

Research Article

Claudia Leeb*

Mystified Consciousness: Rethinking the Rise of the Far Right with Marx and Lacan

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0022>

Received March 31, 2018; accepted September 2, 2018

Abstract: This paper brings core concepts coined by Karl Marx in conversation with Jacques Lacan to analyse some of the mechanisms that have mystified subjects' consciousness, and contributed to a scenario where the (white) working-classes in the United States and elsewhere turned to the far right that further undermines their existence, instead of uniting with the raced and gendered working class to overthrow capitalism. It explains that the money fetish, which we find at the centre of the American Dream of wholeness (on earth), serves as the unconscious fantasy *object petit a* to deal with the desires and fears subjects fundamental non-wholeness creates, which have been heightened by the insecurities of neoliberal capitalism and exploited by the far right. It also shows how religion offers the illusion of wholeness in the sky, which produces subjects who endure rather than rebel against their suffering. Finally, it explains how the far-right brands the sexed and raced working-classes as inferior to uphold the illusion of the white working-class subjects as whole, which further undermines the creation of a revolutionary proletariat.

Keywords: far right, Marx, Lacan

Introduction¹

The reform of consciousness consists *only* in enabling the world to clarify its consciousness, in waking it from its dream about itself, in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions (Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique” 15).

The German thinker Karl Marx made it clear that to wake the world up from the dream about itself, critical theory must analyse “the mystical consciousness, the consciousness which is unclear to itself” (Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique” 15). In this paper I turn to core concepts coined by Marx, including the money fetish, his critique on religion, and his concept of universal versus particular emancipation, to analyse some (albeit not all) of the mechanisms that mystify subject's consciousness, and contributed to a scenario where the (white) working-classes in the United States and elsewhere, instead of forming an emancipatory proletariat to overthrow capitalism turned instead to the far right that further undermines their existence.²

However, drawing on Marx does not mean that I support the theses that it is solely economic factors that led to the rise of the far right that plagues the world today. Rather, my argument is that economic factors interact with psychological factors in the rise of the far right and Marx's concepts help us shed light on that interaction, which I underline in this paper by bringing Marx in conversation with the French psychoanalytic thinker Jacques Lacan. This paper challenges then the prevailing view that Marx does not

¹ I would like to thank Matt Stichter, as well as the anonymous reviewers and the editor, for their helpful feedback on this article, which helped to strengthen the final version of the paper.

² I do not aim to pathologise the white working-classes, but it does need to be explained why in their genuine suffering they are turning to leaders who will only make their lives worse off.

*Corresponding author: Claudia Leeb, Washington State University, Pullman, United States, E-mail: leebclaudia@gmail.com

have anything to offer when it comes to analysing the rise of the far right today, which is why there is almost no literature on the far right that draws on Marx.³ While there is a tradition of critical theory engaging in Marxist and mostly Freudian psychoanalysis in the wake of mid-20th-century fascism, there has been almost no attention to Marx and Lacan and the current rise of the far right.⁴

This paper elaborates on the ways in which the hole at the centre of the commodity in Marx, can be equated with the Lacanian Real, the hole in the signifier and language, which generates non-whole subjects. My reading challenges thinkers, such as Wendy Brown, who have argued that Marx never paid attention to the ways in which language and discourses produce subjectivity (Brown 120). It also challenges Marxists, such as Ernst Fischer, who suggest that Marx had a dream of achieving “the whole (wo/)man,” or whole subjects, which seems to be a dream Fischer himself has (Fischer 1). I show that Marx had a keen understanding that any attempt to aim at a whole subjectivity generates the money fetish, what Lacan termed *object petit a*, and which contributes to mystify the consciousness of the (white) working-classes and keeps them in their dreaming state.⁵

To detail my theoretical elaborations, I draw on Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American right* (2016), in which she provides an analysis of in-depth interviews with members of the far-right Tea Party in Louisiana, which she conducted over a period of several years. Although Hochschild does not frame her analysis in Marxist or psychoanalytic terminology, it is one of the few books on the far right that provides a rich and respectful account on the far right in the United States, that provides insights on why desperate subjects turn to the far right today, which assists me to ground my theoretical elaborations with practical examples.⁶

The paper is composed of four sections, excluding the introduction and conclusion. The first section of the paper, “The Money Fetish as *Object petit a*” discusses Marx’s idea of the commodity fetish, and in particular explains that the money fetish serves as the unconscious fantasy *object petit a* that aims to cover of such non-wholeness. The second section, “The Dream of Wholeness on Earth,” explains that the money fetish, which we find at the centre of the American Dream of “economic success,” serves as *object petit a* to deal with the desires and fears non-wholeness creates and shows how *object petit a* is exploited by the far right.

The third section “The Dream of Wholeness in Heaven” explains that religious illusions of wholeness in the sky produce subjects who endure rather than rebel against their suffering. The fourth section, “Displaced Fears and Desires” explains how the far right produces views of sexed and raced working-classes as inferior to uphold the illusion of the white working-class subjects as whole, which undermines the creation of a revolutionary proletariat. I conclude with a few words on how to break through mystification of consciousness to fight the rise of the far right.

³ Recent scholarship on the far-right either dismisses or ignores Marxist analysis as well as psychoanalytic concepts (see for example Wodak and Müller). The scholars who focus on some socio-psychological explanations have done so without connecting it to economic forces (Moffitt), and those who have provided an economic analysis, have done so without any reference to Marx and failed to connect it to socio-psychological mechanisms (Judis, Mudde and Kaltwasser).

⁴ Kliman is one of the few texts that draws on Marx to grasp the rise of the far-right today. Kliman argues that it is only white supremacy which has a long history in the United States and *not* economic factors, which explains the turn of the white working-class to the far-right. However, his rejection of economic factors and his lack of a socio-psychological framework does not allow him to explain why, at this specific historical moment in the United States and elsewhere, white supremacy led to a rise of the far-right.

⁵ In *Power and Feminist Agency: Toward a New Theory of the Political Subject* (2017), I further detail the ways in which Marx assists us to theorise alternative conceptions of subjectivity.

⁶ As such this paper is rooted in conceptual elaboration, illustrated with the discourse of the American Dream, and the specificity of Hochschild’s cases, which pertains to a specific context— a southern location in the United States of America, and in the context of the Tea Party.

The Money Fetish as *Object petit a*

Marxism did not succeed in taking into account, in coming to terms with, the surplus-object, the leftover of the Real eluding symbolization (Žižek 1989, 51).

In this section, I elaborate on why Žižek is incorrect with his assertion that Marxism, which includes for Žižek Marx himself, did not succeed in coming to terms with the moment of the Real, which is one of the dimensions through which the French psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan mapped his thought. The Real, which lies at the juncture of the symbolic and the imaginary domain, marks “a fault, a hole” in the symbolic domain, which is the domain of signifiers (or concepts), and with that the domain of language and discourse (Lacan, “The Function of the Written” 28). The Real refers to the moment in the symbolic domain and its signifiers that “resists symbolization absolutely” (Lacan, *Book I* 66-67).

Contrary to Žižek’s argument, we find in Marx’s thought something akin to the Lacanian Real. Marx shows us in *Das Kapital I* that there is a hole in the commodity form, which is predominant in capitalism, much like we find in hole in the Lacanian signifier. Like the Lacanian signifier, whose meaning is determined by its relation to a whole chain of signifiers (Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* 198), the commodity, argues Marx, stands in “a social relation to not only one kind of commodity, but to a whole world of commodities” (Marx, *Das Kapital* 77). The commodity stands in a social relation to a whole world of commodities because the work product only becomes a commodity when it circulates in the world of commodities.

In order for the work-product to be able to circulate, its use-value needs to be transformed into an abstract category, an *equivalent*. Whereas use-value satisfies particular needs, exchange-value allows the product to circulate, to be exchanged with another product (Marx, *Das Kapital* 49). For Marx, “the equivalent form of a commodity is the form of its immediate interchange-ability with another commodity” (Marx, *Das Kapital* 70). However, much like the signifier, whose meaning we can never fully determine, because it is linked to a whole *chain* of signifiers (Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* 198), Marx explains that the determination of the commodity’s exchange value remains necessarily “*incomplete*, because the series representing it is interminable (Marx, *Das Kapital* 78, my emphasis).

The reason for this is that “the *chain*, in which an equation of value is a link, remains liable at every moment to be lengthened by each new kind of commodity that comes into existence and furnishes the material for a new expression of value” (Marx, *Das Kapital* 78, my emphasis). Here Marx identifies the basic indeterminacy of the commodity: in every exchange-transaction there remains a certain insecurity in how to determine the exchange-value (the meaning) of the commodity (the signifier). Although the commodity presents itself as a whole, there remains a hole at its centre, which occupies an analogous position as the Lacanian moment of the Real. It is then perhaps then no-coincidence that Lacan signified the Real also as *das Ding* (Lacan, *Book VII*), which Marx had used to characterise the commodity (Marx, “Capital, Volume One”).

The hole in the w/whole is connected for both thinkers, Lacan and Marx, to subject formation. In Lacan’s thought, the signifier brings subjects into being, which underlines the ways in which language constitutes subjectivity.⁷ However, because there is a hole in the signifier, the subject, who emerges via the signifier (such as by one’s given name), remains what Lacan calls “a subject-with-holes (*subject troué*)” (Lacan, *Book XI* 182), which I have previously described with the idea of the subject-in-outline (Leeb, *Power and Feminist Agency*). Insofar as there remains a hole in the centre of the subject *and* the symbolic domain and its signifiers, the subjective and the objective domain (the symbolic order) are connected.

The subjects’ confrontation with the Real, the hole in the signifier (or in the commodity), is a traumatic moment because it confronts them with the fact that they are subjects-with-holes. This is then connected to two affects: desires and anxieties. Lacan distinguishes desire from need and relates it to the fundamental hole in the whole of the signifier (the commodity), *das Ding* (Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* 227). Desire is the desire of the subject to do away with these holes and become whole. However, the traumatic

⁷ This connects Lacan as well as Marx to Foucault; however, we do not find a concept akin to the Real in Foucault.

confrontation with the Real, or the hole in the commodity form, tells the subject that she cannot become whole, no matter how much she desires to become whole, and this generates anxieties.

When the subject is confronted with the anxiety-provoking moment of the Real, or the hole in the commodity form, which tells her that she cannot become whole and that she remains a subject-with-holes no matter how much she tries to become whole, *object petit a* emerges as an unconscious fantasy object whose core aim is to conceal the impossibility of becoming whole (Lacan, *Book XI* 103). *Object petit a* is the historically contingent and privileged object that provides the subject with the illusion that she is or can, after all, become whole. This fantasy object fulfils the subject's desire for wholeness and allows her to get rid of her anxieties that reaching wholeness is impossible. As Lacan puts it: "The *object petit a* is what falls from the subject in anxiety. It is precisely that same object that I delineated as the cause of desire" (Lacan, *Television* 82). Although *object petit a* allows the subject to cover over her remaining a subject-with-holes, and, like a mirage, feel whole again, Lacan makes clear that *object petit a* never manages to fully cover over the subject's hole, since the whole subject is the result of a fantasy (Lacan, *Book XI* 270).

Moreover, because of the moment of the Real in the signifier, which remains at the centre of the subject, she remains alienated in the symbolic domain of language. It is here where Lacan makes a connection to Marx: "In what way can one go beyond the alienation of [her/]his labour? It is as though you wanted to go beyond the alienation of discourse. All I can see transcending that alienation is the object sustaining its value, what Marx, in a homonym singularly anticipatory of psychoanalysis, called the fetish" (Lacan, *Television* 111).

Lacan hints in this citation that we find in Marx something akin to the Real, insofar as the object that sustains the fantasy of transcending alienation, or getting rid of the hole in the signifier or the commodity, is *object petit a* for Lacan and the fetish for Marx, which renders Žižek's argument that we do not find a concept in Marx akin to the Lacanian Real as problematic. However, Lacan never embarked on the project to elaborate in more detail on what ways *object petit a* is connected to Marx's notion of the commodity fetish. Furthermore, Lacan missed that it is not the fetish in general which surfaces as *object petit a* in Marx's thought. Rather, it is *the* commodity fetish, money, which promises in Marx's thought to do away with the hole in the w/hole of the commodity form.

As Marx explains in *Das Kapital* I, the commodity, from the standpoint of satisfying human wants (its use-value), has nothing mysterious about it. However, once we consider it *only* from the standpoint of exchange-value, it turns into a mysterious thing—the commodity fetish. He explains this with a piece of wood that when making a table out of it, continues to be this common every-day thing. "But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head and evolves out of its wooden head grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was" (Marx, "Capital, Volume One" 320).⁸

These grotesque ideas that come out of the commodity form and turn things on its head are connected to the desires and fears generated by the hole in the commodity (the signifier) and the object that aims to covers over such holes (but fails to do so)—*object petit a*. For Marx, money is *the* fetish, because it is the privileged general equivalent, and as such it promises to erase "all qualitative differences of commodities" (Marx, *Das Kapital* 146). As the "radical leveler of all differences," money is the element in capitalist exchange that promises to eradicate the remaining insecurity in every exchange-transaction—how to determine the exact exchange-value of the commodity, or the hole in the w/hole of the commodity.

"The enigma of the money fetish," says Marx, "is only the becoming visible of the eye blinding commodity fetish" (Marx, *Das Kapital* 108). In other words, money blinds our eyes because it covers over the hole in the commodity form (the signifier). As such, money functions as the *object petit a*, the privileged object in modern, capitalist societies to conceal the trauma of the impossibility to become whole. As Etienne Balibar further explains, whereas commodities seem to *have* an exchange-value, money, for its part, seems to *be* exchange-value itself, which has an irresistible power over individuals (Balibar 176). The irresistible

⁸ Table-turning is a type of séance in which participants sit around a table, place their hands on it, and wait for rotations. The table was purportedly made to serve as a means of communicating with the spirits of deceased people one knows; one asks a question, and the table would tilt at the appropriate letter, thus spelling out words and sentences to answer the question.

power the money fetish exerts over us is its eye-blinding quality as *object petit a*, which promises people to cover over their beings subjects-with-holes.

Marx provides the following example in *Nationalökonomie und Philosophie*: “What money can buy, *I am*, the possessor of money,” he points out, “The extent of the strength of money is my own strength” (Marx, “Nationalökonomie und Philosophie” 298). Money as *object petit a* not only covers over the hole in the commodity form, it also covers over the hole in the subject, here the subject’s (mental and physical) weakness, and she, like a mirage, appears as whole and strong through possessing money. He provides the following example: “I am ugly, but I can buy myself the most beautiful women. Therefore I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness—its deterrent power—is nullified by money” (Marx, “Nationalökonomie und Philosophie” 298). Money is *the* fetish because it fulfils the desire for wholeness and does away with the anxieties of remaining a subject-with-holes, in the above example a man’s ugliness, which, like a mirage, becomes nullified by money.

My discussion of Marx’s money fetish as *object petit a*, underlines that Marx had a clear understanding that we remain as subject non-whole and that any striving for wholeness leads us into the domain of the fetish, which, as I will show in the next section, the far right exploited for its own electoral success.

The Dream of Wholeness on Earth

The ruling ideology of the American Dream (in short, the Dream) promises everybody in the neo-liberal capitalist society of the United States of America the possibility to achieve wholeness to get rid of their being subjects-with-holes, which means the possibility for everybody to achieve “economic success,” if subjects just work hard enough. Insofar as the Dream tells subjects that they can make it from the dishwasher to the *millionaire*, we find the money fetish as the unconscious fantasy object *a* at the core of the Dream. The money fetish assists, like a mirage, to erase the appearance of structural barriers of gender, racial and class injustices, and provides subjects with the illusion that they can become whole.

Furthermore, the ruling ideology of the Dream, which we find in different variations in the US American left to the far right, suggests that it is (neo-)liberal capitalism that allows subjects to reach the American Dream. As such the Dream, via the money fetish at its centre, covers over the fact that neo-liberal capitalism, instead of securing wholeness for subjects, further depletes them of the mental and physical energies, which is why Marx signified capital throughout *Das Kapital I* as a “vampire” that circumvents any existing moral and physical barriers to fully suck out the last drops of the worker’s blood to enliven itself, which leads to chronic illness and workers’ premature deaths.⁹

However, the Dream through the money fetish mystifies people’s consciousness about such a blood sucking enterprise. As an example, Lee Sherman, a white American, was a pipefitter for most of his life, fitting and repairing pipes carrying lethal chemicals in the petrochemical plant Pittsburgh Plate glass, based in Louisiana, one of the poorest states and with the highest toxic emissions. The company had low safety standards, and as a result, most of his co-workers died young from being exposed to lethal chemicals. At one point, Sherman himself barely escaped death on the job, after a hydrocarbon burn. When he became ill from constant exposure to chemicals, the company fired him, because it did not want to pay for his medical disability (Hochschild 25-28).

Marx made clear that, for making an end to the blood-sucking enterprise of the vampire capital, a class must be formed “which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal...which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society,” which is for him the proletariat (Marx, “Contribution” 64). Why did Sherman, instead of forming with other depleted workers a revolutionary proletariat to overthrow capitalism, turn to the far right, which further undermines workers’ existence? The money fetish as it appears as unconscious fantasy *object petit a* at the centre of the Dream is one explanation.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, but even before that, insofar as a growing number of subjects in the United States are struggling to get their basic necessities met—such as food and shelter—the Dream of

⁹ For a more detailed elaboration on Marx’s metaphor of the “vampire capital” see Leeb (“Rebelling Against Suffering in Capitalism”).

becoming a millionaire seems to be even further removed than ever from reality. Nonetheless, the Dream continues to have an irresistible force over people's bodies and minds. It is so because we find the money fetish object *a* at its centre. Although the money fetish is nothing else but a *Spuk* (specter) in our heads that mystifies subjects' consciousness, it has all-too-real effects upon subjects, because, like a mirage, it produces subjects-*without*-holes, and allows subjects to fulfil people's desire for wholeness and cope with the anxiety of non-wholeness.

Arlie Russell Hochschild points out that in all of her conversations with members of the far right Tea Party in Louisiana (such as the aforementioned Lee Sherman) "the repeated term 'millionaire' floated around conversations like a ghost" (Hochschild 143). Here it is important to note that it is working-class subjects, who find their bodies and minds are depleted, and who live in a toxic environment destroyed by the vampire capital, who make such references to the "millionaire," as they are still thinking of themselves as always potentially becoming a millionaire, which underlines the power the Dream has over subjects' bodies and minds.

The Dream has such irresistible power because it has the money fetish at its centre, which allows subjects to cover over their being subjects-with-holes, and allows them to feel whole. As such, the money fetish of the "millionaire" as it appears in the Dream serves as *object petit a*, as Lacan puts it, as the socially accepted way to delude oneself "on the subject of *das Ding*, [to] colonize the field of *das Ding* with imaginary schemes" (Lacan, *Book VII* 99). The money fetish as *object petit a* allows subject to covers over *Das Ding*, the non-wholeness of the signifier (Lacan) or the commodity (Marx), which remains at the centre of the subject. It allows subjects to delude themselves about the Real state of affairs.

Another example is Mike Schaff, who had worked hard all of his life in the oil industry of Louisiana, but still felt that he had not quite made it. "From a shotgun home on the Armelise sugarcane plantation to a college education, a professional career, and a home on Bayou Corne, Mike had done well, but he didn't seem sure it was well enough" (Hochschild, 196). The wealth nearby and the wife of a wealthy oil company engineer who looks down on his side of the houses, because it allows trailers, reminds him of his non-wholeness vis-à-vis the Dream. He nonetheless does not give up on the Dream and believes that, with the help of the far right, he will make it to the top of the Dream.

He supports the far right because it is for free market capitalism and small government and against paying social security. And if he did not have to pay into social security, he argues, he could have invested that money and "would be a billionaire by now" (Hochschild 112). The money fetish as *object petit a*, here the billionaire, serves to cover over the moment of the Real, with imaginary schemes. It has an irresistible power over him, because it cancels out his lingering feelings of non-wholeness of not having made it to the top of the Dream, and thus of being non-whole in the story of the Dream. It blinds him to the fact that the source (the far right) that should help him to the top is the same source that keeps him at the bottom and further destroys his life.

The members of the ruling class use the means of mental production to advance the money fetish as the unconscious fantasy object *a*. As an example, a video of a ground-breaking ceremony celebrates the expansion of Sasol, the South Africa based petrochemical giant in Louisiana, by pointing at the ways in which such expansion will allow people to feel whole again. Its effects can be seen on Mayor Hardey who, like most others she interviewed on the far right, fully supports the Sasol expansion, because oil promised that Louisiana, one of the poorest and most polluted states in the US, would have an industrial renaissance, that would turn Louisiana, like a mirage, from being the last state to becoming the first (Hochschild 90).

The money fetish, which is advanced by means of mental production, has effects on people's minds and bodies: "The mention of Sasol was often accompanied by the word "billion," as in a \$7 billion investment for the ethane cracker, a \$14 billion investment for the gas-to-liquids plant. It conveyed the idea of power, importance, and prosperity" (Hochschild 86). Subjects, who feel powerless, unimportant and not being able to prosper in neo-liberal capitalism, can via the unconscious fantasy *object petit a*, the money fetish, here expressed in the images of the "billion" investment of the oil industry, feel themselves whole, or powerful, important and having made it to the top. The eye blinding money fetish at the same time blinds people that Sasol suppresses other lines of work in Louisiana, such as tourism and the fishing industry, leaves pollution, and does nothing to resolve the many problems saddling the state.

Furthermore, Marx explains that the money fetish is “the alienated ability of mankind” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 104), because of its overturning power—it provides subjects with abilities they do not possess, and renders abilities people possess as ineffective. As Marx puts it, “what I am unable to do as a (wo/)man, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of money. Money thus turns each of these powers into something which in itself it is not—turns it, that is, into its *contrary*” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 104). He provides the example of somebody who has a vocation for study, but she has no money for it. As a result, she has no effective vocation.

On the other hand, “if I really have no vocation for study, but have the will and the money for it, I have an effective vocation for it” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 105). The story of the American Dream makes it seem as if success is merit-based, such that if you try hard you will be rewarded, or if you’re talented then you’ll do well. However, money as the alienated ability of humankind shows us that it is those who are talented, but do not have money, cannot get the right degrees and attend the right schools, and as a result, end up being regarded as stupid. Whereas those who do not have talents, but have money, can buy themselves tutors and entry into the right schools, and at the end appear as smart.

Moreover, the overturning power then also turns attributes people possess into its opposite. Marx provides us with the following example: “I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed to be honest. I am stupid, but money is the real mind of all things and how then should its possessor be stupid? (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 103). Insofar as the overturning power of money makes people, who are stupid, dishonest and unscrupulous to appear as the opposite, being a billionaire has worked, for example, in Trump’s and his cabinet’s, which is composed of billionaires, favour.

Here subjects, via the leader and his cabinet of billionaires, whom the money fetish *object petit a* renders as whole, because of their wealth, can get rid of their own feelings of failure or non-wholeness, and feel whole, or “great again.”¹⁰ As such the money fetish allows people to fill the gap inaugurated by their being subjects-with-holes, which generates desires for wholeness and fears that one might not be able to reach it. Such fears and desires are heightened through the ruling ideology of the Dream of becoming a billionaire, or at least a millionaire. As Lacan puts it, “Object petit a fills the gap” (Lacan, *Book XI* 270). Money as *object petit a* serves to deal with the anxiety of the subject’s incompleteness; it conceals that anxiety-provoking moment of non-wholeness left in the commodity form and allows people to fulfil their desire for wholeness.

However, despite the centrality of the money fetish to mystify people’s consciousness, these issues remain and further undermine subjects’ existence. As Lacan makes clear, “petit a never crosses this gap” (Lacan, *Book XI* 270). The money fetish as the unconscious fantasy *object petit a* certainly can’t cover over the extremes of the suffering that subjects experience in Louisiana. However, the good news is that if you can’t reach wholeness on earth, there is something else that allows you to reach wholeness in the sky.

The Dream of Wholeness in Heaven

This state, this society, produce religion which is an *inverted world consciousness* because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of this world” (Marx, “Contribution” 53).

Religion is an expression of an inverted world consciousness that renders it as the general theory of the world because it expresses in its imaginary world everything that is wrong with capitalist society, and the suffering it has brought onto the world stage. Suffering subjects in capitalist societies create a world

¹⁰ In a recent article, I have explained that what binds far-right followers to the leaders is the psychoanalytic mechanism of ego-idea replacement. By replacing one’s ego-ideal (which contains the demands the environment has upon the ego, such as achieving economic success, and introjecting the leader, one can get rid of the stains of frustrations (that one has not made it in the Dream) that mar the picture of one’s own ego (Leeb, “A Festival for Frustrated Egos”).

of illusions in the sky to cope with such suffering. As such, religion is the “general basis of consolation and justification” for everything that is wrong in capitalism (Marx, “Contribution” 54). Although religion consoles subjects about the suffering produced by a wrong society, it, at the same time, *justifies* such society, which underlines the centrality of religion to keep the oppressed in their chains.

However, Marx points out that “Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. It is the *opium* of the people” (Marx, “Contribution” 54). Although religion is a protest against the suffering produced by capitalism, it functions at the same time as opium or a painkiller that assists subjects to endure such suffering, which helps to explain why the white working-class in the United States, instead of rebelling against the vampire capital, opted for enduring such suffering.

The current opioid epidemic in the United States, which is largely afflicting the working-classes, shows the centrality of Marx’s analysis.¹¹ It explains that the (white) working-classes are suffering and that the suffering needs to be dealt with in a way that helps to push for positive social change—else the far right exploits it and displaces the source of the suffering onto others (immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims, etc.); and/or the working classes aim to dull such suffering through a turn to the far right, religion and/or drugs, which makes people passive.¹² A recent study shows that the chronic use of prescription opioid drugs was correlated with support for Trump in the 2016 US presidential election, and is the result of subjects’ socioeconomic suffering, which they aimed to dull with their support of the far right, which functioned like an opiate insofar as it allowed them to feel great.¹³

The white churches function as a consolation for the white working-classes in Louisiana, who have been left alone by state and national politics to deal with the suffering caused by environmental disasters created by industry. For Harold and Annette Areno, as an example, “Their faith has guided them through a painful loss of family, friends, neighbors, frogs, turtles, and trees” (Hochschild 47). Because religion functions as their *only* source of consolation the Arenos vote for far-right politicians, because they are for religion, which is for them more important than the fact that the same politicians are also for tax-exemptions for big industry and environmental deregulation, which has brought about their suffering to begin with. The opium of religion squelches any protest against such suffering.

Furthermore, religion is so central for the Arenos and the other members on the far right in Louisiana, who are all religious, because it provides subjects-with-holes, whose desires for wholeness and anxieties about their non-wholeness are heightened by the toxic environment they work and live in, an illusory world of wholeness in the sky, much like the money fetish as *object petit a* provides them with an illusory wholeness on earth. The illusory world of wholeness in the sky, allows subjects to cope with their anxieties of non-wholeness and fulfil their desire for wholeness, even if they need to wait for such wholeness until after they are dead.

Areno Harold points at this illusory world when he tells us that his time to die will soon come, and that “they say there are beautiful trees in Heaven” (Hochschild 242). Much like the money fetish, which secures the (unconscious) fantasy of wholeness on earth, religion offers the fantasy of wholeness in the sky, here expressed as the “beautiful trees in Heaven.” The fantasy of wholeness in the sky is the result of the subject’s confrontation with the traumatic moment of the Real. Lacan points out that the Real “stretches from the trauma to the phantasy—in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something” (Lacan, *Book XI* 131).

This “something” that fantasy conceals, is the trauma of the subject’s fundamental non-wholeness, which creates the desire for wholeness and the anxiety that reaching such wholeness is impossible. The

¹¹ I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for this connection.

¹² In a recent article (Leeb, “Mass Hypnosés”), I explain the ways in which the rise of the far-right provides followers with an “emotional high” that covers over their suffering. In my subsequent work on the far-right I will further elaborate on the ways in which the “far right opiate” not only provides a dulling of suffering but also an emotional high for its followers, which is why they stick to the far-right (the opiate) no matter what, despite its destructive tendencies, and fail to rebel against such destructiveness.

¹³ https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2685627?utm_source=silverchair&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=article_alert&utm_term=mostread&utm_content=olf-widget_07112018.

fantasy of religious wholeness in the sky conceals the Real state of affairs—the ways in which the vampire capital depletes workers of their physical and mental energies and destroys the environment—that it is the destruction of real trees on earth by industry that makes the fantasy world of beautiful trees in the sky so effective to mystify subject’s consciousness. As such, the religious fantasy of wholeness in the sky covers over heightened non-wholeness on earth. In the illusory religious world in heaven, all non-wholeness has vanished, and one can feel whole again, which underlines the ways in which such an illusory world contributes as a painkiller that does away with subject’s desire to rebel against the vampire capital.¹⁴

Churches advance the idea that subjects can achieve wholeness in the sky if they endure the suffering on earth, which underlines their connection to capitalism. The churches in Louisiana receive ample monetary support from big industry that pollutes the environment to remain *silent* about the suffering big industry causes. Instead, the pulpit focuses more “on a person’s moral strength to endure than on the will to change the circumstances that called on that strength” (Hochschild 124). If subjects endure their suffering on earth, they are promised wholeness in the sky. The advantageous side effect for the vampire capital is that this also means that the sufferers are called upon to *not* rebel against their suffering.

An example is here Madonna Massey, a homemaker and member of the far right, who suppressed her desires for taking on leadership roles when she got married and took on the role of a good Christian wife subordinated to her husband. She openly expresses her anxiety about living in a toxic environment in close proximity to big industry. Any impulses she had to organise the community to fight for a clean environment were squelched by religion. As she puts it, “I’m probably less an activist than I would be because of my faith. As a kid, I wrote every president to tell him what I thought he needed to do. But now, I am less involved...You have to put up with things the way they are” (Hochschild 179).

However, Marx did not suggest that what makes people rebel against the vampire capital is to abolish religion itself, as this would merely leave the conditions due to which a society produces religion as opium intact. As he puts it in thesis four in *Thesen über Feuerbach*, Marx explains that subjects create a religious, imaginary world because of their “inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness” (Marx, “*Thesen über Feuerbach*” 6). To abandon religion (as suggested by Feuerbach), leaves intact the conditions that make people turn to religion, “The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized in practice” (Marx, “*Thesen über Feuerbach*” 6). We need to understand the contradictions on earth that are created by neo-liberal capitalism that make subjects create and cling to the illusory world of religion, which can only be removed through the revolutionary agency of the proletariat. However, the far right has something else in store to mystify people’s consciousness.

Displaced Fears and Desires

There is something else the far right has in store to allow people to become whole, which Marx helps us assess through his distinction between universal human emancipation and partial emancipation. Partial emancipation, which is based on partial, namely political revolution, “leaves the pillars of the house standing” (Marx, “Contribution” 62). In partial emancipation, a class undertakes “from its particular situation, a general emancipation of society. This class emancipates society as a whole, but only on condition that the whole of society is in the same situation as this class; for example, that it possesses or can easily acquire money or culture” (Marx, “Contribution” 62). In capitalist societies, it is the bourgeoisie that undertakes from its particular situation a general emancipation of society.

How could this class convince the rest of society that it emancipates the whole of society, whereas in truth, it “emancipates itself and attains universal domination” (Marx, “Contribution” 62)? Marx explains that “no class in civil society can play this part unless it can arouse, in itself and the masses, a moment of enthusiasm in which it associates and mingles with society at large, identifies itself with it, and is *felt*

¹⁴ However, there is a slight difference between the money fetish as *object petit a* and religious illusions. Whereas both offer the fantasy of wholes that aims to close the gap between the Real and reality, the money fetish of *object petit a* is in neo-liberal capitalist societies the *historically contingent and privileged object* that takes on the function of an unconscious fantasy that conceals the impossibility of becoming whole, which Marx shows us with his discussion on the money fetish.

and recognized as the general representative of this society...It is only in the name of the general interests that a particular class can claim general supremacy” (Marx, “Contribution” 62, my emphasis). Also far-right politicians, by associating and mingling with society at large, aroused a moment of enthusiasm in the (white) working classes, where the politicians were seen as the general representative of society that will end their suffering, which allowed the far right to claim general supremacy.

How could the far right convince the (white) working-classes that they are the liberating class? Marx makes the important observation that “for one class to represent the whole of society, another class must concentrate in itself all the evils of society, a particular class must represent a general obstacle and limitation. A particular social sphere must be regarded as the *notorious crime* of the whole society, so that emancipation from this sphere appears as general emancipation. For *one* class to be the liberating class *par excellence*, it is necessary that another class should be openly the oppressing class” (Marx, “Contribution” 63). In Marx’s time, it was the nobility and the clergy that produced this “positive significance of the bourgeoisie” (Marx, “Contribution” 63).

In today’s neo-liberal capitalist society, the notorious crime of the whole society are those most vulnerable—the raced and gendered working classes. The far right discourse in the United States particularly brands immigrants from Mexico and the Middle East as concentrating in themselves all the evils of society, so that emancipation from this sphere which the far right aims at through measures such as building border walls and travel bans, appears as general emancipation. Far-right discourse also brands women as a limitation. As Hochschild points out, Trump “generalized about all Muslims, all Mexicans, all women—including that all women menstruate, a fact Trump declared ‘disgusting’” (Hochschild 2016, 227-228). By branding certain groups of people as representing a general limitation, and thus non-whole (Muslims, Mexicans, women), the far right allowed the white (male) working classes to fulfil their desire for wholeness, insofar as they can feel superior and thus whole again.

Kliman’s work (2017) helps to draw attention to Marx’s writings on Irish independence and the US civil war, which provide us with another central explanation for why the white working-class, instead of uniting with the gendered and raced working-class, turned to the far right. Marx explains that the bourgeoisie in England consciously fomented white supremacist attitudes and anti-Irish sentiment to divide the working-class into antagonistic camps. “This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this” (Marx, “Marx to Sigfrid Meyer”).

The division of the working class into antagonistic camps kept the workers apart and hindered the creation of an independent revolutionary proletariat. As Marx points out in *Das Kapital I*: “In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded” (Marx, *Das Kapital*).¹⁵ Although the branding of black skin allowed the white working classes to feel superior, or whole vis-à-vis the raced working-classes, Marx made clear that it chained them to the ruling classes and undermined their own chances for liberation.

Also the working classes in the United States and elsewhere today cannot emancipate themselves if labour is branded in the skin of the raced and gendered working-class. The far right artificially, through the means of mental production, such as TV and media, brands the skin of Mexicans and Muslims as inferior, and thereby creates and keeps alive antagonisms in the raced and gendered working-classes. Such branding generates a scenario where “a particular social sphere must be regarded as the *notorious crime* of the whole society,” and the white working classes can *displace* their anxieties of non-wholeness and incompleteness on that sphere.

The far right produced the raced and gendered working-classes as the notorious crime of society through mental production—such as Fox News, which has been a staunch supporter of the far right. Subjects on the far right in the United States obtain their news almost exclusively from Fox news. As one member of the far right Tea Party, who listens to its news coverage all day, puts it, Fox tells her what “to feel afraid,

15 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm#S7>

angry, and anxious about” (Hochschild 2016, 126). What she needs to be afraid of, according to Fox news, is ISIS, immigrants, particularly those from Mexico and the Middle-East, and those the federal government beneficiaries that help undeserving subjects to “cut the line” in achieving the American Dream (Hochschild 2016, 131).

The members of the far right in Louisiana talked freely about the anxieties they had about Mexicans and Muslims, even if they are only a small part of the population. By displacing their anxieties of remaining non-whole in the ruling ideology of the Dream upon branded groups, they can feel themselves whole or “great again,” although the lingering feelings of anxiety that they are far from having achieved the Dream, and that they are breathing in polluted air, eating toxic food, working in dangerous factory jobs, and looming new environmental disasters, remain. Moreover, what also remains is their subjugated position within American society, which they can only overcome if they unite with those the far right brands as inferior.

Conclusion: Breaking Through Mystification

I am speaking of ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with powers that be (Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique” 13).

These words uttered by the young Marx in his early text *From of Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing* are more relevant than ever, because the rise of the right poses a threat to the world today. Subjects living in countries where the far right rules, such as in the United States, must ruthlessly critique their respective governments and not be afraid to come in conflict with the powers that be, even if this means to lose one’s job. In these concluding remarks I provide some conclusions based on my analysis provided in the previous sections. The most important conclusion is that we must do everything to break through the various forms in which subjects’ consciousness becomes mystified, which the far right takes advantage of to shore up its power, to form a revolutionary proletariat.

Marx argued that the formation of the revolutionary proletariat is central in England, because at his time, it was the centre of capital, and a proletarian revolution in England would immediately inspire other nations, and generate a world proletarian revolution (Kliman 2017, 14). As Kliman points out, in today’s neoliberal capitalist societies the formation of a revolutionary proletariat is central in the United States, because it is the centre of (neo-liberal) capital today. A proletarian revolution in the United States could inspire proletarian revolutions in neighbouring nations, and from here turn into a world proletarian revolution that liberates the working classes from all countries from their radical chains. For this to happen we must ruthlessly attack all the sources that mystify people’s consciousness.

How is that possible, since the mystification of subjects’ consciousness, as discussed with the examples in this paper, seems somewhat total? Here the moment of the Real, which points at the non-wholeness in the signifier (Lacan) or the commodity (Marx) offers a hint. Although the commodity presents itself as a whole there remains a hole at its core. Commodity fetishes are *failed* attempts to eradicate that hole at the centre of the commodity. Since there is a hole in at the core of the signifier or the commodity fetish, far-right discourses fail to completely mystify subject’s consciousness. In this brief moment of non-wholeness, which I have called elsewhere the moment of the limit in power (Leeb, *Power and Feminist Agency*), subjects who have been blinded and mystified by the illusory world on earth or in the sky can regain their senses and start thinking for themselves again, which is central for them to organize a revolutionary proletariat.

Marx, as an example, ruthlessly critiqued religion as a source of mystification. However, such critique does not mean that he wants to take away the only means of consolation people seem to be left in neo-liberal capitalism. Rather, as he puts it, “Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not that (wo-)man shall bear the chain without caprice or consolation but so that (s/) he shall cast off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusion (wo-)man so that (s-)he will think, act and fashion (her-)his reality as a (wo-)man who has lost (her-)his illusions and regained (her-)his reason” (Marx, “Contribution” 54). The criticism of religion allows subjects to become aware that the imaginary

flowers provided by religion (the trees in Heaven) is an illusion that makes them endure rather than rebel against their chains.

Similarly we must ruthlessly critique the money fetish as *object petit a*, whenever it surfaces in the discourses on the American Dream of becoming a billionaire or millionaire, because such critique allows subjects to disillusion them about the Real state of affairs on earth, which the money fetish aims to cover over, so that they can act and fashion their reality as a “(wo-)man who has lost (her-)his illusions and regained (her-)his reason.” For this to work we must critique the ways in which the Dream itself provides the illusion of wholeness, in a world that is everything else but whole.

It also implies critiquing notions of being able to reach whole subjectivity, which we find in the liberal discourse of the free and independent subject, because such notions mystify people about their fundamental non-wholeness. Subjects must accept their remaining-with-holes, not so much to also accept the ways in which the vampire capital has depleted subjects and nature, but to become aware how desires for wholeness and fears of non-wholeness can be manipulated by the far right to cover over such depletion. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly we must ruthlessly critique all forms of the branding of the raced and gendered working classes as inferior, as it is such branding that keeps workers separated.

Once the (white) working-classes give up that illusory world of wholeness on earth and in the sky, they can unite with the gendered and raced working-class and cast off their chains in a proletarian revolution. As Marx put it, “the call to abandon their illusions about the condition is *a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions*” (Marx, “Contribution” 54). A ruthless criticism of everything existing is central for abandoning a condition that requires illusions, and which have been manipulated by the far right for its electoral success. We must not be afraid of such criticism, even if it brings us in conflict with powers that be. Marx’s thought remains indispensable to move us in this direction and to shed light on the rise of the far right.

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