

REFLEXIVITY, AUSTERITY AND THE VALUE OF THE USELESS

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Abstract

In this article reflexivity is defined as a neoliberal mode of thought, often evident in our research data as a circular pattern which fails to comprehend contemporary modernity. This type of reflexivity is illustrated with reference to austerity and food poverty. The article argues that while it might be relatively easy to observe this kind of reflexivity in others, it is much more difficult to gauge its effects on the researcher's own epistemological perspective. When attempting to do so, the premises upon which we construct academic knowledge and the importance of certain data that might, at first sight, appear to be 'useless' come under scrutiny. Lacanian psychoanalysis and the works of Jean Baudrillard are used in order to explore alternatives.

Key words: reflexivity, austerity, foodbanks, neoliberalism, value, Lacan, Baudrillard,

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AUSTERITY AND REFLEXIVITY

Austerity envelops us, whether we are rich or poor. It is the by-product of neoliberal economics, the undesired side-effect of the pursuit of wealth and prosperity; possibly a condition for life, if one takes into consideration how quickly people get used to the idea that there will not always be jobs for everyone, and Lazzarato's (2011) powerful argument in *The Making of the Indebted Man*, that we should be getting used to always being in debt, enmeshed in a web of unserviceable financial obligations which now inflect human subjectivity.

Researching austerity inevitably brings one face to face with the reality of social justice, the community, the everyday discourses of living in poverty or helping others to survive, as well as the importance of thinking politically, radically, psychoanalytically. It also brings one face to face with reflexivity, not just the researcher's awareness of their privileged position in the interview situation (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000) or the academic's awareness of the limitations of their chosen epistemological perspective when writing, but moments that catch one unaware and offer insights into one's relationship to the 'work', the 'other', the 'object' and the 'subject'. These moments, delightful or anxiety-provoking as they might be, are also potentially radical, inviting us to think – reflexively in fact – how the world thinks us, rather than how we think the world. To such moments we may wish to respond with unorthodox combinations of analysis (Blackman et al., 2008, 10), ways of finding common ground between theoretical perspectives that, at first sight, seem to antagonise one another. The need to think radically, differently, daringly, is not a superfluous academic pursuit but an urgent task that reinforces existing critiques of neoliberal austerity.

Below I make such an attempt, bringing together Lacanian psychoanalysis and Jean Baudrillard, a vociferous critic of Freud who sometimes nods approvingly in Lacan's direction and argues that the death drive has exceptional critical potential, if rescued from the clutches of pedestrian psychoanalysis (2004, 150). Lacan provides a range of concepts suitable for discussing contemporary socio-political formations, such as the four discourses,

key discursive positions from which subjects articulate or receive messages¹ (Lacan, 2007), and the notion of the Other, the socio-cultural frame of reference for all our enunciations and actions. Lacanian scholars of ideology and politics also draw on the notion of the phantasy, the imaginary and often erroneous adherence of subjects to a particular set of ideas, and, of course, the notion of the death drive, both as perilous repetition of ideological impasses (Dean, 2013) and as pivotal element in their dismantling and interpretation (Žižek, 1997).

Baudrillard is keen on such impasses, thinking that they illustrate the fundamental problem with capitalism, namely, that it is a system structured solely around exchange and value. Exchange and value form the system's unique mode of operation; everything has value; everything must have value in order to have meaning. Moments when value and exchange falter, argues Baudrillard, expose the fundamental weakness of capitalism and create scope for thinking differently. He therefore proposes the notion of the impossible exchange (discussed below) as a key concept in the critique of ideology (Smith, 2010). By the same token, he draws attention to anything that does not have exchange value; the useless, the remainder and the defunct (Baudrillard, 2001), in order to illuminate the restrictive logic of capitalism and the possibility of thinking radically.

It is rather impossible to do justice to Lacan's or Baudrillard's thought in the space of a short paper, or to discuss thoroughly their convergences and irreconcilable differences. Suffice it to say, that they are both committed to a pursuit of truth which leaves little room for narcissistic certainties and, most pertinent to the present case, little room for illusory assumptions about the superiority of one's perspective. In terms of reflexivity, therefore, what one must encounter in the process of researching-learning-knowing, is not how to make the most of the amassed wealth of knowledge, even when doing so in a critical fashion, but how to accommodate, and in fact learn, from one's ignorance. In that sense, both Lacan and Baudrillard value the disturbing insight acquired at the limits of knowledge and that, for both theorists, can be linked to the death drive and its radical potential.

¹ With the four discourses Lacan (2007) draws attention to the transindividual nature of language. There are four discourses. The discourse of the Master, which posits itself as a 'self-evident' position of authority and knowledge; the discourse of the hysteric, which questions but also adheres to the Master; the discourse of the university, which produces a supposedly 'neutral' form of knowledge and the discourse of the analysts, inverts and subverts the previous positions. For an account of the role of the four discourses in politics and culture see Clemens and Grigg (2006).

Below, I discuss the role of reflexivity and value/uselessness drawing on research on the effects of austerity in East London². As part of my research, I interviewed several food bank managers asking questions about the sustainability of food banks, as well as their views on poverty, charity, the role of the community, and the profile of their clients. The first part of the paper offers a psychoanalytic reading of austerity as represented in the words of food bank managers and looks into the role of reflexivity in their own statements. The second part of the paper discusses my own reflexive engagement with the interpretation of the data and how a negative comment by a colleague led me to re-think the way we approach both reflexivity and austerity. Inevitably, and contrary to academic convention, some passages are written in first person.

AUSTETITY IN FOOD BANK MANAGERS' ACCOUNTS

Food banks are growing in number due to the effects of austerity on the low paid and those relying on benefits (Downing and Kennedy, 2014). The food banks I researched were located in East London, one of the most deprived areas of the capital. They were run by local churches, supported by the Trussel Trust (2013), a nation-wide charity which helps local initiatives on a franchise basis. Food banks rely on volunteers to run two or three times a week, distributing non-perishable foods which are donated by the local community. Managers are often priests or members of the local church.

Despite the fact that public opinion seems to have accepted food banks as part of the British welfare landscape (Rayner, 2013; Harrison, 2013; Butler, 2013), the Department of Work and Pensions dismisses them as not part of the welfare system. A government source has been quoted as saying: 'The Trussell Trust itself says they are opening three new foodbanks every week, so it's not surprising more people are using them' (Downing and Kennedy, 2014, 9). In 2013 Lord Freud of the Department of Work and Pensions made the suggestion that food bank users were chancers taking advantage of free good, and insisted that the recent sharp increase in people resorting to food banks was 'not necessarily linked to benefits sanctions or delays' (Morris, 2013). This puts food banks in a peculiar position in relation to the State. Their clients are coming through the system, referred to them by doctors, schools, job centres and social workers, but food banks receive neither recognition nor financial support by the authorities. Given the situation, food bank managers were eager to stress the importance of helping the *deserving*

² For a preliminary report in this research see Tsilimpounidi, M, Sampson, A. and Voela, A, 2014.

poor, echoing the criticism that they feed scroungers, but were understandably unwilling to discuss why some poor are more deserving than others.

It is fair to say that organisations with limited means must allocate their resources wisely. Food bank managers acknowledged the existence of practical limitations but also spoke about ‘discouraging dependency’. Food banks usually give three vouchers, roughly the equivalent of food for three weeks:

If you give any more [than three vouchers] it is dependency-creating; what we’re trying to do is to get people to look after themselves and take a grip of their situation, and do something about it.

Discouraging dependency usually means returning clients to the welfare services, and speaks volumes about the real problem: the long term consequences of austerity-poverty and the medicalisation of poverty by approximation to dependency.

Charity operates in a network of social values. Despite the suspicion towards potential frauds, clients are normally seen as marginalised individuals to whom society has turned their back. The food bank is therefore considered as a holding environment in which vulnerable people might find support to gradually overcome their difficulties. A quasi-therapeutic discourse is often adopted. One is encouraged to talk:

OK we’re a charity but let’s put that aside. I can help you as much as you open up – you tell me this much, I can only help you this much. You tell me a little bit more, I can tell you what to do, so you’ve got to trust me, you’ve got to talk to me.

Neoliberalism, the ideological arm of the free-market economy in which austerity occurs, sees the individual as a free and competent agent, a manager of oneself who must take life in their own hands. The individual is also supposed to be entrepreneurial, aspiring, achieving, and ultimately able to support itself. Failure to do so is often seen as lack of willpower or moral fibre (Brown, 2006). Food bank managers offered a mixture of opinions on the matter. Benefits are one’s *entitlement*, and clients were encouraged to claim what was rightfully theirs. At the same time, an affirmative approach to life was encouraged. One should not suffer in silence or despair. A priest-food bank manager said about a client who was suicidal:

I started talking to him, tried to encourage him that there is life, a better life out here, that people are making it, people are finding their way around.

Love is important. It is said to be essential for the community, not the big society but the community of the vulnerable and the volunteers who meet at the food bank. Love and charity are seen as the starting point for *returning* to a state of happiness. The nostalgia for the better days is palpable in the following statement:

And then everybody will be moving into being happy once again, as we used to be, so we are praying and hoping that the seed will not die in the ground. That's it.

It is not surprising that food bank managers intentionally or unintentionally echo key neoliberal discourses which either see individuals as responsible for taking life into their own hands or pathologise welfare dependents (Standing, 2011), stressing the need for counselling, therapy or even resilience training. It is not surprising that the concept of receiving and redeeming vouchers is monetary in its conception: vouchers are food bank currency, nominal bank notes to be 'exchanged' for food in a system of transactions which encompasses relations between professional bodies and charitable organisations, as well as relations of accountability and trust. Food banks are caught in the current discourses of budget cuts, efficiency and stamping out fraud. Inevitably they are emplaced in a climate of negative trust and reduced good will. At the same time, they are a relatively new phenomenon in the symbolic economy of charitable Christianity which had traditionally relied more on religious and moral criteria and less on policy-led directives for choosing its beneficiaries. Thus, the fact that food banks are designed to plug a short term gap in collaboration with state agencies makes them servants of two masters, God and the State, attempting to strike an almost impossible balance between helping the hungry and the poor – a fundamental Christian premise – and conforming to the restrictive bureaucratic criteria by which the welfare system identifies eligible clients.

Inevitably, food bank managers were reluctant to be drawn into an openly political discussion. They were careful and circumspect: 'you know, the government's doing their best'; or mildly critical and realistic in accepting food banks as a fact of life:

The government is for the people, and here the government is not for the people. So the government need to also know what's going on with the people. We also expect them to tackle it [poverty]... Unfortunately food banks will always be there because we'll always have the poor, we'll always have people that will need the food, but we don't want quite a lot of people depending on food.

Yet, when speaking about their service compared to the state agencies, managers claimed to offer more than the State and ‘more than food’. This added value of their service is justified as follows:

So we try to be human, we try to be flexible, so sometimes what I will do, I will send them [clients] back to the social services or the Job Centre and say, ‘OK you know I can’t support him (client) for this long. You are going to do something to get this thing sorted out’.

Flexibility chimes with humanity. Yet humanity apparently has its limits, especially when one is eager to comply with bureaucratic regulations. An astounding example is the following:

Participant: The people that are coming here are coming through frontline care professionals, so we don’t get people off the streets.

Interviewer: But if someone walks in and says, ‘I’m hungry,’ would you feed them?

Participant: No we won’t. We will direct them to an agency that can help them, we can never tell who’s coming in, anybody could come in, they could be completely justified, but how would we know that?

Neoliberalism, argues Gilbert, should not be thought as a wholly uniform and concrete doctrine but as ‘enabling certain behaviours and not others’ (Gilbert, 2013, 7). When it comes to austerity, I would argue, it enables contradiction and absurdity, like being charitable and feeding the hungry but not until their status has been established – as if hunger can wait. It also enables ambivalence, separating the deserving poor from the cheats, and loving (exonerating) and hating (holding responsible) the State in equal measure. By the same token, the emotional labour of the volunteers, which is in fact considerable, and the daily contact with food poverty give rise to projection: it could be me in their place. This fear is alleviated by the very pragmatic stance taken by some managers (e.g. we will not feed just anyone), while thinking oneself, reflexively, in the place of the other. As one food bank manager put it about having to eat whatever is on offer:

When your back’s up against the wall, you’ve got no choice, so you make it work.

Austerity jars with the myth of the caring State and the myth of prosperity for all, two discourses that even those who demonstrate their fictive character find hard to relinquish. From a Lacanian perspective, food bank managers speak from the position of the hysteric, who articulates a reaction to the discourse of the Master (State) but does not question his

sovereignty. The hysteric's discourse, argues Zupančič, often appears as a discourse about injustice and pleads for the rights of those at the margins. Simultaneously, it conveys a structural complaint about the master's inadequacy (castration): 'the hysteric is much more revolted by the weakness of power than by power itself, and the truth of her or his basic complaint is that the master is not master enough' (Zupančič, 2006, 165).

The discourse of the hysteric applies to the subject's (food bank managers' in the present case) *position* towards the Other and her *expectations* from the Other (Master, State). Two possibilities usually arise: the Other (State) needs something which the subject can provide – in this case, food as a stop gap solution until the State can, once again, assume full responsibility and we can all return to prosperity; or the Other (State) is depriving the subject of something that she needs or desires (Žižek 1997, 33). One may immediately assume that this *something* must be the unrestricted access to welfare and benefits. But this, in fact, does not concern the managers directly. Only their clients. What the Other/State withholds from the managers is the recognition of their labour, the symbolic value of what they provide which is not inscribed in the productive system but is treated as surplus. This complaint is not explicitly voiced as disappointment at the fact that the Other/State enjoys at their expense (Zupančič 2006, 165). However, they register it in their harshness towards the 'cheats' or when speaking about offering 'more than' the State agencies to their clients: more than food, more time to empathise and listen; spiritual solace, love and community. It is this double excess (being both 'surplus' and 'more than' the other), I argue, that sums up their perceived value in a system of socio-political equations.

The reluctance to engage directly in political conversation can also be interpreted from a psychoanalytic perspective. Discussing neoliberalism from a Lacanian perspective, Dean (2013) argues that two of its key characteristics, reflexivity and complexity, should be understood with reference of the drive. Neoliberal reflexivity is akin to the drive which 'takes the form of a circuit that is never closed' (Dean, 2013, 140). In politics, she argues, reflexivity 'substitutes action with circular thinking' and with 'narcissistic circuits of self-absorption' (Dean, 2013, 151). In academia it motivates 'levels of increasing meta-ness, commenting on discourses, practices and alternatives, until the need to act loses its force and urgency' (ibid).

Dean draws on the Freudian drive which captures a specific reversal between 'me' and the 'other'. The drive encourages a transposition between the subject and the object: the object to be seen, studied, or observed, is replaced by the subject who sees, studies or observes. A

misleading reflexivity is established when, seeing the other as object, makes *me* the subject (Dean, 2013, 139). Applying the logic of the drive on modern capitalism, Dean explains how the tactics of the ‘management’ of everything, from risk, to assets, to poverty, creates the impression of being in control. It turns the process of endless, drive-like management into a supposedly effective way of doing things ad infinitum: always managing but not to clear end (Dean, 2013, 145).

Complexity, the other characteristic of neoliberal thought, displaces accountability with reference to knowledge (Dean, 2013, 149). In practical terms, it corresponds to the widely held belief that the global financial system is too complex for anyone to grasp in its entirety, or to discuss in terms of blame or responsibility. The fact that it is hard to know everything or have access to all possible factors before making a decisions is often quoted as sufficient explanation or excuse of failure, lack of clarity or good judgement. Partial knowledge, therefore, is not accepted by people as a limitation but as a condition (Dean, 2013, 150).

Dean also draws attention to a sense of satisfaction involved in an endless pursuit, a satisfaction very pertinent to the managers’ disappointment and feeling unappreciated. In Freudian analysis the purpose of the drive is enjoyment, but enjoyment is not necessarily related to reaching a specific goal or finishing a specific task. Failure might procure enjoyment, so long as a certain circular trajectory is being traversed. Regarding neoliberal logic, there is only a modicum of enjoyment, a pay-off enough for the subject to keep going (Dean, 2013, 140). We could consider the management of poverty as an endless activity where a modicum of enjoyment supports the charitable commitment to plodding on, being a volunteer, rather than a recipient of help: while I am here (manager), I am not there (client); I cannot see the big picture (too complex) but I still attain the little bit of ‘reward’ for having accomplished something that will be lost in an ocean of needs and a client’s return to the care of the state.

THE RESEARCHER’S REFLEXIVITY AND THE USE OF THE USELESS

The above reading identifies patterns of discourse consonant with both neoliberal ideology and the drive-like character of late capitalism. It highlights the ambivalence neoliberal austerity produces in speaking subjects, in their attitudes towards both fellow human beings and the state. It also highlights the misleading role reflexivity, infinity and complexity might play in that setting. Drawing on a psychoanalytic theoretical model, this interpretation approaches the managers’ discourse as *a symptom* of neoliberal ideology. However, the

efficiency of my interpretation began to lose its appeal when I realised that I was probably doing something quite similar: by abstracting and theorising my data I was perhaps transposing the limitations of my knowledge onto the 'infinity' of knowledge, interpreting-displacing my findings onto a higher level and producing myself as (interpreting) subject vis a vis the object of my inquiry. Should I be disappointed at this error, or pleased with the belated reflexive insight? Perhaps I should also be reminding myself that the results of my research would be useful to someone, addressing them, as we always do, to 'whom it may concern' upon publication. But does this posited, hypothetical other differ all that much from the Master/Other in my interviewees' discourses? The sudden realisation made me feel both anxious and annoyed.

Below I explore this grey area of anxiety and reflexivity, first by developing the epistemological perspective from which such an inquiry can be attempted, and subsequently proposing ways of approaching the object of research differently. For this purpose I bring together Baudrillard and Lacan, though not quite in the way proposed in the emerging literature.

Baudrillard finds both Marxism and Freudianism inadequate for understanding contemporary modernity. Their limitation, he argues, arises from their understanding of value as positive (Baudrillard, 2004, 219; Smith, 2010, 175). For Baudrillard, Marxism is a political economy of the lost object (2004, 16), striving to reverse capitalism by reclaiming what is alienated by the capitalist as surplus value (2004, 36). Marxism is therefore unable to challenge capitalism radically, because it adheres to the same notions of alienation of the product of labour by the master, accumulation and surplus.

Baudrillard extends a similar critique to Freudian psychoanalysis, via language and signification. The signifier is given a positive value (2004, 227) and Freud's analysis is functional and economic (2004, 223), focusing on the unknown-repressed quantity that needs to be recovered. Thus, both the libidinal and the political economy operate on a principle of repression/alienation, accepting the existence of a remainder that can be accessed, liberated and productively reclaimed (2004, 229). The unconscious can be thought as such a remainder (2004, 230). Further similarities can be observed: in Marxist economy the surplus resembles the 'something' that the Master/Other enjoys or withholds in the example we discussed above, known in Lacanian psychoanalysis as *object a* (Proto, 2013b).

The critique of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism is part of Baudrillard's theory of simulation (2004), a historical-epistemological critique which focuses on the gap between representation and the object of representation. Baudrillard argues that successive ages of bourgeois capitalist production have eroded the distance between representation and its object, and, more importantly, have rendered the referent (the object in the real world) obsolete and irrelevant. Baudrillard's primary example is the copy (Proto, 2013a), initially a reproduction of an original which eventually replaces and eclipses the original in the next cycle of reproduction. Likewise in economy, especially in contemporary times, the gradual easing of restrictions in global trading, the removal of the golden standard (Baldwin, 2015) and the virtualisation of financial exchanges have produced a free-floating capitalism in which wealth and numerical values do not necessarily correspond to 'real' money. Simulation excises the object as real world referent. Simulation also infinitises desire. Making more money from money, for instance, becomes a purpose in itself (Proto, 2013b), a fetishist pursuit which makes the satisfaction of the desire to make money, like the pursuit of the Lacanian object a, even more remote.

Baudrillard's theory offers an insight into how bourgeois metaphysics, the principles of which are aim, unity and truth, has created an ideal transcendental subject by aligning subjectivity to the production of knowledge in terms of utility and rationality, and by establishing the principles of equivalence and identity as the predominant modes of thought (Proto, 2013a). In this context, subjectivity is seen as the repository of rational knowledge (truth), as well as the founding principle of the transparency of history and reason; identity ($A=A$) operates not only as a philosophical principle but as an ideological substratum, and 'history synthesizes opposites into a higher unity' (Woodward as cited in Proto 2013a). Through these operations, the privileged position of the subject is created by homologically projecting and then identifying the subject's view point as the vantage point of view and then accepting the result as 'rational mind' (Proto 2013a).

From Baudrillard's perspective, my inability to see things clearly at the beginning as well as the reflexive reversal of this condition serve the same purpose: producing more and making the produced knowledge available for reintegration in a discourse which can accommodate not only evidence of value alienated in the Other, or the subject's phantasy (mine as well as the food bank managers') of giving something to the Other, but also, and most important, their *remainder*, in the present case the belated awareness and by-product of the process.

At this point Baudrillard's thought seems to converge with the Lacanian critique of the discourse of the university, the supposedly neutral knowledge which is essentially a new and reformed discourse of the master (Zupančič, 2006, 168). The two are separated by a *shift* from the master's absolute discourse to an endless movement, where the otherness linked to surplus (the alienated enjoyment in psychoanalytic terms) is smoothly and constantly reintegrated into the mass capital:

Once a higher level has been passed, surplus jouissance is no longer surplus jouissance but is inscribed simply as value to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of whatever it is that is accumulated – what is accumulating from out of an essentially transformed nature' (Lacan, cited in Zupančič, 2006, 170-1).

In the above framework, capitalist production as master discourse is seen as constant production of otherness and constant valorization of this otherness, that is, transformation into value (Zupančič, 2006, 174).

What was I doing then? Was I just witnessing or chancing upon the inescapable propensity of the dominant system to transform everything into value? Worse, was I just reproducing that propensity? The reassurance that both feelings of frustration and possibilities reside at that point (Zupančič, 2006) were not very consoling. Could things be done differently?

In his early *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (2004) Baudrillard speaks of a process of signification and exchange, which, unlike exchange in the Marxist and psychoanalytic tradition, does not leave a remainder or surplus. Baudrillard thinks that such a process is best exemplified in language by certain forms of poetry (2004, 226) and in culture by the exchange of a gift as practised in societies of the past (Smith, 2013, 86). In both cases the gesture or process of signification is consumed and exhausted within the limits of a specific task and nothing remains to be transferred to a higher level.

Baudrillard returns to the notion of the remainder in *Simulation and Simulacra* (2006, 143-4), speaking, like the Lacanians, of capitalism's ability to integrate any surplus. Resigned to such a propensity, Baudrillard proposes that we should do nothing to prevent the process, letting dominant ideology take its course, and waiting until it implodes, when nothing else, no surplus or difference, is left to be assimilated.

Elsewhere, Baudrillard develops the impossible exchange as an impasse that illuminates the very nature of consumerism-capitalism. The impossible exchange is both a remainder that resists assimilation and an act revealing that the referent (real object) has been excised in the process of simulation. In the *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (2004) the impossible exchange brings the system to a halt by not producing anything to be liberated or made available for the next level. It is therefore a function of the death drive, the latter being a radical force that resists accumulation, exhausting itself here and now, in the process of signification (Baudrillard, 2004, p. 228). Baudrillard also argues that *truth* is not recovered from the unconscious but *inhabits* a social exchange. He returns to the notion of the impossible exchange and the useless remainder in one of his last books, *Impossible Exchange* (2001), this time naming – and almost mourning – the loss of the referent that advanced capitalism and the technology have gradually excised and made useless: art, work, religion, the body, in short humanity itself (2001, 43). He then talks about ‘the useless truth’ (2001, 44), an extension of what has been lost or excised, a term that is meant to stir concern in its philosophical absurdity.

In my data I discovered a good example of a useless truth and a ‘pointless’ gesture that illustrates how the remainder might work. One of my interviewees told me that the previous Christmas he invited the food bank clients to a party at the local community centre. Unsure whether invitations sent by post would reach them, since most of them were in temporary accommodation or occasionally homeless, he and his volunteers delivered them in person:

On the 17th of December last year we organised a party here, a Christmas party for all the clients, and these are people who cannot remember when last anybody invited them. How would we invite a ‘homeless’ person to come for a party? We personally wrote their name and delivered the post to their accommodation... I budgeted for 80 but this hall was filled with 138 people – some came in wheelchairs and they were so excited, they said that this is for the first time they receive [an invitation]. That’s very nice.

This, in my view, is a beautiful and senseless act that evades the circuit of ‘dependency’. It resists the bio-political discourse of supporting and feeding the poor or giving them incentives to get out of their poverty (e.g. this is what we do for you; what are you going to do for yourself?); it defies indebtedness, bio-political management and manipulation. It is a ‘useless’ and quintessentially communal act, full of dignity but no exchange value. The truth and power of the act lies in what is exchanged there and then, a gift

in the circuit of commercial exchange, a use-less (non-productive) pleasure exhausted between givers and takers.

I included the above incident in a conference presentation on austerity, politics and policy. A colleague reacted negatively. There was no point, he remarked rather tersely, in including such anecdotes in discussions of policy and politics. Such stuff was irrelevant. I could see his point: there was nothing *of use* to be extracted from this example. But what was he objecting to? Was an act of humanity irrelevant to food hunger and austerity? In neoliberal discourse humanity no longer figures as the absolute principle beyond value, or, in Lacanese, as a master signifier that attracts and organises other signifiers into meaning³. It is relativized by being emplaced in a managerial system (think of the term management of human resources), demanding that humans that are out of the productive economy need to return to the system (see also Standing, 2014), ceasing to be superfluous to a system of rational choices and productivity. Humanity excised as a cardinal referent.

I would argue that we should start noticing such *use-less remainders* in our data. Not with a view to re-integrating them in ‘the system’, but as *that* which genuinely disturbs; not simply as uncomfortable truth (we are used to those) but as the reflexive horrible mirror of (in)humanity in neoliberal austerity. Unanswerable questions – impossible exchanges of meaning – may arise at this point: can humanity be ‘reassimilated’ in the system of capitalist austerity values? How was it reduced to a remainder-excess in the first place? At what point did ‘humanity’ recede as a master signifier and become a remainder?

The researcher’s reflexivity as impossible and potentially useless-disturbing knowledge comes to mind. What is my impossible exchange, my reflexivity? What is to be done at this point? Baudrillard does not advocate a return to difference or a restitution of the Other. Instead of that, he invites us to think *radically differently*, along the lines of a challenging reversal: ‘it is the object that thinks us; it is the effect which causes us; it is language which speaks us; it is death which lies in wait for us’ (2001, 89). This radical way of thinking is pursued by prioritising the object over the subject (Baudrillard 2001, 88-9).

³ The master signifier is empty. It is an abstract idea like ‘Justice for All’ (Glynos 2001) around which a political (or ideological) field is usually organised. Laclau emphasizes the contingency of any term that purports to convey the true and permanent meaning of a master signifier. New terms fill its place at different times, attracting and renewing allegiance to its cause and reorganizing the field of ideology around it but can never quite capture or pin down its entire meaning.

For Baudrillard the critical problem of contemporary modernity is both social and individual. As social order becomes more virtual and less dependent upon external referents, more self-contained and perfectly self-reflexive, we begin to find it increasingly difficult to judge the truth of appearances. Many traditional disciplines, like Law, Economics or Humanism face up to the impossibility of external reference or grounding. Likewise, individuals are faced with impossible exchanges when encountering the demise of higher values, the old referents for their acts and decisions. Unable to ground their existence in anything else, continues Baudrillard, they ‘turn in on themselves, demanding the right to be themselves, which is ‘the end of the self, the point at which the subject is lost’ (Heggarty, 2004, 86). It is this narcissistic, self-reflexive turn that Baudrillard seeks to challenge via a process of knowing based on the ‘impossible exchange’. The latter proves the absurdity of the metaphorical sliding of meaning. It constitutes a process of self-knowledge: ‘We do not know ourselves distinctly and clearly until the day we see ourselves from the outside as another’ (Baudrillard in Levin 1996, 32). This, of course, does not call for a naïve identification or exchange of places with the other. It rather concerns the necessity of contemplating or abruptly encountering our vantage point of seeing from the place of the other, or under similar limit conditions. Thus, stepping outside oneself constitutes a critical activity which not only brings ideology and the Other under scrutiny but challenges the ‘I’ as the centre of truth and certainty (Heggarty 2004, 45).

Along those lines Baudrillard proposes that the world thinks us. This reflexive relation goes much further than Lacan’s (1991) anecdote about the tin can (material object) starting back at him (the thinking subject). It goes even further than the logic of the *objet a* as remainder, or locus of lack or fleeting presence on all registers of being (Imaginary, Symbolic and Real). The convergence between Lacan and Baudrillard has primarily been studied with reference to simulation, as an exchange of places between the subject and object, a kind of imaginary fusion which threatens to abolish meaningful separation and difference (Proto, 2013a and b). I would add that their convergence must also be thought along the lines of a more radical interpretation of drive. Drawing on Freud who understands the drive as a succession of voices – the active voice (to see), the passive voice (to be seen) and the middle voice (to give oneself to be seen – Lacan argues that the operation of the drive is reflexive in the sense that it allows “a new subject” to appear when the tri-partite move is accomplished (Lacan, 1991, 179). For Lacan the drive is always the death drive (Evans, 1996, 33). When the death drive enters the symbolic order it inhabits different zones of the body becoming

partial drive(s). A different aspect of the death drive emerges at the end of the analytic process, beyond the realm of language and desire. Žižek draws attention to the knowledge produced at that point, emphasizing the difference between the *knowledge of the drive* and the *knowledge of one's desire*: while the latter is located in language and is eventually articulated as the subject's truth, the former is described as 'non-subjectivised' and 'acephalus' knowledge (Žižek 1997, 36-37). When this 'acephalus' knowledge emerges one encounters anxiety but also goes beyond the Other, without whom one is left with a 'being' which is 'infinity as such' (Verhaeghe, 2001, 103). It is in this disruptive 'beyond', I would argue, that Lacan and Baudrillard converge, in their challenge to subjectivity and ideology. In that realm Lacan finds the knowledge of the death drive and Baudrillard the impasse of the impossible exchange, both of which jar with the omnivorous, in-different Other (see also Voela, 2012).

Encountering the limitations of thought and seeing one's theoretical perspective via the lens of another theory is, indeed, a destructive-constructive experience. This kind of reflexive knowledge is un-productive: it annoys, irritates but cannot be denied, or exchanged, or integrated in a dialectic process. Reflexivity from that perspective is not just awareness of the limitations of knowledge or extra knowledge but a permanent challenge – to borrow an expression from philosophy, a view from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). Seeing myself from that perspective I appear not as sovereign rational subject but as a vanishing mediator of the several realities I hold together in my inquiry: me, subject and object of austerity and neoliberalism, conduit between data and representation, effect of the neoliberal master discourse and university knowledge, place-holder in an impossible structure. Nobus and Quinn (2005) draws attention to the radical 'stupidity' that lies at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the knowledge that is not to simply acquired or produced for useful purposes (2005, 2), but the traumatic (2005, 3) and disruptive of knowledge (2005, 5) which is neither accumulative nor sacrificial, but a fall of knowledge (2005, 136) which echoes with the Baudrillardian perspective.

REFLECTING (ON) THE USELESS

Austerity envelops us, whether we are rich or poor. It causes our discourses to rotate between mastery, academic knowledge and a difficult remainder, notions of usefulness and uselessness, value and lack of value, inclusion, exclusion and re-integration.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis having seen-known reflexively and from the point of view of the drive always involves a significant break-through, or a traversal of the phantasy that normally supports our relationship with the big Other. For some Lacanians the aim of critique – of a reflexive critique in the present case – ‘is not how to eliminate terms such as illusion and misrecognition, but how to draw their boundaries through an articulation of a *new ontology* – an ontology which involves positing the socio-symbolic order as lacking’ (Glynos, 2001, 196).

Baudrillard, for whom the social Other has already collapsed into in-different simulation, seems to think that it might be too late for that. If humanity has been excised from the circuit of capitalist production, all that is left is reflexive melancholia, *saudad* for what has disappeared (2001, 40-41). Such a melancholia seems to characterise the political left at the moment, claims Brown (2003), in the wake of the collapse of communal values. It has yet to advance to a different – more productive? – form of engagement.

In the meantime, and taking both Baudrillard and the Lacanian exhortation to remain stupid into account, we might proceed by doing things differently, by *not* trying to provide an answer: becoming the reflexive mirror of useless acts of kindness, and witnessing or offering a testimony in the ethical sense of the terms, bringing to attention gift and useless exchanges and remaining sceptical about the exchange value of our knowledge.

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